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## Summary of the Research

# Children Left Behind by Labor Migration: supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU (CASTLE) ICMPD / 2021 / MPF-357-004

## Introduction

This research is one that addresses the situation of children left behind by their parents who engaged or are engaging in labour migration from the perspective of their rights and possibly within transnational family practices that create, observe and enforce such rights. Being part of an action research project that also involves co-researchers, the results of this research project aim to function as the **voice** of beneficiary groups - stay-behind children and their families - therefore aiming, besides signaling issues and calls for support, to also highlight family **practices** that may function as examples to be disseminated.

In this summary, based on evidence data obtained in our research, we will present examples of good practices identified by the participants which can be divided into four groups, namely:

- family members of transnational families with children in which one or both parents have been going abroad for a significant amount of time during the recent past:
  - migrant parents,
  - stay-behind parents (or other caregivers) and
  - stay-behind children
- experts, namely officials, employees of state institutions and NGOs as well as other professionals who are knowledgeable in the issues of transnational families.

**The good practices that follow** have been based on these findings and are structured on the analysis themes identified in the data analysis process.



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### *The situation and views of children in the context of migration*

Children’s perception of “abroad” and of “home” is important, with the influence on the child’s personal experience when one of the parents migrated. Good practice in this sense is to offer the opportunity for children to visit their parents in the country where they migrated. As we have found, numerous children have, on occasion, visited their migrant parents’ country of stay or even other countries on trips. Beside personal impressions, perceptions are predominantly formed by projections through parents’ and peers’ stories, or even social or broadcast media. Moreover, since socially, migration is usually the norm in these children’s communities, the foreign nature of “abroad” is entirely domesticated (“normal”, “not worth mentioning”).

*“Dad [in Germany] has shown me that roe deer come in some cities and people don’t hurt them at all. At us, if you see a deer, we hunt them down immediately. Where Dad was working, there was some old, historical building. There is much where you can see the history through some buildings that have been repaired as they were before” (Moldova)*

The inclusion of the child in the decision-making process regarding migration contributes to a better understanding by the children of the reasons behind the decision. In our study children are mostly just told, sometimes in advance, but not involved in, decisions relating to migration; however, they all contribute, first of all passively, through understanding and accepting adult arguments and decisions, which are mostly economic, while still undergoing a strong feeling of loss and missing the parent.

The maintenance and closeness **of the relationship between the siblings** prove to be a good way for the children for adapting to the new familial (migratory) context. As a consequence of migration, second, children also acquire increased self-management, mutual support among siblings and peers and they actively participate in the family through additional contributions to household and even support given to adults including the migrant.

Children and youth see leaving and staying in a more nuanced perspective, viewing migration as one that should be limited to a certain goal and to a certain amount of time (they “should leave



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for a certain amount, and for a certain goal, then return” - stay-behind child, Moldova, - “he knows that a family is waiting for him at home”, stay-behind child Ukraine).

Family labour migration also influences children's future prospects, educational and career opportunities. By obtaining a better income, than they could earn in their country of origin, parents can more easily cover their children's educational expenses. Study plans abroad (or the plan not to leave) is the issue that is most frequently discussed, indeed a norm, with a large proportion of youth having a definite study abroad plan even from high-school or later, a minority refusing to leave, while some are ambivalent (*“I might study here or there, haven’t made up my mind yet”* - stay-behind child, Ukraine).

### ***Relationship with caregivers***

To improve the relationship of stay-behind children with caregivers, the research participants claim that a cognitive effort is needed to keep the caregiver role as it is (namely, as a caregiver, not a surrogate of the distant parent, since *“you cannot replace a person”* - stay-behind child, Ukraine), however, recognition is given to their effort and to the difficulty of their multiple roles. At some time they (caregivers) may become role models (an over-identification in detriment of nuclear family bonds, such as the case of a Moldovan youth whose uncle, a lawyer, became a role model for him, his parents being of more modest professions).

#### *Youth activities, compensation strategies, support groups*

Peer support and acceptance for children left behind is a key factor for their active social participation. Overall, children and youth report that the vast majority of families in their environment have migrant adults, this being the predominant normalcy within peer communities - hence mutual acceptance, indeed support is natural among them. Numerous children and youth acknowledged the need for support by peers, social media groups, teachers and possibly organizations (although the latter was unclear) (Moldova, Ukraine), while also reporting interest and support by teachers, neighbors, adult acquaintances, church community or psychologists as offered and accepted.



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Reports indicated that while one cannot compensate for a parent’s absence, children and youth need to build self-esteem and personal embedding through other means and groups to compensate for their feelings of loss or loneliness: *“...since I was always busy with homework or training and I tried to eliminate these thoughts with the help of time when I was busy.”* (stay-behind child from Moldova).

### ***Transnational relationships and communication as perceived by children***

Constant communication also adds to a “normalization” of transnational families’ life.

In respect of children’s and youth’s attitudes towards migration, differences were shown in correlation with age - adolescence (from 12 to 16) being more problematic since it enters the temporality of planning hence the awareness of temporal suspension. Also, issues correlated with the person migrating, gender and age-specific relationships being highlighted by respondents (*“girls grow closer to their mothers at this age”, “boys need their fathers at his age and I’m not there”*).

Overall, there is very abundant communication involving much Internet access and usage, a high degree of co-presence and interest, sometimes group communication or through third persons (adult at home); also, much Internet use by children for other purposes to replace parent as an information source. In a number of cases, long-distance communication also happens with the school of the child. However, in spite of the difficulties migrant parents face nowadays in communicating with their children, the situation was much worse before the wide availability of new ICTs, and reports are of much improvement in this area. *“It happened (in the past) that we spoke even once a month, because I had free days only on Sundays and I could go to that phone place (i.e. a place where they could access cheaper international calls) only on Sundays and sometimes I was calling and nobody was home. (...).”* (migrant parent Moldova)

Using the Internet to navigate their daily existence is commonplace in the lives of many migrants: *“we live with the Internet...”* (migrant parent Moldova); *“Uncle Google will help with everything”* (migrant parent Ukraine).



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At the same time, a certain caution is practiced, some of the online information being presumed to be unreliable. Accordingly, verifying the information by directly talking to people is a common strategy: *“I follow Facebook and Instagram, I am up to date with what is going on in Moldova. I read the comments, and what people say. There are different opinions, you don’t know which to believe. What you read and see on the Internet, is one thing”* (migrant parent Moldova). The nature of their work, their working schedule and time differences hamper the permanent connectivity between migrant parents and their children back home, although they make efforts to ensure a permanent communication. Their migrants’ working arrangements may interfere with the children’s agency in initiating the transnational communication practices. *“We spoke once every 2-3 days, depending on his schedule. If he worked until late at night, we could speak to each other once every 3-4 days. If he worked in the second shift, we spoke little in the morning or evening. Not very often.”* (migrant parent Moldova).

The transparency of transnational communication practices is a key constituent of these relationships, self-conscious secrecy may become part of such communication. Although secrecy amounts to practice of caring about each other through (perhaps excessive) protection - hence a positive act - in transnational family members’ perception, both adults and children, it may turn into its opposite and withhold important support and access to essential information, hence, participation.

The awareness about the requirement of notifying the authorities on the situation of their stay-behind children (who is going to be responsible for their care) seems to be widespread among migrant families. The procedural aspects are often flexible enough to allow communication outside the traditional face-to-face encounters. Apart from written notifications, sending documents electronically to the municipality’s email address is the encouraged practice, while also offering other channels such as Viber as an acceptable alternative: *“We ask nicely, we inform... Especially now, as the law has been modified, they have the possibility to send from abroad, to send the sheet written by them, namely, they send it... They also have the possibility through Viber, as well as via mail, I mean there are several (possibilities) in the law”* (expert Moldova).



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