

The impact of Diaspora on political processes in Republic of Moldova

Rodica RUSU,
doctor în științe politice, conferențiar universitar,
Academia de Administrare Publică
de pe lângă Președintele Republicii Moldova

REZUMAT

Studiul dat reprezintă analiza impactului diasporei moldovenești asupra procesului politic din Republica Moldova. Este examinat rolul diasporei, al funcțiilor sale asupra vieții politice din țară, care sunt metodele și mijloacele de influențare a evenimentelor politice, în special participarea diasporei la procesul electoral. Se estimează capacitățile diasporei moldovenești de a contribui la dezvoltarea proceselor democratice și de modernizare a Republicii Moldova.

Migration is considered one of the defining global issues of the early twenty-first century, as more and more people are on the move today than at any other point in human history. The total number of international migrants has increased over the last 10 years from an estimated 150 million in 2000 to 214 million persons today. [1] This means that roughly one of every thirty-five persons in the world is a migrant. With globalization the numbers continue to grow.

The migration in Republic of Moldova represents a widespread and highly important process due to the fact that a significant share of persons able to work is involved thereinto. There is no adequate and complete information regarding the exact number of migrants working abroad. One of the reasons is the lack of an effective and long-life recordkeeping of migration processes. In addition, the lack of overall national control on eastern borders of the country, resulting from the unsolved Transdnestrian Conflict also has adverse impact on the labour migrants' record-keeping process. An estimated 300,000 to 600,000 Moldovans live outside of the country with remittances representing more than 30 per cent of GDP, making it one of Europe's most emigration affected countries. [2]

Diasporas are the consequence of transnational migration. There is no single accepted definition of the term "diaspora", neither

is there a legal recognition of the term which consequently has given rise to many different meanings and interpretations. IOM's Glossary on Migration defines diasporas as "people or ethnic population that leave their traditional ethnic homelands, being dispersed throughout other parts of the world". [3] The term "diasporas" conveys the idea of transnational populations, living in one place, while still maintaining relations with their homelands, being both "here" and "there". The use of the plural reflects the diversity of populations that can be acknowledged as diasporas and the diversity of strategies and links that people maintain individually or collectively with their homelands.

Ethnic diaspora communities are now recognized by scholars as „inevitable” and „endemic” features of the international system. Diasporas are thus perceived as transnational political entities, operating on „behalf of their entire people”, and capable of acting independently from any individual state (be it their homeland or host states).

The definition of diaspora includes temporary and permanent migrants and is adapted from G. Sheffer's classic work on modern diasporas. Diaspora population may consist of people living permanently in the country of origin or country of destination, and migrants who work abroad temporary, people who hold double citizenship, ethnic diaspora, citizens of the host country or second-

generation groups. In the contemporary context, with the acceleration in international mobility, the term diaspora has been used more broadly to encompass expatriate populations who are living outside of their home countries or contemporary diaspora linked with issues of transnationalism and globalisation. [4]

S. Vertovec explains that transnationalism is grounded on some distinct conceptual promises. [5] Ones of them are social morphology – social formations spanning borders – in particular, diasporas; type of consciousness – increasing numbers of people have dual or multiple identifications; site of political engagement – an increasing transnational political activity involving groups like international non-government organizations (INGOs), Transnational Social Movement Organisations (TSMOs) and ethnic diasporas. The politics of homeland is also important.

But transnationalism is not limited to migrants' activities and networks. Migrants have become increasingly important, not only as a source of remittances, investments, and political contributions, but also as potential "ambassadors" or lobbyists in defence of national interests abroad. Many migrant-sending states recognize that although many migrants are unlikely to return, they can still advance state consolidation and national development from abroad. Migrants have the potential to be organized into strong lobbies that advocate for sending country interests. In response, sending states may endow migrants with special rights, protections, and recognitions, in the hope of ensuring their long-term support. The interplay between "transnationalism from above" (by sending states) and "transnationalism from below" (by migrant groups) is evident in the practices of numerous "home-state" and "home-town" associations connecting migrants and their resources to their homelands often by promoting community development projects; it is also seen in governments offering bonds at high state-guaranteed rates of interest to undertake major national development projects by mobilizing worldwide diasporic loyalties. [6]

The phenomenon of diaspora poses challenges but also offers potential benefits to communities in both the homeland and the diaspora. Diaspora communities face the dual challenge of integration into host communities and maintaining strong personal and cultural ties with their families and homeland. Countries of origin face the dual challenge of how to address issues such as brain drain and separated families, but also realize the full potential of financial remittances, business ties and other benefits of expatriate communities. Diasporas and home countries alike are realizing that both can benefit in important ways from strong partnerships addressing areas of mutual concern, ranging from identity in the diaspora to development of the homeland.

The main role in order to organize and mobilize the diaspora in the collective interests are material, cultural and organizational resources of the diaspora and its opportunities in the country of residence, motivation and ability to maintain unity.

Diaspora is influenced by and interacts with both the country of origin, as well as that of destination and countries of origin with communities in destination countries (students associations, communities of migrant workers (seasonal, legal, illegals and others). It seeks to develop and maintain relationships with political, social, cultural institutions with destination and of origins countries.

Diasporas are also considered to be a major source of direct investments in key industries and are often seen as "first movers" who pave the way for other, more detached investors. They bring valuable skills, experience and networks, while acting as an influential lobby that can advance the homeland's political and economic interests in the destination country. Their contributions have many faces and appeal to policymakers in both origin and destination countries. [7, p. 217-232]

The positive possibilities for diaspora groups are numerous. They can raise awareness of political and human rights violations, be advisors to conflicting groups, and serve as facilitators between home and host coun-

tries. They also are arguably the best equipped to fulfill these positions in that they understand their home conflicts better than host country diplomats and peacekeepers do, are generally more acceptable to both sides of the conflict, and due to their strong ties have a desire to reach resolution in a serious and efficient manner. Example of such activity is the Moldova Foundation, the first non-governmental organization, created in 2003 and focused exclusively on advocacy matters for Moldova not only in U.S., but also elsewhere. [8] It is not a Diaspora group, but an advocacy organization, formed by mostly non-Moldovans (from the United States, Australia, Israel, Germany, even Nigeria) having the goal to support civil society in Moldova to enjoy freedoms, as well as to get free from the Russian military occupation of Eastern region of Moldova, called Transnistria, that borders Ukraine. The foundation has organized events that familiarized the Washington establishment with the results of elections in Moldova (in 2005 – parliamentary elections – and in 2007 – local elections) and their implications for the regional security, among other events focused on democratic reforms and obstacles Moldova faces.

Specific legislative or policy changes may be needed to facilitate diaspora involvement in development. For example, dual or multiple citizenship can open doors for migrants because diaspora members often find themselves barred from investing in their country of origin if it does not allow dual citizenship. Governments can consider establishing and maintaining contact with diaspora and migrant associations as important steps to mobilize diasporas for participation in home country development. Diaspora must have an inclusionary role. All studies on diasporas deal at one point with issues of images, perceptions, identity and trust. However, if the symbolic inclusion of diasporas matters this needs to be translated into real inclusion (legislative and institutional). Policies can ensure the recognition of diasporas as full citizens, recognize their inputs, address major image problems, build trust, favour institutional change and build leadership. Policy interest is driven by the growing awareness

about the diasporas' potential contributions to development strategies, as well as by the demands and the lobbying coming from diasporas as individual and collective actors. Consequently, governments multiply provisions and initiatives, targeting mainly the human and financial capital of diasporas, through diverse programmes and tools (institutional, legal, financial etc.)

This also involves building capacity within ministries to favour the development of policies engaging diasporas for development.

In this context, the organization of the Diaspora Congresses represents a way of communication between migrants and homeland; it's a possibility to strength the links between diaspora and government. Till present were organized five Congresses: usually in October, in 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012. The V Moldovan Diaspora Congress organized in Chisinau 12 October, 2012, adopts a resolution identifying measures such as the creation of a specialized state agency on diaspora and a diaspora council with a consultative role for Moldovan government; the involvement of diaspora leaders in Moldovan official delegations; supporting the creation of Moldovan Cultural Centres in cities with large number of Moldovan migrants and promoting policies which would better involve the Moldovan diaspora in the social, economic and political affairs of their home country.

Discussions also included the protection of migrants' rights; utilizing educational, cultural and scientific activities abroad to promote national culture and traditions; the importance of Moldovan diaspora in promoting the country towards European integration and ways to consolidate the Moldovan diaspora. The adopted resolution will be discussed with Moldovan authorities at a later stage and will be included in the National Diaspora Action Plan. [9]

Previously, diaspora management and protecting Moldovan citizens abroad has been identified as one of the key priorities in the Moldova National Action Plan on protecting Moldovan citizens residing abroad 2008 and the Program of Actions for supporting

persons born in the Republic of Moldova residing abroad 2006-2009. At the end of 2011 was initiated the emergence of the government Diaspora Agency responsible for development and introduction of the state policy in the area of migration as well as for ensuring of the connection between Moldova as the state and citizens of the republic, staying abroad. Unfortunately, it doesn't strat to work at present.

Perform political functions is an important form of diasporas activity. These functions are implemented through political parties, ethnic divisions, with their representatives in the parliamentary and municipal authorities; public organizations of the diaspora that may have an impact on public authorities; individual members of the diaspora, occupying influential positions in the political, economic and cultural life of their country of residence, and willing to contribute to the realization of the national interests of the motherland.

The development of transnational networks makes it look differently on the role and place of diaspora in the world, and to pay special attention to the socio-political, economic and sociocultural potential. Approach to the diaspora as a critical foreign policy and economic resource, gaining ground in the international practice of modern States, which seek to exploit this potential on the international scene to build a network of economic, socio-political and other ties. But not always the first word belongs to the State. Often the community creates a system of networking and the State (country of origin) is part of the international chain.

The mechanism of diasporas effect to political structures has a complex structure. The influence of the press and manipulation of public opinion also must be noted. An important component of this phenomenon is the financing of electoral campaigns. Another means of lobbying it is the availability of research institutions. Another method, which is the most effective, is the quick promotion of the ethnic community to the President's entourage. Influence of ethnic diasporas in the political decision-making process in the area of foreign policy beco-

mes inevitable as a result of increasing interconnectedness.

On a global level Diasporas have increasingly become significant players in politics, for which there are numerous reasons, including: (a) new communication technologies, which have improved the abilities to mobilize people; (b) the growth of economic resources due to swelling migrant numbers and communities; and (c) profound changes in the world political system itself, as more democratic nation-states emerged, following the fall of communist regimes, Moldova being one of such. [10]

Political interests and activities within Diasporas are certainly nothing new; historical studies of migrant communities indicate a considerable degree of political engagement-from-afar. Examples of such politically active Diaspora communities are the Jewish and Armenian-American associations that represent some of the strongest lobbies in Washington, D.C. Also the Diasporic Iraqi groups and individuals, for instance, played crucial roles in encouraging American military intervention in Iraq in 2003. At present, we can broadly observe a variety of ways in which internationally dispersed social groups mobilize and undertake a range of electoral and non-electoral political activities.

Different Diaspora-based associations may lobby their host countries to shape the policies in favor of their homeland or to challenge the homeland government; they may influence the homelands through their support of or their opposition to the governments, give financial and other kind of support to political parties, social movements, and civil society organizations, or even sponsor terrorism or the perpetuation of violent conflict in the homeland. [11]

The interests of homeland state elites have translated into a number of policies designed to shape relations with diaspora populations. The most powerful – and controversial – type of diaspora engagement policy is the expansion of citizenship through dual nationality legislation giving that abroad preferential access to entry and the homeland state's political community. [12] In migrant sending states, external ci-

tizenship is meant to create a relationship of rights and obligations with emigrant non-residents to tie potentially reluctant or increasingly distant (in time and space) populations abroad to the state or origin. The homelands, that are the nation-states themselves, may reach out to engage the political interests of Diaspora populations. There is now an upward global trend in the prevalence of dual citizenship/ nationality, both in terms of people possessing it and states allowing it.

In addition, emerging elites utilized diaspora populations as potential constituents who could affect domestic political outcomes through transborder media connections or eventually through gaining the right to vote or have special representation within the government.

The general rule is that, since elections are an expression of a nation's sovereign will, they take place on the respective territory and in its "extensions" abroad – embassies and consulates. Provided mutual interest and good will, governments of some states may sign agreements on opening extraterritorial polling stations outside diplomatic missions as well, otherwise it is not possible. Due to the globalization phenomenon changing the state of fact many citizens of various states are abroad; therefore, it is often decided to do "absentee voting," i.e. distant voting, via mail, usually on the day before the elections. [13, p. 206-208]

In a 2007 report, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance noted that external voting rights for diaspora members are a 'recent phenomenon' [14, p. 2] and are allowed in '115 countries and territories in the world.' [15, p. 1-9] The extension of voting rights is one of the strongest forms of political representation a home country can offer its diaspora; but there are multiple forms of such representation, with varying levels of engagement beyond the extension of voting rights, which countries can consider when providing 'a political voice' for its diaspora. However, this variety seems to suggest that diaspora engagement through political representation is not an easy or even correct form of strategic en-

gagement, and there appears to be a large amount of uncertainty and lack of knowledge regarding the political representation of diasporas and the impact of extending voting rights to diasporas.

With an estimated 400,000 – 600, 000 Moldovan citizens abroad the out-of-country voting mechanism would be particularly relevant to Moldova. If the remittances sent by Moldovan migrants to Moldova is the primary expression of their practical, economic and familial link to their homeland, then out-of-country voting is the principle (if not sole) expression of their political engagement in the political process of Moldova. [16]

During the last electoral processes, the main problems of the exercising the right to vote abroad were: the enough number of polling stations to accommodate even a small portion of the number of migrants that could potentially have exercised their right to vote; a shortage of ballot slips in a number of the polling stations; was the considerable distance many of the migrants would have to travel in order to vote.

At the present, the Central Electoral Commission is preoccupied with the design of an electronic register of electors, also one of the next reform will be the launching an electronic service that would provide the opportunity for Moldovan citizens to participate in elections through electronic networks, regardless of their physical whereabouts either from the country, or from abroad.

Also, is important to realize that an extensive information campaign aimed at encouraging Moldovan migrants to exercise their right to vote is necessary. The organizers of such a campaign would have to take great pains to ensure that the information disseminated was free of political party sponsorship of any kind and instead reflected the overarching non-partisan objective of engaging Moldovans in their nation's political process. The thrust of such a campaign would be to underscore the notion that Out of Country Voting is a tangible means of maintaining a link to the homeland. At the risk of sounding polemical, when a Moldovan votes in national elections, it is a vote for a political party; but when a migrant votes in

these same elections, it is a vote for Moldova and the link to his/her homeland. [17]

An important thing about out-of-country voting and activities determined by this process is that the turnout has increased lately. [18, p. 86-89] If in the elections of February 27, 1994, only 1948 citizens participated in voting, then in those of April 05, 2009 – 16 805 citizens, and on 29 July 2009 – 17 484 citizens, or an increase of about two times compared to 2005, when 10,018 Moldovan citizens turned out to vote. Let us remember the situation of July 29, 2009 (by the way, a weekday), when the CEC met the needs of the people who wanted to vote and extended the voting hours until 22.00 local time for the polling station within the Consulate General of the Republic of Moldova in Bologna, Italy and the one within the Embassy of the Republic of Moldova in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

During previous parliamentary elections, claims of certain electoral contestants concerning the need to ensure the right to vote of Moldovan citizens who are working abroad were absolutely legitimate. In fact, this right is guaranteed to Moldovan citizens by the Constitution, the Electoral Code and is not necessarily connected to the number of Moldovan gasarbeiters, which is impressive. If at the parliamentary elections of 2009 (April 5th and July 29th) 34 Voting Bureaus were organized abroad, then, at the Parliamentary elections of 2010 (November 28) 85 Voting Bureaus were opened abroad. [19]

By analyzing the situation, we can identify two main characteristics of the vote of the Moldovan Diaspora. First of all, it appears clearly that if given the opportunity, Moldovan emigrants will eagerly participate in political processes of their home country. Indeed, the sharp rise of the number of electoral bureaus in 2010 (85 bureaus, compared to 34 electoral bureaus in 2009) resulted into a very important increase of the number of voters. Second important factor: the structure of the vote in the Diaspora is extremely different if compared to the results inside the country. It appears clearly that only 8 – 9 % of the Diaspora voters will give their vote for the Party of Communists. In 2010, the three

democratic and liberal parties have won more than 82% of the votes among emigrated Moldovans. Therefore, in Moldova's case, Diaspora appears as the main force of the democratic change, capable of influencing the composition of the Moldovan Parliament in favor of democratic, liberal, right-wing and pro-European oriented parties.

During the last three rounds of parliamentary elections in the last two years, pro-European parties managed to obtain that missing edge that change elections is to dismiss the regime. What happened is that more than 90% of votes from the diaspora were given to pro-European parties - most migrants gave only 45% to the Russian Federation. In 2009 the diaspora gave the missing votes to elect the president without the Communist Party. The role of diaspora communities, the NGOs, civil society in this situation was especially strong. They did a lot of promotion to help increase pro-European voter turnout. When it comes to the voter turnout you pointed out the relatively low turnout of Moldovan voters; three years ago the figure was 5% of Moldovan migrants, while in the last elections it was already 20%. [20] That means four times more. It is really encouraging. It is a clear proof that the political activism of the migrants is certainly increasing. It just takes time to build confidence that they can actually change the situation. It was in 2009 when the popular protests led to the change in power in Moldova that people realized they do indeed have the power to change things.

Besides the out-of-country voting phenomena, the diaspora also carries out other actions in order to influence the political life in the Republic of Moldova. So, diaspora got involved and pressured the Moldovan authorities to adopt the controversial law on anti-discrimination. Moldovan members of the Association „Salvados Para Salvar” of Spain addressed a message to the leadership of the Republic of Moldova relating to the free movement of Moldovan citizens throughout the territory of Europe. „As we understand, the current stagnation problem of this project consists in developing the national legal framework, to grant everyone the same ri-

ghts, including ethnic, religious, sexual, etc. minorities, disabled people, as it is set forth in the Constitution of our country," – the statement of Moldovans from Spain reads. [21] „We know that a legal framework exists in all E.U. countries, which does not hinder the right to free movement for minorities. Our view is that no one can judge or condemn someone for seeing things differently than we do. Staying away from a person or a group, does not mean solving the problem of minority," – their statement says. Moldovans settled in Spain expressed hope that the visa liberalization issue would be solved soon so that one can move freely within Europe. Earlier, two other Moldovan Diaspora in Europe published calls to adopt the anti-discrimination law. Moldovan communities settled in France and Italy each published

a call to the political class in Chisinau, justifying that the law is necessary for E.U. visa liberalization.

The increase of the number of voting bureaux outside the country will lead to an even higher participation of the Moldovan Diaspora in the electoral process. The active implication of the Moldovan Diaspora in the political life of their homeland shows the willingness of the Diaspora to help the country, not only by massive remittances. Therefore, from the political perspective, the Moldovan Diaspora represents a hope for the process of genuine, sustainable democratization of Moldova. The increasing interest of the Diaspora to contribute to the development of the country, must determine the government to implement the policies regarding the involvement of Diaspora in different areas.

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E-mail: rusu_rodika@yahoo.com