

# Role of the Elites in the Fight against Vulnerable Situations

*Case study: Moldovan Community in France.*

A common characteristic of people who have completed their migration route, for economic reasons, is their predisposition to accept precarious living conditions in the host country. By leaving their home, they hope to provide for the material needs of the families left behind: a luxury they can't allow themselves if remaining in their homeland. Once settled in the host country, the lifestyle of the migrants significantly revolves around income-generating activities. Their primary objective being to send as much money as possible to the home country, the migrants try to save on everything, regardless of their comfort. Thus, comfort, leisure and quality of the living environment take second or third priority plan.

It is known that migrants often seek to minimize their living expenses. For many, their migration experience is designed as a temporary phenomenon - a likely return to the country of origin is never excluded in the medium to long term. Therefore, pending for an undetermined amount of time in perilous conditions is worth the opportunity to help out their families.

With that in mind, we can now understand why, in the last 15 years, a remarkable preponderance of economic migrants inhabited the poorest areas of their host country. In those deficient neighborhoods, migrants frequently find themselves in a vulnerable position due to a lack of work and an unsuitable integration program. These insecure migrants living in those conditions are an ideal target for the prostitution industry and the human trafficking "business". According to the Central Office for the Repression of Human Trafficking (OCRTEH), many prostitutes are foreign nationals (*BBC*, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2013). Therefore, we don't only assist to a transfer of prostitutes, but we witness most importantly a migration of women who are looking for employment. As stated by OCRTEH, a majority of these women come from Central and Eastern Europe. In France, they now account for half the foreign prostitutes (French Senate, October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002).

Battling prostitution and sexual exploitation, France's prevention and care services developed themselves considerably. A "communitarian" perspective has emerged to meet unmet needs. Forthwith, many migrants chose to seek the help provided by community-based associations, while others opt to get it outside the communitarian sphere. Consequently, the elite of migrant communities are developing a new framework of interaction with the migrant community (the "roots") and the national community of the host country.

## **Vulnerability defined by insecurity in the context of economic migration**

The causes of insecurity in Eastern European countries are emerging in the disastrous economic situation of the last 20-25 years after the fall of communism in the USSR (1989-1991) and in the satellite countries, which triggered a series of deep processes of corporate transformation of the region. Enjoying their newfound freedom following the numerous decades of domination under a totalitarian system, the Eastern European nations have entered a new era characterized by a fast "import" but not always wise values and lifestyle of the West. As the following events occurred very suddenly in the whole region, the state's political organization and the rules of economic life underwent major transformations. Those changes led to many negative effects, particularly upon the material situation of the inhabitants of the region. Phenomena such as official corruption at all levels, monopolies controlled by supporters of the former communist power, incorrect adaptation of the judiciary and legislative system to new realities, sudden breach of economic ties between the structures of the formerly planned economy - contributed to a rapid impoverishment of the population. Soon, millions of people were left unemployed, living standards fell sharply and the prospects for economic recovery seemed to move away at high speed.

Under these conditions, a new phenomenon has emerged and gained momentum in the mid- 90s: economic emigration. Lacking solid prospects for rapid and sustainable improvement of the economic situation, the countries of Eastern Europe have seen a mass exodus of active people to countries in better economic health, seeking financial stability and new opportunities for professional and personal development. The East-West economic migration can be described mainly by its mass character: all social strata are concerned. People of all ages, from all educational levels and from all socio-professional groups have launched the "conquest" of a better material status.

The first migrant populations from the former communist bloc in Eastern Europe after 1989 have been facing problems of limited mobility to the West. Thus, in the late 90s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the countries of the former Soviet Union found themselves isolated from their neighbors to the west. This has not necessarily decreased migration (statistics showed a growing number of East-West migrants), but deeply complicated the process of emigration, while promoting a mode of unlawful access of such migrants in Western European countries. This led to an increase in networks of human trafficking in the region. Hence, for the migrant women of Eastern Europe, vulnerability is mainly reflected by poor living conditions and characterized by the search of work in the host country.

There are many cases where these women are victims of trafficking, sexual exploitation and/or lack of work in the host country, sometimes forcing them into prostitution. A study conducted by the European Parliament confirms that the vulnerable living conditions of these women lead to exploitation through prostitution (Schulze, January 2014). Most victims are affected migrant(s) and/or representative(s) of ethnic minorities. Thus, according to the European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers (TAMPEP), on average, about 70% of prostitutes in Western Europe are migrant women (TAMPEP, February 2007). The study of the European Parliament draws attention to the fact that, for migrant women, the probability of falling into prostitution increases

accordingly to the population of the host country (*Schulze*, January 2014). This reflects the increased vulnerability of migrant women because of racial discrimination, poor knowledge of the host country's language, administrative barriers arising from stringent migration policies and segregation of work. All factors that lead migrants to markets in informal work, increasing the risk of suffering from poverty and marginalization. According to several studies in France on the renunciation of care (*French Senate*, October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013), it is found that this waiver is manifested among the public in a precarious situation, particularly marked among foreigners in irregular situation. This explains, to some extent, health status and lack of access to social rights of prostitutes from Eastern Europe.

### **Vulnerable Migrant Communities = "Human Resources" of Prostitution**

The formation of economic migrant communities in France is a phenomenon that appeared and gained momentum near Paris, in the town of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, one of the poorest towns in France. This town hosts a high proportion of immigrant populations. According to the town authorities, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges today welcomes people from more than 101 countries worldwide (*ADLI*, 2014). Much of the city is formed by the poor districts where slum landlords rent shacks to illegal immigrants in exchange for rent prices unbeatable in the real estate legal sector in the region. These "units" do not fit any standard of health and safety and do not allow their occupants to lead a lifestyle in accordance with the right to privacy. However, economic migrants, who are always looking for inexpensive methods to survive in France, prize these temporary housing solutions. This is the case of Moldovan immigrants, who today are numerous in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, to the point that the city has earned the nickname "Little Moldova" among Moldovan citizens living in the Parisian region. The municipality estimates their number from 2 000 to 2 500 people (first Moldovan community in France) (*Le Parisien*, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014). The vast majority lives in precarious conditions, considered very "different" if compared to their homes in Moldova and are built with the money earned in France. According to police sources, most of these migrants are victims of trafficking of all kinds - cases of extortion, theft, fraud and exploitation by the "authorities" are common.

Many obstacles make the lives of these migrants even more precarious: difficulties to find work, to defend themselves in case of legal problems, finding accommodation or employment... The rate of "moonlighting" or undeclared work is very high. Several Moldovan migrants have graduated from universities in their home countries or have significant professional experience. However, they are struggling to find a job corresponding to their level of education or experience. Many migrants work in undergraduate jobs. For example, many female teachers in their country are given domestic jobs. In addition, the equivalence of foreign degrees is often not admitted in France. A majority of migrants lack qualification, which also affects the types of contracts they get: precarious, part time work. There is also a significant lack of social ties in the territory, which leads to increased number of isolated migrants.

Being a migrant in these vulnerable communities proves to be an aggravating factor in situations of precariousness. The absence of social protection, housing, isolation, exposure to aggression, feelings of unworthiness sometimes push Moldovan women and migrant women

of Eastern European countries in general, to engage in prostitution to earn more money than in the origin country. This money is used most often to invest legally in their country (once they are back), to support their families remained at home or to ensure their own survival in France.

### **The "Elite Migrants" - a new Solution?**

The link between the individual, the institution and the authorities (of the host country, but also of the country of origin) is a fragile relationship within these vulnerable communities. It is difficult for insecure migrants to speak to representatives of institutions. Fear of judgment, language problems, the difficult administrative situations, are all factors that further block these relations. There are a number of structures and associations aimed at helping these migrants in their integration into French society. But very often they are invisible to migrants. Many of them do not know the activities of these structures, or they simply refuse to use them for lack of confidence. This can be explained by the fact that people prefer to trust a person rather than a structure. Most often, people in these structures are of the same origin, with different migration routes (most want to study); they have managed their integration into the host society and are identified as "elite migrants".

### **Actions of "Elite Migrants" to Limit Vulnerabilities**

In recent years, several Moldovan associations and the municipality of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges have achieved aid work. This field action is geared towards the community of Moldovan citizens, which is particularly large in this city. Since 2012, an Orthodox church was opened in the city, offering the Moldovan community in addition to religious services, moral and psychological assistance. The Orthodox Christian community "Church of the Holy Trinity" has become a real support for Moldovan migrants in the region. The involvement of other associations of Moldovans has been consistent and has materialized through the establishment of free legal help for Romanian that is permanently accessible to all Moldovans encountering legal difficulties as part of a project European (Consolidation of Migration Management Capacities in Republic of Moldova). Since April 2014, free French language courses have been set up for Moldovans in the region. These activities for the benefit of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges Moldovan community aim to reduce the precariousness of the population by providing the means to seamlessly integrate into French society. It should be mentioned that legal aid and free French courses are also available to Moldovan nationals of the entire Paris region.

There are many ways of helping these migrant populations: to be accompanied to solve the problems of everyday life and accomplish the specific steps to the integration process, to be able to speak and write the language of the country where these people live and work, are all areas where elites can help new coming migrants. This was seen in the actions of the elites (especially intellectual and religious) of the Moldovan community in France. Their role in this process has been essential: it is the associative leaders in the region who have targeted the urgent needs of the community, identified necessary initiatives to help new coming migrants and have made links between the municipality and the community.

Among the more recent players in the fight against the precariousness of migrant communities, is NEXUS, an activity hub funded by the European Union, partner governments and international organizations. It is being implemented by a consortium led by the International Agency for Source Country Information (IASCI) in Austria and a number of activities are financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). NEXUS is currently present in Moldova, where the team works to support local initiatives to help the success of the migration project of Moldovans wishing to leave their country, but also to fight against the potentially dangerous effects of mass emigration (neglecting of minors, exodus of qualified managers, human trafficking, etc.). A purpose of these activities is to build an accessible bridge between the migrants and the country they want to leave for. In other words, NEXUS intends to help Moldovans choose the best migration path in line with their expectations and offers them the best possible conditions of personal security, without forgetting their integration within the host society. The slogan of NEXUS “Migrate well informed!” summarizes a new philosophy, a new approach to migration: emigration is neither inevitable nor a tragedy, it's an experience that can and should be both positive and enriching for migrants and for the host country. The will to achieve this stated objective derives much of NEXUS activities in Moldova, where the goal is to inform prospective migrants “upstream” through activities such as advice on the administration of the host country, the formalities for obtaining visas, housing, labor law, labor contracts... NEXUS counts on the flow of information to help maximize the profit for the migrants who will be ready to return home once their economic goal has been achieved in the best possible conditions.

Since 2015, NEXUS has extended the range of its partners outside Moldova, forging collaborations with leaders in the Diaspora in host countries (including France). Thus, NEXUS provides and promotes an effective connection between the Moldovan migrants, elites and institutions of the country of origin (Moldova). In this context, it is important to mention the NEXUS Moldova partnership relations with civil society actors in the Paris region, including the Association for the Integration of Migrants (AIM). The expected result of this partnership is to ensure continuity of action for legal aid and the free French courses for Moldovan citizens residing in the Paris region of France. At the same time, the effort is directed towards identifying ways for the introduction of two new “services” for the Moldovan community in France: guidance and counseling for new coming Moldovan students in France, and assistance for the integration of the labor market (résumés, cover letter, preparations for employment interviews ...) that helps maximize the possibility of employment. The main objective of these activities is to contribute to help migrants escape from their present precarious situation. The role of the diaspora elites in identifying novel methods to achieve these ends is fundamental: it is thanks to the initiative of these new elites that a financially viable model was developed. This model includes the participation of a project supported by the European Union (in this case, NEXUS) and donor states (Switzerland), as well as a support structure for the activities that are free of charge for the beneficiaries (the migrant community).

Since 2011, the representatives of the Moldovan diaspora in Paris have also organized an orientation and integration seminar for new coming Moldovan students in France. The idea came in 2010, following exchanges between the leaders of the Diaspora and representatives of

the Embassy of the Republic of Moldova in France. During these exchanges, the integration difficulties faced regularly by young Moldovan students arriving in France were widely discussed. In some severe cases, these difficulties had led to the expulsion of the students from the French territory, for lack of the necessary steps leading to a residence permit. The orientation seminar and integration was proposed by representatives of the Moldovan community, themselves former students in France. The transmission of the key elements of etiquette in France is the focus of this seminar, which takes place annually on the first Saturday of October. The seminar is a great example of solidarity between students, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. The success of this event is confirmed annually by strong student participation. The seminar is part of the community mobilization effort against precariousness and vulnerability. Many student testimonials say they benefited from this activity and believed it was useful in the fight against social exclusion, and for the integration of migrants into French society. Thus, by conducting a series of activities in partnership with the European structures for their community, the leaders of the Diaspora are gaining trust among migrants. Moldovan migrants consider these leaders represent their interests in the face of Moldovan and French authorities.

Training the elite among migrants has been proven to be one of the best ways of integrating these communities into the host societies and proves a mature and achieved experience of migration. Without a completed project of integration, these skilled, motivated and socially active migrants can never break out of their own migrant circle. Now these elites represent sustainable and efficient connections between the communities of migrants and their host societies. This demonstrates that there is a change of mind, insofar as the elite of migrant communities no longer cultivate a certain "distance from the people". Instead, the new approach is completely reversed: the new elites argue effectively for the integration of the most vulnerable and poorest social strata. Now, even if access to the elite is still done by the "traditional" channels (level of education, financial situation, employment status ...), there is more support for people coming from different socio economic backgrounds. Thus, the elite is respected by the community at large due to their efforts to keep a close link with the entire community (even the poorest members of this community) while actively campaigning on their behalf and contributing to the eradication of social exclusion.

The community of Moldovan nationals in France and its elites, that is already formed or is being formed, serves as an interesting example of the elite's participation, involvement and active struggle against vulnerabilities that lead to exploitation. This is a specific case where the notions of civic activism and meritocracy are becoming more important and are assuming a new meaning.

## **Sources**

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