CHAPTER 2.

REZILIENȚA DEMOGRAFICĂ A POPULAȚIEI REPUBLICII MOLDOVA – NECESITATE INDISPENSABILĂ A POLITICILOR DEMOGRAFICE ÎN PARCURSUL SPRE UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ

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Rezumat: *Cadrul demografic se află în etapa de post tranziție demografică ce au determinat incursiuni ale tendințelor și structurii demografice. Procese de durată, apreciate în timp, ce necesită o abordare detaliată scrupuloasă și profundă științifică prin intermediul rezilierii politicilor demografice existente. Adițional este crucial de a reseta mecanismele de influențare, scopul scontat de pe urma politicilor demografice, precum și modalitățile de abordare prin prisma criteriilor de gen.*
Cuvinte cheie: *reziliență demografică, probleme demografice, politică demografică, politică familială, declin demografic, îmbătrânire demografică, inegalitate demografică, dimensiune optimă a familiei.*

DEMOGRAFIC RESILIENCE OF THE POPULATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA – INDISPENSABLE NECESITY OF DEMOGRAFIC POLICIES DURING EU INTEGRATION

Abstract: *The demographic framework is in the stage of post-demographic transition, which has determined incursions of demographic trends and structure. Long-lasting processes, valued over time, that require a detailed, scrupulous and deep scientific approach through the termination of existing demographic policies. Additionally, it is crucial to reset the influencing mechanisms, the expected goal of the demographic policies, as well as the ways of the approach through the lens of gender criteria.*

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Introduction

The demographic transformations observed over the past decades represent the manifestation of a large-scale, long-term phenomenon with profound implications for the Republic of Moldova. The state's resilience lies in its capacity to adapt to rapid demographic shifts, which have become increasingly pressing. The accelerated demographic transition—bearing a dual impact on both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the population—underscores the disproportions between the mechanisms of influence and the anticipated sustainability of demographic development. These dynamics must be assessed both in relation to the current stage of modernization and from a forward-looking perspective. Demographic trends are becoming ever more significant and irreversible, a fact substantiated by the findings of the 2024 Population Census in the Republic of Moldova.

The demographic vision of the Republic of Moldova, including the formulation of evidence-based demographic policies and their integration into national development programs, would enhance the country's demographic resilience.

The Concept of Demographic Resilience

Demographic changes represent a fundamental element that will determine the anticipated progress of society. People are the ultimate spatial resources, and human capital—through its economic and social quality—generates added value that we risk losing if not properly developed and retained.

Demographic resilience refers to the capacity of a society to withstand demographic changes and to transform these shifts into opportunities for development. It involves the formulation of policies and programs that address factors such as population ageing, emigration, declining fertility, and other transformations associated with demographic transition, as well as new challenges dictated by the requirements of a market economy.

As a concept, demographic resilience emphasizes the importance of population dynamics for socio-economic development, individual well-being, political stability, and security. Demographically resilient

societies understand and anticipate the population dynamics to which they bear witness.[4]

Demographic resilience is an aspiration that entails the ability to predict demographic changes, to understand their implications, and to design policy interventions based on evidence and human rights. This means moving beyond narrow, short-term approaches focused solely on population size, toward comprehensive, inclusive policies aimed at ensuring the prosperity and well-being of all members of society.

Demographic resilience must become an integral component of the new strategic planning framework. It is grounded in three key pillars—adaptation, mitigation, and adjustment—which operate in parallel with the reform of the institutional framework.[5] These requirements emerge from the accelerating pace of demographic trends, the necessity of new interventions, and the realities of the national demographic context.

The resilience of demographic systems also reflects the core objectives established by the World Population Conference (Bucharest, 1974), which addressed population growth, morbidity and mortality, fertility, migration, and population structure. Later, the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) placed human rights—particularly reproductive rights—at the center of sustainable development, emphasizing the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality as essential elements of demographic resilience.

Interconnected factors of demographic changes:
Demographic decline

The demographic decline experienced during the period **1990–2025** threatens the long-term viability of the state and undermines both economic development and the overall well-being of society. Economic growth currently lacks a demographic foundation in the long run. The ongoing demographic downturn in the Republic of Moldova can be attributed to several interrelated factors:

- *Political factors:* The transition from a centralized to a democratic system generated significant political instability.

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[4] *https://moldova.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf /rezilienta_demografica.pdf*

[5] *https://moldova.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/teoria_schimbarii_pentru_rezilienta_demografica_-_adaptare_ atenuare_ajustare.pdf*

- *Economic factors:* The prolonged and burdensome transition to a market economy, accompanied by ill-conceived economic reforms under an indecisive political system, instilling uncertainty and widespread poverty among the population. The absence of political will and the indifference of decision-makers to design effective, long-term, evidence-based policies further deepened the crisis.
- *Social factors:* The collapse of the social security system, healthcare services, and public service delivery at all levels contributed to a substantial decline in living standards.
- *Demographic factors:* Profound transformations in core demographic processes, coupled with the deteriorating economic and social context, have exacerbated the demographic situation.

The combined effects of these interconnected factors have produced catastrophic consequences for the country's demographic evolution and outlook, leaving substantial negative impacts in both the medium and long term. Political and economic actors at all levels—upon whom the resolution of these issues depends—often fail to recognize that, while social and economic errors can be mitigated relatively quickly, demographic transformations and their sustainable management constitute a complex and long-term process. *(Table 1).*

The numerical evolution of the population of the Republic of Moldova

Year	Total population (thousand persons)	Increase or decrease over the five-year period (thousand persons)	Average growth (decline) in the Republic of Moldova	
			Thousand persons	%
1990	4319,4	-	-	-
1995	4347,9	-11,5	-2,3	-0,1
2000[1]	4291,5	-703,8	–	-
2000[2]	3044,1	-66,4	-13,3	- 0,4
2005	3600,4	-43,7	- 8,7	- 0,2
2010	3563,4	- 37,0	-7,4	-0,2
2014(R)	3557,6	- 5,8	-1,2	-0,1
2024(R)	2,4	-1,157,6	-1,15	- 32
Total		-167,4	-	-

Source: [2 p. 178]:

[1] – Population number with the eastern districts and Bender municipality.

[2] – Population number without the eastern districts and Bender municipality.

The reproductive crisis reflects the advanced degradation of the reproductive gene pool. Several key aspects can be highlighted:

- For three decades, the Republic of Moldova has been in a state of free fall in terms of population reproduction, under conditions of demographic transition. Mortality fully offsets the birth rate, with only about 24,000 births annually and a total fertility rate of 1.2 children per woman of reproductive age. Unofficially, the number of annual births occurring abroad is estimated at over 16,000.
- More than 50% of families have only one child. Marriages occur later in life, and approximately 20% of families of reproductive age experience infertility.
- Family instability diminishes reproductive potential. Young people enter marriage later and dissolve it more easily. Half of marriages end in divorce during reproductive age.
- For the past two decades, the country has experienced negative natural population growth. Generational replacement no longer occurs within the demographic cycle. Younger generations are numerically twice as small as the older ones, and the total fertility rate remains below the replacement level.
- The share of the young population has fallen below sustainable demographic thresholds. Age and gender disparities have become increasingly pronounced, both among mature and elderly population groups.

Rapid demographic ageing generates consumption and economic and social dependence:

- The population of the Republic of Moldova is ageing rapidly and continuously. By 2050, every second citizen will be over 50 years old. As of 2024, older persons accounted for 22.5% of the total population, representing over 584,000 individuals. Among the elderly population, one in three people is between 60 and 64 years of age.
- Over the past five years, the share of the elderly population aged 70–74 has increased the most, now constituting 19% of all older people. Of the total number of households composed solely of elderly individuals, 62.3% are located in rural areas, and in some administrative units, the proportion of people aged 60 and above has reached 30%.
- According to the Index of active ageing in the Republic of Moldova (2020), one-third of the population aged 55 years and older possesses the capacity and opportunities for a healthy ageing.

- Individuals aged 55–64 exhibit a high inactivity rate (57.8% in 2018), which is among the lowest employment rates in Europe for this age group. Economic growth is not generating tangible benefits for the elderly population.
- Employment beyond the statutory retirement age is largely unattractive, with only 20% of pensioners remaining formally engaged in the labour market.
- Demographic ageing exacerbates gender disparities and asymmetries. The pronounced feminization of older age groups increases the risk of marginal poverty among women, particularly in rural areas.
- COVID-19 restrictions intensified both physical and social isolation among older people, heightening their vulnerability to illness and pushing many closers to the poverty threshold. During the pandemic, the inactivity of the elderly population, especially in rural regions, became more evident, while healthcare needs continued to rise. The health system has struggled to adapt effectively to these new demographic and social challenges.

Excessive and Prolonged Emigration of the Population

- The number of emigrants has reached exorbitant levels, estimated at approximately one million people, according to unofficial data. Furthermore, an additional 15% of the population of the Republic of Moldova intends to move abroad within the next three years, with a higher proportion among young men.[6]
- According to the statistical analyses conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), a new long-term trend has emerged, marked by increased female labor migration during the period of independence, which has jeopardized family stability and gender balance.
- Every third person planning to emigrate is under 35 years of age and within the reproductive age group. The likelihood of emigration among individuals aged 20–29 is 3.8 times higher than among those aged 50 and above.
- The average age of a migrant is 35 years. Where male migrants tend to be younger, with an average age of 34, compared to 37 among female migrants. The majority of emigrants—22.4%—belong to the age groups with the highest reproductive potential, namely 15–24 and

[6] *https://ggs.gov.md*

25–34 years. Consequently, in the short term, the country faces the loss of one reproductive generation, and in the long term, the loss of two generations of migrants.

- For the first time in recent years, citizens of the Republic of Moldova express an intention to emigrate not primarily for financial reasons, but rather for social ones—related to the quality of public services, infrastructure, and overall living conditions.
- The economic factor is no longer a strong predictor of emigration. The intention to emigrate is higher among urban residents and individuals with higher education and income levels. Those with higher incomes have also raised their expectations regarding quality of life, lifestyle, and the public environment in which they wish to live.
- The intention to emigrate is 8.2 times higher among persons planning to change their residence within the country or move to another address. This trend reflects a broader desire to improve one's living environment, seeking better employment opportunities, higher-quality public, educational, and healthcare services, as well as improved infrastructure and public transportation.

Population – A Reflection of Administrative, Social, and Economic Inequalities

Periods of economic growth are generally accompanied by an increase in inequalities, while demographic processes cannot be entirely separated from these dynamics. Development and innovation strategies are inherently dependent on the population factor, in which both quantitative characteristics and the growing significance of qualitative aspects play a decisive role. Disparities within this domain have widened to such an extent that they have affected fundamental demographic processes and the sustainable existence of the demographic framework across time and space, as well as the broader socio-economic context. Demographic inequalities are, in essence, gaps created by systemic imperfections that threaten development [1].

Demographic Inequalities in Spatial and Administrative Distribution (Urban/Rural)

The territorial distribution of the population of the Republic of Moldova reveals significant spatial and administrative disparities. Natural conditions, alongside historical factors and socio-economic

priorities, have determined an uneven settlement pattern across the national territory—even within the relatively small geographical space of the Republic of Moldova. During the post-independence period, the population distribution has become increasingly disproportionate along the center–periphery axis. This unevenness has been further intensified by internal migration directed toward the central region [7].

The country comprises 65 urban localities and 1,549 rural localities, with the average commune consisting of approximately 2,234 inhabitants per administrative unit; however, this figure is underestimated due to extensive migration. The rural population is dispersed over 92.3% of the national territory, while the largest share of the total population is concentrated in the Central Region (including the municipality of Chișinău), where 50% of the population resides on only 34% of the country's area.

Along the Bâc River valley, more than 60% of the country's population is concentrated. The territorial distribution of the population indicates that approximately 30% of the total population lives in both the northern and central regions, where population density is highest—over 100 inhabitants per km^2, with an average national density of 91 inhabitants per km^2 (2025), compared to 111.4 inhabitants per km^2 (2004), and reaching up to 126 inhabitants per km^2 in certain districts. Although the average density masks regional disparities, these imbalances have become increasingly pronounced in recent years, despite gradual spatial shifts over time.

The average rural density stands at 68.6 persons per km^2, and 85 persons per km^2 in the central region [2]. Slightly more than 15% of the population resides in the southern region, with only 465,000 inhabitants, where population density is below 68 persons per km^2, the lowest level nationally. In contrast, the maximum density is found in Chișinău Municipality, with 1,380 persons per km^2— more than ten times the national average, and over twenty times higher than the lowest density. Urban density disparities are enormous between city categories, in smaller towns, population density approximates the national average *(Table 2).*

Urban Density in Selected Cities of the Republic of Moldova

City	Population	Area, km²	Population Density, persons per km²
Chișinău	671,800	123	5 461
Bălți	149,700	78	1 191
Criuleni	7,887	7	11

Data source: *Calculations based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)*

In the ATU Gagauzia, up to 5% of the population of the Republic of Moldova resides. The inhabitants of the municipality of Chișinău account for one-fifth (20%) of the country's total population and approximately half (50%) of its urban population [3]. Together with the city of Bălți, these two urban centers comprise about 60% of Moldova's urban population, leaving only around 40% of urban residents distributed among the remaining 63 towns.

The demographic ambivalence—between "too little" and "too much"—is much deeper. The city of Chișinău exceeds the demographic size of the country's medium-sized cities (Bălți, Tighina, Tiraspol, and Cahul) by more than four times, and the small towns by over forty times. The numerical disproportion between the smallest and the largest urban administrative units is more than sixtyfold (Chișinău with 674,500 inhabitants compared to Slobozia with only 14,600 inhabitants).

The extent of depopulation generates politico-administrative inequalities, as evidenced by the local elections of 2015, repeated in 2025. For example, in the commune of Salcia (Taraclia), only 81 votes were cast; in Otac (Rezina), the mayor was elected by 174 residents; in Coghilnicei (Rezina) – 167 residents; and in Marianca (Ștefan Vodă) – 151 residents. Consequently, administrative costs per resident are three to five times higher, averaging about 230 lei in communes with populations between 1,500 and 3,000 inhabitants. According to EU assessments, the sustainability threshold for local administrations providing adequate public services lies between 4,500 and 50,000 inhabitants.

The territorial distribution of rural settlements is relatively uniform, owing to favorable natural conditions (climatic and orographic). In 2016, the rural population totaled 2,042,005 people [5], most of whom were concentrated in large and medium-sized villages of over 2,000 inhabitants each, accounting for 57.4% of the rural population. A further 26.9% lived in medium-sized villages with 1,000–

2,000 inhabitants, 15% resided in smaller villages of 500–1,000 inhabitants (415 villages), and only 4.6% in 104 villages with fewer than 500 residents. At the opposite end of this inequality are the districts of Fălești, Ungheni, Orhei, and Rezina, which include small and very small rural settlements. These categories of rural localities are the most vulnerable to depopulation and are projected to disappear in the forthcoming demographic period.

At the 2004 census, 56 rural settlements each had fewer than 50 inhabitants (for instance, Elenovca, Dondușeni – 8 persons; Podul Lung, Călărași – 13 persons). This inequality changes gradually from north to south, from larger to smaller settlements. Notably, large rural localities are predominantly located in peri-urban areas, particularly those surrounding Chișinău, many of which have been absorbed into the municipality in recent years.

The largest rural locality, Congaz, had 14,000 inhabitants in 1989, 12,327 in 2004, and about 11,000 in 2024 five to six times above the national average. The commune of Costești (Ialoveni) has 11,128 inhabitants, while Cărpineni (Hîncești district), with a population of 10,900 (2024), is the largest rural settlement in its district and the third largest nationwide. The inequality between rural and urban settlements is primarily demographic in nature. The difference between the largest commune (Congaz, Costești – 11,000–12,000 inhabitants) and the smallest town (Slobozia – 14,600 inhabitants) is not significant. In fact, some small urban settlements often do not even reach the average size of medium-sized rural settlements (e.g., Bâcovăț).

The number of villages within communes reflects the precarious demographic situation that has primarily affected the rural space, endangered by the phenomenon of depopulation. This process places both villages and communes in a state of existential inequality, both in the present and from a future perspective. It is difficult to differentiate communes[7] from villages[8] based on demographic criteria alone. Ad-

[7] *DEX; COMMUNITY, commune, s. f. I. Administrative unit composed of one or more villages, led by a communal popular council. A commune is an important center of peasant population, composed of one or more villages, with a population of around 3000 inhabitants.*

[8] *Wikipedia, Commune (from the word commune in the French language; plural „communes") is a basic administrative-economic unit, composed of one or more villages and led by a Communal Council headed by a mayor.*

ditionally, depopulation emphasizes in the categories of rural human settlements small villages – hamlets[9] which are in accelerated evolution but demographically devastated.

Demographic inequality is often not highly distinctive among settlement categories. For instance, the commune of Chetrosu has 1,974 inhabitants, and Todirești 1,843 inhabitants (as of 2004). The demographic differences are negligible, while the resulting inequality is primarily socio-economic—manifested in administrative capacity, resource distribution, and development priorities—which ultimately induce inequality. From this perspective, inequality arises from the inevitable absorption of smaller settlements by larger ones (especially when the latter surpass them demographically), leading to uneven spatial distribution of the population. Consequently, such dynamics generate new long-term challenges. We may therefore conclude that villages and communes coexist in a state of demographic and administrative inequality, which undermines their balanced development.

Additionally, some communes have populations of fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, undermining their designation as communes due to the absence of a sufficient demographic base, especially when compared with certain villages that are significantly larger. Demographic inequality thus discriminates against rural localities with the status of villages but with populations exceeding 1,000–2,000 inhabitants, both within their administrative units and at the national level. For example, the commune of Ochiul-Roș (Anenii Noi) has 376 inhabitants, while the village of Todirești (part of the Chetrosu commune) has 1,843 inhabitants—an evident demographic disparity. Similarly, Chioselia Mare (745 inhabitants, commune status) and Frumușica (859 inhabitants, Cahul district); Lebedenco commune (796 inhabitants) and Ursoaia village (1,263 inhabitants, Cahul district); Ciobalaccia commune (1,008 inhabitants) and Victorovca village (1,322 inhabitants, Cantemir district); Hârjauca commune (747 inhabitants) and Palanca village (956 inhabitants), Tuzara commune (803 inhabitants) and Seliștea Nouă village (1,393 inhabitants, Călărași district); Natalievca commune (565 inhabitants) and Popovca village (981 inhabitants, Fălești district); Bobeica commune (675 inhabitants) and

[9] *Hamlet – group of peasant settlements (sometimes scattered) that do not constitute an administrative unit, having a number of inhabitants smaller than that of a village*

Drăguşeni village (1,286 inhabitants, Hînceşti district)—all exemplify double demographic inequality. The number of villages forming a commune varies between one and six—for example, Balatino commune (Glodeni) has four villages, Sarata (Hînceşti) – four, Ţătăreuca (Soroca) – five, and Natalievca (Făleşti) – five.

These administrative units thus combine widely polarized demographic inequalities.

Recent demographic changes have generated increasing disparities. Districts with populations exceeding 100,000 inhabitants include Cahul, Hînceşti, Orhei, and Ungheni—each concentrating over 3.0% of the country's total population. In contrast, the districts with the smallest populations are Basarabeasca (29,000 persons, representing only 0.81% of the national population—equivalent to a medium-sized town), Dubăsari (34,000 or 0.99%), Şoldăneşti (42,000 or 1.20%), and Taraclia (43,000 or 1.23%), all two to three times below the national average. The national average per administrative unit is 111,034 inhabitants, nearly twice below the national mean. Demographic inequalities, when correlated with administrative structuring, diminish demographic equity and balance. Long-term observations confirm that the demographic potential criterion was not taken as a basis in defining certain administrative units.

Depopulation demographically undermines the very foundation and long-term sustainability of the country's territorial-administrative framework, particularly affecting smaller administrative units. The demographic outlook, marked by the intensification of numerical inequalities, requires a thorough revision of the territorial-administrative organization of the state, with the principal argument being the demographic potential of the national space. Additionally, 39 villages are administratively included within cities, 914 villages hold commune status, and 660 villages are subordinate to communes [6]. The number of communes within each administrative unit is disproportionate relative to the number of localities. For example, the Hînceşti district includes 38 villages, Orhei and Floreşti each have 37, Soroca – 34, while at the opposite end Basarabeasca has only 6 villages and Dubăsari – 11.

Rural–Urban Inequalities

Against the backdrop of a highly urbanized Europe, the Republic of Moldova entered the third millennium as the least urbanized Euro-

pean state. During the intercensal period, the rate of urban population averaged a decline of 1.0% per year, while the rural population decreased by an average annual rate of 0.13%, thereby widening the demographic gap between the two environments. Economic growth is largely a derivative of urban development, which tends to concentrate in specific zones or cities of the country. The central region—particularly the capital city remains the primary focus of this concentration. Currently, one in four inhabitants exhibits rural-to-urban mobility directed toward Chișinău. Demographic inequalities consequently generate regional disparities in income and socio-economic development. From a comparative perspective, demospatial and administrative disparities of this kind are present in most Central European states; however, what is particularly evident in Moldova is the disproportionately high number of territorial units relative to a population that is rapidly declining (*Table 3*).

Development disparities in European countries

Country	Territory, thousand km^2	Population, million inhabitants	Number of NUTS II Regions	Average area per region, thousand km^2	Average population per region, thousand inhabitants	GDP per Capita, % of the EU Average, EU-15 = 100		
						Aver.	Min.	Max.
EU Candidate Countries								
Bulgaria	110,9	8,5	6	18,5	1417	22	22	24
Czechia	79	10,3	8	9,9	1288	60	47	115
Estonia	45,2	1,5	5*	9,0	300	37	37	37
Latvia	64,5	2,5	5	12,9	500	31	31	31
Lithuania	65,2	3,7	5*	13,0	740	28	28	28
Poland	312,6	38,7	16	19,5	2419	36	26	53
Romania	238,4	22,5	8	29,8	2813	28	22	40
Slovenia	20,3	1,9	12	1,7	158	69	69	69
Slovakia	49	5,4	4	12,3	1350	49	39	99
Hungary	93	10	7	13,3	1429	49	33	72
Republic of Moldova	**33,8**	**3,6**	**12****	**2,82**	**300**	**10**	**6**	**21**

Source: Regional Development: The Republic of Moldova vis-à-vis the European Union

The Republic of Moldova is characterized by the lowest proportion of urban population (46.4% urban and 53.6% rural according to

the 2024 census), showing only a slight tendency toward increase in recent years. Compared with European countries, this share remains considerably lower. Contrary to global trends, Moldova exhibits a pattern of "ruralization" over short demographic intervals. The southern region has the lowest degree of urbanization—only 26%.

Settlement Categories and Demographic Inequality

Across the different categories of settlements, demographic inequalities are clearly evident. However, in none of the country's territorial-administrative units (with the exception of the municipality of Chișinău) does the urban population exceed 50% of the total. The highest level is recorded in the Bălți district—42%. When compared with the overall national level of urbanization, district centers display significant discrepancies. In most administrative units, rural populations remain dominant, while the urban population is concentrated in a single urban center the district seat.

The lowest share of urban population is observed in the central administrative area, where it constitutes only 24.3%. Of the 66 urban localities, 32 have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, and 17 towns do not reach the national average population of a rural locality. Furthermore, five towns have fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, with the smallest being Bâcovăț (Strășeni) with only 1,313 residents.

Cities and villages in the Republic of Moldova—except for the municipality of Bălți—regardless of their economic or demographic potential (for example, Orhei with over 30,000 inhabitants, Bucovăț with fewer than 1,313 inhabitants, or the village of Frumoasa, Călărași district, with approximately 700 inhabitants) share the same administrative status, powers, and responsibilities. The municipalities of Chișinău and Bălți possess production factors and infrastructure elements that make them more capable of attracting investment compared to other localities [7].

Gender and Generational Inequalities in Evolution

The roots of gender inequality are demographic in nature, though the patterns of evolution differ across population groups. The gender ratio is a key criterion determining the demographic quality of a population or the broader national demographic framework. Gender equality constitutes a core dimension of human development, emphasizing that when development disregards gender aspects, it becomes inherently fragile.

Gender inequality is a primary concern in demography because it affects population reproduction, generational continuity, and balance, as well as the ways in which men and women interact with economic processes and demographic phenomena. Life expectancy and its evolution have reintroduced gender and generational discrepancies, which are also indirectly influenced by economic and social factors. These gender-based disparities have both biological and socio-economic origins. Biologically, they appear in sex ratio imbalances at birth (approximately 49 girls and 51 boys per 100 live births) and in differences in life expectancy (women live on average 5–7 years longer than men). Social and economic factors, which continue to evolve, amplify these disparities.

Age also has inverse proportional implications relative to gender: as age increases, gender imbalances become more pronounced. In demography, the intragenerational gender dimension is viewed positively from the standpoint of reproduction (youth and male population dominance), where the probability of new generation emergence is high. Conversely, the intergenerational gender dimension affects nuptiality, marriage age, and marital stability. Imbalances within these structures reduce the likelihood of reproduction, thereby weakening the long-term demographic sustainability of the national framework.

Gender and generational inequality give rise to social aggressiveness, particularly in underdeveloped countries—of which the Republic of Moldova is no exception. Male competition becomes especially pronounced during periods of socio-economic transition, when society undergoes a new redistribution of resources and hierarchical positions. The gap between the rich and the poor is expected to widen significantly at local (regional) as well as national levels. Demographic inequality generates economic inequality, and consequently, social inequality.

Population aging further amplifies gender and generational imbalances. While at birth a slight male predominance is observed, by adulthood (around age 20) there is only a brief and theoretical gender equilibrium. In older age groups, however, the female population dominates significantly — at age 70, there are approximately 6–7 men for every 10 women, with the gender gap widening progressively with age. In the 30–34 age group, there are 1,034 women per 1,000 men; in

the 50–54 age group, 1,155 women per 1,000 men; and in the 70–74 age group, 1,623 women per 1,000 men. Longevity is most frequently attained by women, while male overmortality remains high until old age. Thus, longevity increases demographic, gender, and both intergenerational and intragenerational disparities. Population aging disrupts demographic equilibrium by accentuating the proportion of elderly individuals, with pre-retirement and retirement generations becoming dominant in the national demographic structure. For example, at the 1939 census, the gender gap was only 0.8%, considered negligible. By 1959, the maximum recorded difference between sexes had risen to 7.6%. During the postwar period, this imbalance gradually decreased from 7.6% to 3.1%.

Generational inequality reflects the demographic transition from younger to older and numerically dominant cohorts. Demographic aging represents one of the most profound challenges—essentially a "physical crisis" of the population—leading to declining productive capacity, which in turn may generate intergenerational rivalry and conflict. The demographic share of children has fallen below 25% of the total population (while the optimal share is considered around 29%). As demographic aging advances, the share of elderly individuals increases, and over time, the proportion of the *"oldest-old"* continues to grow. Thus, demographic disproportionality is expected to deepen.

Gender structure disparities are also evident according to the environment of residence (urban versus rural). The urban population consistently exhibits a lower (attenuated) degree of gender imbalance compared to the rural population. The primary factor contributing to these differences is the excessive emigration of the working-age population. In urban areas, men tend to migrate more frequently due to the specific nature of economic activities—especially seasonal and industrial employment—which consequently reduces the urban–rural gender gap. Therefore, the gender balance in cities is partially maintained by the availability and attractiveness of industrial employment opportunities for men. However, this effect is observable primarily among younger age groups. *Rural areas*, in contrast, are characterized by a *feminized* population structure, largely due to the limited presence of young adults and the higher proportion of elderly inhabitants. Gender

disparities also vary over time. In 1959, gender disproportions were quite evident—9.6% in urban areas and 7.2% in rural areas. According to the 2024 census, women represent 52.9% of the total population, while men account for 47.1% nationally.

Gender asymmetry serves as a key factor underlying the gradual aging of the population. The share of young people declined from 29.8% to 21.2%, while the proportion of elderly people (aged 65 and above) increased from 6.3% to 7.7%, reaching 16% by 2024 confirming the demographic trend established during the latter half of the 20th century. At advanced ages, gender asymmetry becomes more pronounced due to the higher life expectancy observed in urban populations, which is typically 2–3 years greater than in rural areas. Consequently, the predominance of females remains significant in cities, a trend that is equally becoming evident across rural areas as well.

Life Expectancy Inequalities. Life expectancy is one of the fundamental indicators of population well-being and quality of life, reflecting in particular the general health status of the population. As a consistent demographic pattern, women's average life expectancy exceeds that of men by approximately 5–7 years. In 2014, life expectancy at birth in the Republic of Moldova was 74.8 years for women and 67.1 years for men. By 2024, overall life expectancy reached 72 years, with a gender gap of nearly 9 years, men continuing to experience shorter lifespans.[10] This disparity is largely attributed to the higher rates of premature mortality among men, particularly within the working-age population—only about 50% of men live beyond the age of 60. The differentiated mortality levels between urban and rural populations also generate variations in average life expectancy. On average, urban men live 3.6 years longer than their rural counterparts, while among women this difference reaches 3.8 years.

The demographic framework of the Republic of Moldova is fundamentally characterized by evident inequalities in life expectancy, which continue to evolve, as demonstrated by analyses of National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) data. The average life expectancy of the Moldovan population has shown a contradictory evolution—rising steadily until 1990, when it reached 70 years, followed by a decline to 67 years. According to 2011 data, life expectancy was estimated at 69.5 years,

[10] According to BNS (National Bureau of Statistics data).

with an increase of 0.2 years for men and 3.8 years for women. Over the past five years, life expectancy has increased by approximately 1.6 years for both genders. Life expectancy in the Republic of Moldova reveals multiple disparities—gender-based, intergenerational, and spatial (urban–rural). At present, the increase in life expectancy is slight and modest when compared with global indicators, positioning the country below the world average.

According to the CIA World Factbook (2012), the Republic of Moldova ranked 150th out of 220 countries and regions, while 30 countries recorded a life expectancy exceeding 80 years. Life expectancy is also correlated with the population income index, with rural populations experiencing lower income levels and, consequently, higher mortality at earlier ages. This is further compounded by unequal access to healthcare services [8]. Additionally, one of the most profound inequalities is reflected in life expectancy at retirement age: estimated at 4–5 years for men and 17–18 years for women—a demographic disparity of 4–5 times, which is significant in magnitude.

Retirement Age: A Systemic Gender Inequality

The retirement age represents a diminishing but persistent inequality, one that is systemically imposed and gender based. The current retirement framework in Moldova reflects a form of gender asymmetry, a phenomenon absent in earlier centuries but reinforced by the depth and pace of demographic aging. The national pension system perpetuates demographic and gender inequalities, limiting women's economic and social potential by mandating early retirement (at age 57), thereby excluding them from the labor market and diminishing their economic autonomy both within the family and in society. The system also imposes a shorter contribution period for women. Because of their reproductive role, women face systemic disadvantages, despite their higher life expectancy (74 years). This structure is a legacy of the Soviet administrative model, representing an outdated stereotype in which early retirement is framed as a form of protection but in practice restricts women's participation in productive and social spheres, including access to goods and services.

The inequality deepened further with the increase in the male retirement age to 62.5 years. This creates an artificial income gap—men continue to earn salaries while women receive pensions—producing

disparities both at the household and societal levels. In the long term, this contributes to a rapid devaluation of women's pensions. Within five years, the pension gap between men and women of the same generation exceeds 30%. Equalizing the retirement age for both genders would reduce inequality in both the medium and long term, ensuring proportional recognition of the demographic contributions made by successive generations of women. Moreover, pension indexation practices currently display a deep social and generational inequity, as the valuation of pensions fails to account for intergenerational fairness criteria.

The Social and Economic Impact of Demographic Inequalities

Gender inequality has direct and long-term implications for the national demographic framework. Population aging may become a factor that hinders economic growth, accentuates disparities in living standards, and contributes to demographic stagnation in the labor force, including its quantitative decline. Changes in the population's age structure inevitably transform the overall composition of social needs and affect multiple spheres of life—personal, familial, professional, economic, political, and cultural. Large waves of retirees can generate social tension, reversing the traditional social balance by age and reshaping intergenerational relationships. The public health situation acquires new contours, with chronic illnesses becoming more prevalent and the number of people with temporary or permanent disabilities increasing [9].

The unstable socio-economic situation, underdeveloped labor market, low wages and subsistence-level pensions, combined with opportunities for free movement, continue to stimulate external migration, producing negative socio-economic effects. These processes further distort the demographic structure and income distribution within the population.

Demographic inequality entails multiple negative consequences, such as the slowdown of welfare growth, reduced labor productivity, and overall economic stagnation. The increasing difficulty of maintaining pension fund stability, alongside the rising costs of sustaining these funds, amplifies the need for individuals to remain economically active for longer. However, the high cost of healthcare services severely limits older people's access to essential medical assistance, affecting

the population's overall health status. In practice, demographic aging is accompanied by higher morbidity among large elderly cohorts.

In the coming years, the trend of older individuals remaining in the workforce is expected to intensify, given their growing numbers. Consequently, younger generations—already representing a smaller share of the total population and labor market—will be unable to contribute sufficiently to the pension system. Population aging unfolds amid constant social change: family size decreases, intergenerational relations shift, and the need for elderly care becomes more pressing. Young families, including young adults, bear dual responsibilities—providing care for both parents and children. Thus, the burden on younger generations to support elderly relatives will continue to increase.

Furthermore, the labor market faces a dual challenge: on one hand, declining participation rates among the working-age population and the extension of employment into pre-retirement ages; on the other, rising demand for labor in specific sectors that cannot be met by an aging workforce. The reality is that elderly individuals, as well as those approaching old age, are saving less and spending more, particularly on healthcare and basic needs [10]. Many middle-aged individuals fail to adequately save for retirement, either underestimating or being unaware of the financial resources required to ensure a minimally comfortable old age. As a result, the share of the population aged 0–9 years has decreased by 8.4% overall (nearly halved), including a 7.6% decline in urban areas and an 8.2% decline in rural areas.

Resilience in Demographic Policy – a coherent approach to sustainable development

Depopulation and excessive emigration are eroding the demographic potential of the Republic of Moldova, thereby undermining long-term economic and social development. The country's societal systems remain inadequately aligned with coherent socio-demographic policies. Modernization requires a shift from policies that merely address vulnerabilities toward those that enhance the quality of social and demographic life, an essential condition for the country's alignment with the European Union. Demographic policy must focus directly on the family as a primary social unit, with both medium- and long-term impacts. The outcomes of demographic policies are cumulative and long-lasting; thus, the mechanisms that shape them must op-

erate continuously. In this sense, demographic resilience functions as both a response and an adaptive countereffect to demographic change.

The concept of demographic policy must be understood as a cultural, economic, social, and behavioral component of national development, aimed at improving both the quality of life and the quality of demographic processes. For Moldova, it is crucial to account for the consequences of population decline and demographic aging, as well as for the pressures these trends place on social and institutional systems. Demographic policy must address several interrelated demographic tendencies: the decline in total population, rapidly decreasing fertility rates, persistently high mortality, accelerated demographic aging, large-scale emigration of young people, territorial disparities in population distribution, and factors of economic, social, and geopolitical instability.

The concept of demographic policy on population reproduction should serve as an integral and forward-looking framework for addressing the challenges that affect the sustainability of human capital. Moldova has not yet developed such a concept in practice; instead, it has formally inherited the model from the Soviet period—a model primarily focused on extensive state support for the population. However, these methods and mechanisms are inadequate in the current socio-economic and moral-psychological context, which demands new, human-centered and quality-oriented values. Thus, this concept must be seen as a comprehensive framework of strategies, methods, and mechanisms for the sustainable development of human potential, viewed through the dual lens of socio-economic quality and demographic vitality. Human development constitutes the central objective of this concept, though its implementation must remain multidimensional and complex.

The framework should be grounded in the globally recognized strategy of family planning, which remains the most effective approach. At present, the most sustainable way to address and adapt to qualitative demographic challenges in reproduction is through the institution of the family. All actions in this domain should be guided by the following principles:

a) Recognition of population issues in relation to the environment, spatial distribution, and social development.

b) State legislation must be responsive to real demographic challenges.

c) The ability to formulate and implement coherent, evidence-based demographic policies capable of modifying or adapting to the ongoing demographic crisis of reproduction.

d) Shifting from a quantitative focus to a qualitative paradigm of population development;

e) Replacing the paternalistic state model with a model grounded in social responsibility and solidarity.

f) Protecting the right to have children equally with the right not to have children—families who wish to have a certain number of children should be supported in realizing this choice, without such measures serving merely as instruments to artificially raise fertility rates.

g) Reproductive policies should be directed toward mitigating the vulnerabilities faced by young families, especially during the childbearing and child-rearing stages.

Although certain progress has been made in increasing fertility and reducing child mortality in the Republic of Moldova—through improved healthcare for women of reproductive age, mothers, and children, as well as better socio-economic and environmental conditions—these issues cannot be solved solely through medical interventions. Such measures are necessary but insufficient. Effective solutions require coordinated and coherent action by both the Government and society across diverse fields, including the economy, social welfare, education, and environmental policy.

A fundamental element of reproductive policy is the maintenance of the fertility replacement level. This objective represents the primary stage in the implementation of family-oriented and pronatalist policies. Internationally, the Parity Progression Ratio the balance of the number of children per family is widely applied as a stabilizing element of reproduction, serving as an indispensable indicator for assessing the demographic realities of a national population framework.

At the family level, the concept of reproduction requires a restructuring of both policy measures and social values. As a European country, Moldova must transition from a focus on quantitative demographic indicators to qualitative demographic standards. Modernization demands a higher quality of human capital as an essential component of

global development strategies. Accordingly, opportunities available to the population depend on its qualitative characteristics, which makes the family the central institution in shaping demographic quality. The family embodies two fundamental dimensions of population quality: a) Demographic quality, achieved through reproduction; and b) Social quality, achieved through the education and upbringing of younger generations. These policies—referred to hereafter as family policies—form the core of welfare-state mechanisms associated with childbirth and childrearing. Such policies are often supported by a series of provisions incorporated within other social welfare frameworks. Examples include Childcare credits in pension systems; Free inclusion of children in public healthcare systems; Tax reductions for families with children; Free or subsidized public transport for families with children; and Housing subsidies for families raising children.

Secondly, family policies represent a mosaic of political and social objectives. The primary goal of implementing specific family policy measures has not always been solely related to childrearing. Objectives have also included reducing unemployment and poverty, addressing class or citizenship inequalities, counterbalancing population decline, mitigating labor shortages, and restructuring (or preserving) gender relations. Consequently, family policies often encompass inconsistent or even divergent goals [6].

Within this conceptual framework, it is necessary to determine the optimal family size for the country—both at the current stage of development and for the foreseeable future. Family size serves as the central mechanism within the broader concept of population reproduction. A unified policy framework should be promoted for both rural and urban populations; differentiated approaches would generate social inequality and potentially stimulate new demographic imbalances or speculative interpretations of population trends.

It is evident that the current generation enters marriage 4–5 years later on average than the previous generation. This delay is influenced by extended educational trajectories (the three-year upper secondary cycle, followed by two years of master's studies pursued by the majority of young adults), combined with the lack of stable income and housing opportunities. Consequently, the probability of having children is lower compared to that of their parents or earlier cohorts. Economic

difficulties—such as employment instability and housing shortages—lead many young families to postpone childbearing consciously. This reflects a characteristic pattern among the country's young reproductive-age population. Furthermore, declining trust in family life is evident, as confirmed by rising divorce rates and the growing tendency to delay or avoid formal marriage altogether. In earlier decades, young people traditionally married soon after completing university studies. Today, the situation has changed: due to limited material support from parents, young adults often postpone marriage until later stages of life. This delay has fostered the spread of cohabitation as an alternative to legal marriage, thereby reducing the likelihood of childbirth within formal family structures. Cohabitation has become a preferred arrangement among young people who either have never been married or view it as a flexible and non-binding partnership, even though it is rarely perceived as a durable social institution. A smaller share of couples includes partners who were previously married but choose to postpone childbearing for personal or economic reasons.

The main causes contributing to this trend include:

- Lack of mutual obligations between partners.
- Minimization of family responsibilities.
- Fear of an unsuccessful marriage [6].

It is increasingly necessary to integrate marriage and divorce dynamics into the framework of resilient demographic policies. Divorce exerts a strong indirect impact on reproduction, particularly because it often occurs at a young age, significantly reducing the likelihood of childbirth within subsequent marriages. Therefore, divorce and marriage trends must form part of a comprehensive system of demographic resilience measures. Collectively, these measures should strengthen family cohesion—not only during the reproductive phase but throughout the entire life course—and promote the upbringing of younger generations in complete family environments with both parents, thereby reinforcing family values and social stability.

The Ideal of Reproduction and the Foundations of Family Policy. For most generations within the reproductive age range, the ideal reproductive pattern is that of one child per family. This ideal currently characterizes a large share of Moldovan society—approximately 50% of families have only one child—across both urban populations and,

to an even greater extent, the rural majority. Minimal reproductive behavior is particularly embraced by younger generations, driven by fear of poverty, social insecurity, and the economic pressures imposed by the labor market and employment conditions.

At the family level, several key stages must be clearly addressed within the reproductive policy framework:

- Promoting the conviction throughout society that women hold an equal role to men, regardless of their reproductive function.
- Changing attitudes and behaviors regarding the roles of men and women in the family and in society, closing gaps in knowledge, eliminating gender stereotypes, and promoting the values of motherhood, fatherhood, and gender equality.
- Creating favorable conditions for reconciling family and professional life, ensuring gender equality in all dimensions of employment and care responsibilities.
- Promoting, at the national level, the model family structure of four people (2 + 2), where each adult replaces themselves demographically. Although such a natality model remains below the optimal replacement level, it helps educate future generations toward an awareness of self-replacement, which can become a reliable lever for addressing potential long-term demographic challenges.
- Supporting young families who decide to marry and establish households, through various state incentives that encourage marriage and family formation at demographically young ages.
- Ensuring that family policies reflect coherent approaches to fertility disparities [15].

Currently, it is crucial that demographic policy monitors the patterns and direction of social assimilation through the family institution. Family reunification migration should not exceed the number of returning nationals (repatriations), and such reunifications must be subordinated to the repatriation process. This principal forms one of the core political dimensions of family-level demographic policy.

The goals of **family resilience policy** must become far more ambitious, aiming to: Transform the population reproduction strategy; Modify individual reproductive behavior; Create a supportive environment for maternal employment. Policy measures should address both

direct childrearing expenses and alternative costs associated with delayed childbirth. Only such measures can reshape reproductive plans and long-term demographic perspectives. At the stage of the first birth, financial assistance is the most valuable incentive, whereas for the second birth, the state's guarantee of the mother's reintegration into the labor market—as well as securing her welfare, professional continuity, and pension contributions—becomes the most crucial form of support. The overarching motivation is that every mother should be confident that childbearing does not constitute a barrier to career advancement or professional realization [6]. These principles may serve as the initial pillars of demographic policies aimed at minimizing the demographic crisis amid declining human potential and diminishing demographic capacity.

The establishment of family policy—its principles, objectives, and instruments—depends on the underlying ideological framework and value system. Two primary models dominate in theory and practice, each with various national adaptations and hybrid forms:

a) *The Institutional (Redistributive) Model:* This model regards family policy as a major social domain that delivers universal services, operating outside the logic of the market and guided by the principle of social need. It is based on social equality and aims to extend state responsibility to all dimensions of civil life through the redistribution of resources.

b) *The Residual Model:* According to this approach, there are two "natural" or socially given mechanisms through which individual needs are met: the free market and the family. Only when these fail or collapse does the state or social institutions intervene. Social protection, in this context, targets marginalized families or those in acute need. This model aligns with the liberal ideology of market autonomy and self-reliance, if the nuclear family functions as a self-supporting unit dependent on market forces.

Comparative analyses from the table reveal that the institutional model demonstrates a more active role of the state in family policy compared to the residual model. However, in certain contexts, this activism has produced unintended or paradoxical effects, occasionally counteracting the intended social objectives. Some perspectives suggest that, in the redistributive model, social insurance mechanisms oc-

cupy the primary role, whereas in the residual model, social assistance predominates. *(Table 4).*

Family policy models

Residual Model (U.S.)	Institutional Model (Sweden)
Does not encourage women's participation in the labor market.	Actively promotes women's participation in the labor market.
Family allowances are granted only to very low-income households.	All employees receive family allowances adjusted by income level.
No job security during maternity leave.	Job security during maternity leave is guaranteed.
Taxes calculated at the family level.	Individual taxation ensures separate legal status.
Part-time workers lose major benefits (health insurance, leave days, salary).	Part-time workers receive equivalent protection and benefits as full-time workers.
Mothers interrupt careers to raise children.	Parental leave for both parents; developed public early-childhood care services.

From the comparative analysis, it becomes evident that institutional family policies exhibit a more active character than residual ones. In certain cases, however, this "activism" has generated perverse effects, contrary to the intended objectives. According to some perspectives, in the redistributive model, social insurance plays the dominant role, while in the residual system, social assistance occupies the central position.

In assessing different family policy frameworks and positioning them closer to one model or the other, the following evaluation criteria are typically considered:

- The balance between universalism and selectivity (i.e., programs targeting all families versus those specifically designed for families in difficult circumstances).
- The structure of family benefits, including distribution across family categories, the share of such benefits in the national product, and expenditure per capita.

- The fiscal mechanisms ensuring the resources for family policies, with emphasis on the proportion of public contributions, the share of individual and employer contributions, and the involvement of non-governmental organizations.
- The degree of gender equality, particularly regarding participation in professional activities.
- The taxation system and calculation of tax liabilities.
- The scope and accessibility of family-oriented social services, among other aspects.

At the socioeconomic level, the core objective reflected in the reproductive policy concept must be the promotion and encouragement of fully reproductive families. This goal should serve as a guiding principle at a time when the country faces depopulation, weakened reproductive capacity, genetic vulnerability, and deepening emigration.

In implementing demographic policy as part of broader social policy, the state may employ several resource mobilization mechanisms, including:

- Increasing taxes, pensions, and population contributions.
- Expanding state contributions through transfers from public funds and the activation of philanthropic and non-governmental organizations by economic incentives to enhance their role in social protection.
- Developing early childhood education services to enable women to return to the labor market at their preferred time.
- Raising the retirement age through equalization of contribution periods and retirement thresholds for men and women.
- Expanding youth-friendly infrastructure, such as nurseries, after-school programs, school meal services, and extended childcare options.
- Engaging associative groups and private organizations in financing social insurance schemes.

At the economic level, it is essential that the fiscal mechanism clearly define the age threshold below which young individuals are exempt from responsibilities related to marriage and reproduction. Additionally, priorities should be established for families with two or more children, following practices already implemented in Romania and other EU member states. In Russia, for instance, significant finan-

cial incentives are provided starting with the second child (approximately USD 10,000), whereas in Ukraine, the support is differentiated USD 2,400 for the first child, USD 5,000 for the second, and USD 10,000 for the third [18]. Nonetheless, these measures are often accompanied by underestimations and uncertainties.

A European-style approach to family support would base taxation and benefits not on the minimum wage, but rather on the subsistence minimum. Such a shift would bring Moldovan family policy closer to European social policy standards, offering comprehensive and equitable support for families with children. Across Europe, economic, social, and institutional measures supporting families with children are extremely diverse, reflecting each country's social development history, sociocultural traditions, policy-making styles, degree of decentralization, local governance capacity, and economic resources directed toward family welfare.

In the Republic of Moldova, paternal leave was introduced only recently, on 27 May 2016. According to the legal framework, this leave lasts 14 calendar days and is granted to employed fathers upon written requests within 56 days following the child's birth. During this period, the employee receives a paternity allowance paid from the state social insurance budget. The allowance equals 100% of the insured average monthly income earned at the main place of employment during the three months preceding the child's birth, calculated based on income subject to social insurance contributions. Although the duration of paternity leave remains relatively short, it nonetheless represents a significant step forward toward greater paternal involvement in childcare and promoting gender equality in family life. It strengthens the presence and participation of fathers in raising the younger generation. To further consolidate this direction, it would be appropriate to implement a National Birth Partnership Program, designed to encourage shared parental responsibility and enhance the social value of fatherhood within Moldovan society.

Childcare leave in the Republic of Moldova is granted to insured individuals until the child reaches the age of three, and to uninsured individuals until the age of two. Paid childcare leave may be taken in full or in part until the child turns three years old, and this period is counted toward employment seniority and pension records. Mothers

are also entitled to unpaid childcare leave until the child reaches six years of age, during which their employment position is retained. The period of unpaid leave is included in total work experience, including special service tenure, provided that the individual employment contract was not suspended at the employee's own initiative. However, a form of inequality persists although these years are credited toward pension contributions, the reproductive function of women yields no corresponding social dividends, and the disparities are even greater in cases of premature births. Additional benefits are granted to families with two or more children under the age of 14, such as: four additional days of annual leave, the right to unpaid two-week leave per year, and a guaranteed right to summer leave.

Childcare leave may also be taken by the father or other relatives, in which case it is referred to as parental leave. In Moldova, as in other countries (e.g., the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, etc.), parental leave is among the longest in Europe—three years. By comparison, in Finland, parental leave lasts four months, and in Italy, six months. In contrast, the financial compensation for parental leave in Moldova is significantly lower. In 2016, the average monthly childcare allowance for insured individuals was 30% of the average income earned during the previous 12 months, provided that the mother either did not work or worked part-time, including from home. The calculation base, however, cannot exceed five times the forecasted average monthly salary for the corresponding year. For uninsured women, the monthly childcare allowance is 540 lei.

Currently, parents are not offered flexibility in choosing the duration of their childcare leave (for example, 1 year or 2 years). Ideally, parents should have the option to select:

- One year at 85% of salary (with a high maximum threshold).
- Two years — the first at 60%, the second at 30%, with the third year unpaid.
- Three years at 30% of salary.

Such options would support faster reintegration into the labor market. Excessively long leaves tend to weaken family income and reduce professional continuity, while uncertainty persists for young families regarding the availability of childcare facilities and nurseries when children are not yet fully independent.

Another factor influencing parents' (especially mothers') decisions to take, shorten, or postpone childcare leave relates to education level, fear of professional regression, loss of position, incomplete studies, or employment discrimination, both during hiring and employment retention. Thus, long-term childcare leave diminishes not only income but also career advancement opportunities, a disadvantage observed equally in the Moldovan context.

Family policy in Moldova has not yet fully succeeded in reconciling family life with professional activity, an equilibrium essential for both well-being and fertility growth. Women's participation in the labor market does not inherently hinder fertility; however, economic pressures often compel them to prioritize financial security. Family policy has so far failed to optimally balance paid employment and unpaid domestic work. As noted by J. V. Cernov, resolving this imbalance requires a three-level approach: The state policy level, through family and employment measures; The corporate level, where enterprises adopt family-friendly policies; The household level, where individual strategies are developed to harmonize work and family responsibilities [10, pp. 297–298].

At the national level, promoting the "2 + 2 family model"—two parents and two children, where each individual reproduces themselves—serves as an educational benchmark. Although this format does not fully address demographic challenges, it helps instill self-replacement reproductive norms in future generations, contributing to demographic sustainability. In demographic terms, for stable generational replacement, families with three children should represent at least 50% of the total. Demographic policy must therefore aim to compensate for maternal and emerging male infertility, both of which increasingly affect reproductive outcomes. In Moldova, maternal infertility has risen from 8% to 16%, significantly influencing family reproduction dynamics. Consequently, the new demographic policy must explicitly prioritize and support three-child families as a cornerstone of demographic resilience.

The overarching goals of family policy must be more ambitious, focusing on:

- Transforming reproductive strategies,
- Modifying individual reproductive behavior, and
- Creating a supportive environment for mothers' employment.

Policy measures should cover both direct childrearing costs and indirect opportunity costs (such as delayed births). While financial support is most valuable for the first child, for the second child, job security and state-backed reintegration into the labor market are even more critical. Every mother should have the assurance that childbirth is not a barrier to career advancement or professional development.

To enhance the effectiveness of pronatalist policies, innovative measures are necessary. One option—applied successfully in France—is to link the family head's salary to the number and age of children, complemented by benefits such as childcare services, maternal schools, subsidized housing, and paid family vacations.

Developing a private kindergarten infrastructure represents both a business opportunity and a social solution to meet rising demand for high-quality early childhood education. Additionally, establishing non-commercial family-based daycare centers (serving 10–15 children in adjacent residential spaces) would provide an effective community-level alternative to public childcare, diversifying support options for young families.

The mathematics of demographic construction leaves no room for conjecture: without a recovery in birth rates, the demographic decline that has persisted for over three decades will inevitably deepen through its own internal dynamics. This process will acquire dramatic proportions as the small generations born after 1989 reach reproductive age. A revival of fertility will no longer be able to stop the demographic decline entirely, yet it can significantly slow its pace and reduce its magnitude.

Intergenerational policies implications

The national demographic framework is in a continuous modeling under the action of internal demographic and socio-economic factors that amplify new demographic qualities of the entire system adapted to current requirements. Generationally, the population has undergone profound changes, both in terms of the number of generations, and the modeling of each generation, the priorities and demographic standards embraced by the generations in reproduction. Deep information gaps leave imprints of uncertainty in decision-making, the use of new resources and evidence for the sustainability of the demographic framework.

The current study eloquently indicates that populations have the resources to adapt to new realities, but these have not always been part of support in demographic policies. Achieving the demographic balance is possible through the generational and individual dimensional training. Every member of society from a generational position can contribute and receive support, care, and comfort for life. As a finality of this study, we establish the following from GGS survey:

- In Moldovan families persist intergenerationally support each other members which can serve as a dividend of intergenerational support demographic policies.
- Late marriages in the case of young people omit the favor of support for childcare assistance from parents (grandparents).
- The GGS study confirms that, between generations of families, there is the ambiance of mutual support in the life cycle.
- It is appropriate that family intergenerational relationships be integrated into demographic policies to give consistency to family and family reproduction.
- The quality and level of satisfaction of intergenerational relations is appreciated as a good one.

Some general policy criteria: Intergenerational learning (IL) is the place where people of all ages can learn together, as well as from each other, traditionally common in families, where knowledge is shared over generations. More recently, however, it is seen as being facilitated by larger social groups outside the family circle. It works well to combat stereotypes, such as age discrimination (targeting young and old), and can help address demographic change and lifelong solidarity, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue (foster dialogue, exchange of values, between local and new citizens, young and old), breaking down barriers and working towards an intergenerational world. As mechanisms are also: national education focused on the traditions of society for the transfer of values and helps, societal dynamics – part of lifelong learning, lifelong active citizenship.

- Policies related to families with children must take on new dimensions for the perspective period, with the intergenerational dimension and be part of social development strategies. Currently, in the Republic of Moldova there are several benefits for families with children, these being focused mainly on young children, lacking the

holistic multi-sectoral vision of providing intergenerational support through the family.

The GGS study confirms that there are wide possibilities to model, influence the reproduction of young families through generational support to achieve the sustainability of reproduction both by family and by generation, which is crucial in moderating major demographic problems of the national demographic framework. The integration of mutual aid in family policies is a dimension that can bring evidence from the demographic and European perspective of the country, it will ensure a new intergenerational quality in the family.

- The eloquent GGS study shows that it is crucial to develop measures of demographic policies to support young people in their intentions (but also their indecision which are for economic reasons) for family affirmation. Demographic policies must give them confidence and certainty that the family is the basic shield against all the risks of the stage through which the generation enters reproduction. Demographic policies, measures and their mechanisms must induce the approach of the age of lasting marriage. The transfer, its modeling through consistent mechanisms induces the solution of the probability of sustainable reproduction of young families (to be decided for 2 children) and additionally, the capitalization of the generational support that their parents can offer to young families. The late marriage age of generations of young families is a basic factor shattering the reproductive expectations for parents and the expectations of grandparents to have grandchildren. This measure would foreshadow medium-term population policies.
- Another valuable element is that in family policies to move from social security policies to family social insurance policies. Social insurance is a mechanism for reducing the risks faced by young families during the reproduction stage, and the care for their children that can be achieved through the support of grandparents (their parents). As this support lasts, the implications of fiscal policies and labour legislation would provide coverage for those involved.

The greatest demand in care, services, protection – young families with children feel it at the age of 0-3 years, 6-7 years, 7-11 years. At the age of 3 the barrier is the fact that children are not yet self-employed and are not accepted for institutionalization in nurseries and kinder-

gartens, and at the age of 6-11 years extended school hours and the need for non-supervision at home while at the work. In the realities of the Republic of Moldova, the Community Centers for Early Development of 3-(6)-7 – year-old Children have solved the problem only partially, but the expectations of young families leave a demand for quality in their activity.

- Intergenerational solidarity and the alignment of the infrastructure of health and care systems to the needs of the older population (diseases), the innovative development of capacities in systems and services adapted for advanced aging with good health conditions and combating loneliness in old age.
- Policies must develop a wide spectrum of services adapted to the needs of the older population with priority for the rural population: easy access to common mobile phone services for all family members who have older people; reduced prices for cable television services for the categories of rural and urban older families, which are the basic source of information in lonely life; adaptation of urban and rural infrastructure to the massiveness and depth of reduced mobility of the aging.

Another reality is that, in urban regions, cases can often be registered when there are 38 and 40 children in a group, as well as in the primary classes. An overload of the number of children, especially in preschool institutions, leads to an increased frequency of illnesses in children, respectively to a higher number of unpaid leave among parents (often taken by mothers with children aged 3–6 years, thus, income reduced parenting, increased drug spending, and reduced quality of preschool education in general.

Resilience in Policies Addressing Demographic Ageing

The Republic of Moldova has reached the end of its demographic dividend stemming from the high fertility rates of previous decades and now faces a limited opportunity to harness the human potential of the post-retirement population for supporting economic development. The prosperity of developed societies is largely determined by the employment rate among the elderly, which in advanced economies reaches approximately 50 percent. Moldova, by contrast, continues to exhibit low participation of the older population in the labor force and an outdated pension framework that hinders social resilience. It

is time to reconsider the principle of universality in the pension system and move toward a multi-pillar structure that combines public, occupational, and private components. The transition from a collective to an individual society must be reflected in modern social protection policies. For more than three decades, pensions in Moldova have remained a form of "poverty compensation" rather than a reflection of a lifetime of contribution. Roughly half of agricultural pensioners receive pensions below the national average, revealing deep inequalities. Moreover, elite pensions, which exceed the average wage by several multiples, perpetuate systemic injustice. Family support policies are insufficient to ensure the replacement level of reproduction, and women remain disproportionately disadvantaged—often facing old-age poverty despite lifelong child-rearing contributions. The child-care period between ages 3 and 6 is not included in pension contribution years, further accentuating gender inequality. The decline of the family unit amplifies demographic transformations with long-term negative effects, while reconciliation of family and professional life remains an untapped mechanism for generating future demographic dividends. The pension system continues to exhibit generational and gender-based discrimination. The new pension law has failed to achieve equity between older and newer retirees. Regular indexation of pensions is essential, particularly during periods of high inflation, as currency depreciation severely undermines the real value of pensions. A sustainable system must ensure that the average pension exceeds the subsistence minimum, thereby motivating continued contribution to the pension fund. Currently, Moldova's replacement rate—the ratio of average pension to average wage—is among the lowest in Europe (27–29%).

A resilient pension system must be adequate, robust, accessible, sustainable, and socially centered—promoting solidarity while preventing marginalization and exclusion.

Principles of a Resilient Pension Policy

✓ "You receive as you worked" – benefits should directly reflect years and levels of contribution.

✓ Pension entitlements must include post-retirement work contributions, with proportional increases for each additional year worked.

✓ The system should shift from universal generosity to targeted social security, ensuring fairness.

✓ The "clean-up" of merit-based or privileged pensions must align with the European "pay-as-you-go" model, eliminating excessive disparities.

✓ Promotion of active and healthy aging, enabling older adults with adequate health to remain economically and socially active.

✓ Late-life education and lifelong learning should be embedded in active aging strategies.

✓ The third pension pillar (voluntary private savings) must be urgently implemented to diversify financial sustainability.

Across European states, gradual increases in the retirement age have become a normal and necessary adjustment to demographic realities. However, unlike in the EU, where most individuals survive well beyond retirement and enjoy longer pension periods, Moldovans experience shorter post-retirement lifespans. Therefore, setting the average retirement age at 63 must be accompanied by careful evaluation to prevent intergenerational disparities. Longevity improvements have not kept pace with the extension of working years, producing inequitable burdens across generations. Raising the retirement age has multiple implications:

- It narrows the gap between pensions and wages.
- It offsets labor shortages, supporting productivity and economic growth.
- It reduces fiscal pressure on active workers and the state budget.

However, without parallel wage reform and pension recalibration, this measure may backfire—prompting skilled labor migration and informal employment. The ratio between contribution and benefit years should approximate 1:3—one year of pension for three years of contribution—while the expected duration of pension receipt should not fall below 12–15 years per individual.

Territorial-Administrative resilience: a demographic context

Territorial-administrative reform should not be viewed as a dismantling of human settlements, but rather as a solution to local population challenges. Moldova's network of 55 urban settlements appears geographically balanced, yet this alone does not guarantee sustain-

able rural development. The administrative organization of the past has heavily influenced urbanization patterns, favoring district centers, particularly those that previously served as county capitals.

Several arguments support the necessity and implementation of territorial-administrative reform: Excessive fragmentation: Moldova's 32 districts are far too numerous for a country of 33,800 km^2 and 2.4 million inhabitants (2024). This fragmentation complicates governance, inflates administrative costs, and reduces service efficiency for citizens. Regional optimization: The creation of 5–6 larger regions would enable decentralized fiscal and social decision-making, strengthen local democracy and improve resource allocation. Rural vitality and equity: To prevent rural depopulation following the consolidation of administrative units, residents of dissolved communes must be guaranteed minimum living conditions, following the model successfully applied in Latvia. Cross-border cooperation: Regionalization would enhance cross-border partnerships with EU countries, a key priority in the EU's cohesion strategy. This approach would also stimulate development in Moldova's border peripheries and align national administrative structures with European regional models.

Historically, Moldovan cities emerged as agro-industrial and administrative centers. Today, industrial functions have declined in importance, while administrative and service roles prevail. As district centers, cities must now allocate sufficient financial and administrative resources to meet the infrastructure and service needs of their surrounding rural populations—ensuring that regional governance remains inclusive, efficient, and demographically resilient.

The Geodemographic Context of the Administrative-Territorial Structure. According to European standards, the Republic of Moldova is a small country geographically, with a total area of 33.8 thousand km^2 and a population of approximately 2,512,800 inhabitants (2021), including the left bank of the Dniester estimated at about 365 thousand inhabitants (6.7%). Despite its modest size, Moldova maintains a relatively high population density—121.9 inhabitants per km^2 (with Strășeni District recording the highest at 131 inhabitants per km^2). At the same time, Moldova remains a predominantly rural country, with the highest rural population share in Europe (53.7%). The average rural population density is 68.6 people per km^2, higher than in neigh-

boring Romania and Ukraine. The Central Region registers the highest rural density (85 inhabitants per km^2), followed by the Northern Region. Administrative units surrounding Chișinău—such as Ialoveni, Anenii Noi, Criuleni, Străşeni, Călăraşi, and Nisporeni—exceed 85 inhabitants per km^2. These densely populated rural areas are a legacy of the Soviet era. Depopulation has since disproportionately affected the northern and southern extremes of the country. The rural habitat has undergone major changes, both during the Soviet period and under democratic administrations, as the functional linkage between rural and urban environments has been continuously challenged. The average agricultural land per rural inhabitant is 1.08 hectares, being highest in the left-bank districts (1.7 ha/person) and in the Northern Region (1.17 ha/person). The spatial distribution of rural settlements is polarized: there are 5–6 villages per 100 km^2, varying from 1.5 in Gagauzia, 2.5 in Ștefan Vodă, to 6.9 in Fălești. Hence, the unequal distribution of settlements ranges from large, sparsely distributed villages (especially in the center and south) to numerous small settlements in the north. This inequality represents a key issue for territorial-administrative policy modeling, which has been insufficiently addressed in previous reform proposals.

The number of villages within a commune is an early indicator of demographic vulnerability, threatening the vitality of rural spaces. The phenomenon of depopulation places both villages and communes in an unequal position, undermining social cohesion, economic growth, and the sustainable use of natural and human resources. It is often difficult to demographically distinguish communes from villages, as face similar population trends. According to the dictionary definition, a commune is "an administrative unit composed of one or more villages, led by a communal council", with a typical population of around 3,000 inhabitants. By contrast, a village is simply a rural settlement within a commune, while a hamlet refers to a smaller, often scattered rural cluster that does not form a separate administrative unit. Depopulation has particularly affected small villages and hamlets, which are growing in relative number, but shrinking in population. Demographic inequalities are not always reflected in settlement categories—for instance, Chetrosu commune (1,974 inhabitants) and Todirești (1,843 inhabitants) have negligible demographic differenc-

es. However, inequalities arise from socioeconomic capacity, resource distribution, and development priority, which in turn reinforce demographic disparities. The absorption of smaller villages by larger communes—though inevitably creates uneven spatial distribution and new demographic challenges. Consequently, both villages and communes face inequality of coexistence, which undermines local development and population stability.

Some communes now have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, calling into question their very administrative status due to the lack of a demographic base. Conversely, rural localities with "village" status are often administratively subordinated, facing systemic demographic discrimination. Small and medium-sized towns are undergoing a process of de-urbanization and ruralization, losing their economic and social vitality. As a result, Moldova is losing its regional development centers. With few exceptions, no small or medium town possesses the minimal conditions required to attract population or stimulate regional development. Economic concentration has deepened dependence on the capital, Chișinău, widening the center-periphery gap, a phenomenon intensified by market liberalization and the weakening of state regulatory functions. While the overall territorial distribution of settlements appears balanced, their functional structure is excessively polarized around Chișinău. Today, small towns resemble large villages, often with populations of only 4–6 thousand inhabitants (e.g., Cupcini). Many large rural localities are found in peri-urban zones, particularly near Chișinău, some of which have been recently absorbed by the municipality. Small towns have been subordinated to district authorities, losing administrative autonomy, and many of their functions have been transferred to district councils. Thus, de-urbanization reflects the neglect of regional development policies, which marginalize rural citizens' access to public services, both in terms of diversity and quality. In this context, the functional equivalence between small urban and large rural settlements—for example, Bucovăț and other localities of similar size—illustrates their mutual inequality. These communities lack local economic dynamism, which severely limits their capacity for sustainable development.

A fundamental feature of the northern rural habitat is the prevalence of numerous small and very small rural settlements. This catego-

ry includes localities with populations of up to 200 inhabitants. There are 107 such villages, representing 20% of all rural settlements. At the same time, 22 localities have fewer than 25 residents. Among the 295 commune centers (communal seats), there are only 20 small urban settlements (with populations under 20,000), with the city of Bălți being the sole exception.

The average population size of a local government unit (municipality) varies greatly across the world. For example:

- Korea – 220,000 inhabitants per municipality.
- United Kingdom – 155,800.
- Japan – 74,200.

Within Europe, the ranking is led by:

- Denmark – 56,200.
- The Netherlands – 41,100.
- Greece – 34,900.

The OECD average is 9,100 inhabitants, and the EU average is 5,600.

In Romania, the figure is 6,200, while at the bottom of the ranking are Moldova – 2,800, Slovakia – 1,800, France – 1,700, and the Czech Republic – 1,600 inhabitants per local government unit. In Moldova, 94% of all local public administrations (mayoralties) are rural. In 1995, the average size of a rural mayoralty was 2,490 inhabitants. In 1999, during the transition to the county-based system (which reduced the total number of local administrations), the average locality had 3,490 inhabitants. Following the administrative counter-reform of 2003, the average fell to 2,250 residents. At present, a rural municipality in Moldova has an average of 1,700 inhabitants—half the size recorded 20 years ago.

According to current legislation in the Republic of Moldova, a mayoralty (commune) may be established if the locality has a population greater than 1,500 inhabitants. Only in exceptional cases may a commune be created with fewer than 1,500 residents.

However, in practice, what was once an exception has become the norm: a significant number of communes are now established below this demographic threshold.

In 2015, there were:

- 361 mayoralties with fewer than 1,500 inhabitants,
- 353 with populations between 1,500–3,000,

- 158 with 3,000–10,000, and
- 26 with over 10,000 inhabitants.

By 2023, the figures had evolved as follows:

- 469 mayoralties with fewer than 1,500 residents,
- 300 between 1,500–3,000,
- 106 between 3,000–10,000, and
- 23 with over 10,000 inhabitants.

Moreover, 50 localities had populations of fewer than 50 people (2014 Census). In total, the Republic of Moldova has 916 communes (former rural soviets), of which 845 are located on the territory controlled by Chişinău, and 69 are situated on the left bank of the Dniester (Transnistria). Out of the total number of communes, 411 consists of multiple villages (375 between the Prut and Dniester Rivers, and 36 in Transnistria), while the remainder comprise a single settlement.

The share of urban population per administrative unit in the Republic of Moldova is only 22.7%. The lowest levels are recorded in Cantemir (8.6%), Ştefan Vodă (11.2%), and Criuleni (11.3%). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Taraclia (47.7%), Basarabeasca (39.8%), and Soroca (37.7%) register the highest urban shares. This disproportion underestimates the potential and functional role of towns and district centers as poles for providing services to the surrounding rural territories. According to the 2014 Population Census, the smallest district by population is Basarabeasca, with only 23,012 inhabitants. Other sparsely populated districts include Dubăsari (29,271), Şoldăneşti (36,743), Taraclia (37,357; down from over 43,000 in 2004), and Donduşeni (37,856). In contrast, the most populous districts are Cahul (105,324), Hînceşti (103,784), Orhei (101,502), Ungheni (101,064), and Ialoveni (93,151).

Top 10 Rural Localities (2014 Census):

- Congaz, ATU Gagauzia – over 12,000 inhabitants
- Costești, Ialoveni – 11,000 inhabitants
- Cărpineni, Hîncești – 10,000 inhabitants
- Copceac, Comrat – 9,500 inhabitants
- Baurci, Comrat – 8,700 inhabitants
- Băcioi, Chișinău – 8,600 inhabitants
- Corjeuți, Briceni – 7,500 inhabitants
- Trușeni, Chișinău – 7,500 inhabitants
- Pelinia, Drochia – 7,500 inhabitants
- Peresecina, Orhei – 7,300 inhabitants

Recent estimates by the National Bureau of Statistics show that over 40% of the national population resides in just five administrative-territorial units: the municipalities of Chişinău and Bălţi, the Gagauz Autonomous Region, and the districts of Ungheni and Cahul.

Statistical data indicate that approximately one-third of Moldova's population spends an average of 1.1 hours daily commuting to and from work, while over one-quarter spend around 50 minutes per day traveling for shopping or services. The average daily travel time in Moldova is comparable to that of other European states[11] 12. Proximity to the Chișinău metropolitan area provides clear socio-economic advantages to the central rural regions, while northern and southern rural zones remain structurally disadvantaged. An analysis of primary socio-economic indicators reveals a decline in the traditional prosperity of the northern districts, driven both by demographic factors (notably depopulation and rapid aging) and geographical distance from Chișinău. Currently, the six cities formally designated as growth poles—Cahul, Comrat, Orhei, Ungheni, Soroca, and Edineț—face development constraints and do not meet even the minimum legal criteria defining a municipality. For instance, in Cahul and Ungheni, the share of asphalted roads is below 35%, far short of the minimum 60% required by law for urban classification. Except for Orhei, none of these municipalities operate a reliable urban public transport system, undermining the rural–urban service distribution network.

The average population size of a second-level administrative-territorial unit (ATU II) is 74,200 inhabitants, with the largest being: Gagauzia (151,000), Cahul (116,700), Orhei (112,000), Hîncești (115,500), and Ungheni (106,400). By contrast, the least populated districts include: Basarabeasca (27,200), Dubăsari (35,700), Șoldănești (38,400), and Taraclia (39,000) — comparable to the populations of several urban district centers such as Cahul, Ungheni, or Soroca. The average area of an ATU II is 890 km^2, ranging from Cahul (1,545 km^2) — the largest, 5.2 times bigger than Basarabeasca (290 km^2) — the smallest. [5]

Within mayoralties, the ratio of population per administrative employee varies substantially — from 74 inhabitants per employee (minimum) to 1,904 (maximum). In nearly 43% of mayoralties, this ratio falls between 201–400 inhabitants per employee, while 23% have between 401–600 inhabitants per employee, reflecting significant disparities in workload and administrative capacity. To establish a new administrative-territorial unit, the following criteria are necessary:

[11] *https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Raport_Habitat_III__ro.pdf*

- a minimum population of 5,000 residents,
- road connections linking all constituent settlements,
- a maximum distance of 25–30 km from the center to the farthest village, and
- the capacity to finance at least 12 employees (the current national average being 5.3 employees per mayoralty).

Administrative-territorial reform and rural accessibility are measured by the geographical distance to the nearest town, a key social and economic indicator. Transport services are often nonexistent in low-density rural areas, where long distances and poor road conditions make them unprofitable, further complicating administrative optimization.

Additionally, many small towns (district centers) are unable to provide the full range of services required by surrounding rural populations, and such gaps persist across large parts of the country. Empirical evidence shows that economic growth periods tend to coincide with widening inequalities, while demographic disparities further exacerbate them. Development and innovation strategies must therefore integrate demographic factors, encompassing both quantitative characteristics and the qualitative potential of the population. Demographic disproportions have become so pronounced that they now threaten the sustainable demographic balance, affecting not only population distribution but also roader socio-economic processes. These inequalities are largely structural deficiencies of the administrative-territorial system, posing risks to long-term development.

Mechanisms for Structural and Administrative Policy Design:

1. *Local Development Strategies.* Instruments such as Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) should be further developed and adopted by local or regional authorities to strengthen territorial planning capacities.
2. *Amalgamation of Localities.* The first stage — voluntary amalgamation — has shown limited results. Across the EU, all countries ultimately transitioned to centrally planned, mandatory reorganization. There is a real risk that voluntary mergers may follow partisan political preferences, leading to inefficient entities with limited administrative capacity to provide services.[12] The second

[12] https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/md/Raport-priv-ind-optiunile-de-reforma-administrativ-teritoriala-a-Republicii-Moldova_24

stage — normative amalgamation — involves centrally directed consolidation, establishing a new administrative map and corresponding competences.

3. *Intercommunal Cooperation.* In search of optimal administrative scales and efficient service delivery, European local governments have undergone continuous transformations through amalgamations (e.g., Denmark in 2007, Latvia in 2009) or via inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms (as in France and other EU states).

Promoting inter-municipal cooperation and participatory mechanisms enhances local governance capacities and enables communities to address their needs autonomously, without excessive reliance on central authorities.

Administrative-territorial reform represents a crucial step toward achieving a more efficient and sustainable management of public resources and services. It is essential to establish both political and community consensus to ensure successful implementation of this process. The creation of adequately sized administrative-territorial units will contribute to the provision of higher-quality public services, resulting in improved individual and collective well-being, enhanced social comfort, and reduced administrative costs. Both rural and urban communities must demonstrate a firm commitment to accepting and supporting this reform by actively participating in its implementation. Only through close cooperation and shared commitment can the objective of establishing an administrative system that effectively responds to the current needs of citizens be achieved.

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