

**STRATIFICATION AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY:  
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

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*The main purpose of the research is to analyse the links between stratification and various forms of inequality, to identify the role of economic inequality in social stratification and forming the middle class in the context of the Republic of Moldova. The study is based on the Household budget survey data of the National Bureau of Statistics for the years 2011-2016. The analysis of the statistical data shows that despite the economic growth during the last years in the Republic of Moldova, the economic inequality is still high and is based on unequal distribution of goods and services, polarizing the society in a large number of poor population and a very small number of rich people, the middle class being only in the incipient phase of formation. The economic inequality is manifested through discrepancies between different regions, urban and rural areas, gender, age groups, family sizes etc. To reduce the economic inequality we need an integrated approach based on redistribution of income through progressive taxation (the richest people pay higher income taxes than the poor ones); development and implementation of inclusive social policies for increasing the access to mainstream and social services of the most disadvantaged groups of population, and increasing the social responsibilities of companies regarding the living standards and quality of life of their employees.*

**Keywords:** social stratification, economic inequality, social inequality, income, consumption.

*Scopul de bază al cercetării este de a analiza legăturile dintre stratificare și diferite forme ale inegalității, a identifica rolul inegalității economice în stratificarea socială și formarea clasei de mijloc în contextul Republicii Moldova. Studiul se bazează pe datele Cercetării Bugetelor Gospodăriilor Casnice ale Biroului Național de Statistică pentru anii 2011-2016. Rezultatele cercetării demonstrează că, în pofida creșterii economice din ultimii ani în Republica Moldova, inegalitatea economică este încă destul de mare și se bazează pe distribuția inegală a bunurilor și serviciilor, polarizând societatea într-un număr mare de oameni săraci și un număr foarte mic de oameni bogați, clasa de mijloc fiind doar în faza incipientă de formare. Inegalitatea economică se manifestă prin discrepanțele dintre diferite regiuni, zone urbane și rurale, pe sexe, grupe de vârstă, dimensiunile familiei etc. Pentru a reduce inegalitatea economică, este nevoie de o abordare integrată bazată pe redistribuirea veniturilor prin impozitarea progresivă (cei mai bogați plătesc impozite mai mari decât cei săraci); dezvoltarea și implementarea politicilor sociale incluzive pentru creșterea accesului grupurilor celor mai dezavantajate de populație la serviciile de bază și la cele sociale și creșterea responsabilităților sociale ale companiilor cu privire la standardele de viață și calitatea vieții angajaților lor.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** stratificare socială, inegalitate economică, inegalitate socială, venit, consum.

*Основная цель исследования – проанализировать связи между стратификацией и различными формами неравенства, определить роль экономического неравенства в социальной стратификации и формировании среднего класса в Республике Молдова. Исследование основано на данных Обследования бюджетов домашних хозяйств Национального бюро статистики за 2011-2016 гг. Результаты исследования показывают, что несмотря на экономический рост в последние годы в Республике Молдова, экономическое неравенство сохраняется на высоком уровне. Оно основано на неравном распределении товаров и услуг, поляризуя общество на большое количество бедных людей и сравнительно небольшое количество богатых людей, в то время как средний класс находится только*

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в начальной фазе формирования. Экономическое неравенство наблюдается между различными регионами, городскими и сельскими районами, между полами, возрастными группами, а также в зависимости от размера семьи. Исследование показывает, что для уменьшения экономического неравенства необходим комплексный подход, основанный на перераспределении доходов через прогрессивное налогообложение (самые богатые люди платят более высокие налоги на доходы, чем бедные); разработке и внедрении всеобъемлющей социальной политики для расширения доступа наиболее обездоленных групп населения к основным социальным услугам; и повышении социальной ответственности компаний в отношении уровня жизни и качества жизни их сотрудников.

**Ключевые слова:** социальная стратификация, экономическое неравенство, социальное неравенство, политическая власть, доход, потребление, социальные возможности.

**JEL Classification:** D63, P40, P46, P49, Z10, Z13.

**UDC:** 316.343

**Introduction.** Social structure is a fundamental concept that designates „the assembly of the stable relations which characterizes the social system of a society, consisting of collectivities, classes, categories and social groups in a certain period of time [9].

Stratification represents the location of an individual or a group in a social position assembly, ranked on a vertical scale [2, p.108]. The main criteria for determining the social position is the quantity of valuable resources that the individual/group possesses. The unequal distribution of valuable resources constitutes the main assumption for social stratification.

The quantities of valuable resources that the individual/group possess determine the level of wealth, power and prestige they have at different societal levels. At micro-level (family/community), the wealth, power and prestige are granted to those individuals who have cultural capital (knowledge and access to important information in the society) and social capital (connections with other influential people). Individual qualities such as leadership, personality, sense of humour, self-confidence, quick-wittedness, physical attractiveness, or ascribed characteristic – such as gender or ethnicity-influence, cultural and social capital [12]. At meso-level, the power and prestige are determined by the position the individual occupy in different organisations and institutions and the access to different resources through those positions. At macro-level, the stratification is determined by the economic system which includes occupational structure, level of technology and distribution of wealth in society [12].

The social dimension of stratification is related to the status and prestige the individual enjoys. Status is the relative social position of the individual or group in the social hierarchy, which includes certain rights and obligations. Stratification by status goes hand in hand with a monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities [17, p 302-310]. Property is not necessarily linked to status, but usually in the long term it is. Both propertied and propertyless people can belong to a given status group.

The analysis of different theoretical approaches on social structure shows that the stratification of any society is based on distribution of various values and goods. The distribution of values and goods is based on economic reasons (property ownership), social status (level of group privileges and prestige) and political power (belonging or not to the dominant party).

The inequality is an expression of stratification. Economic inequalities determine the differences in welfare among individuals of a group or in society or between countries. The economic inequality is expressed by income inequalities, salaries, and welfare inequalities [15]. The economic inequality allows persons to have different level of consumption, as well as different level of access to various goods and services and different standard of living.

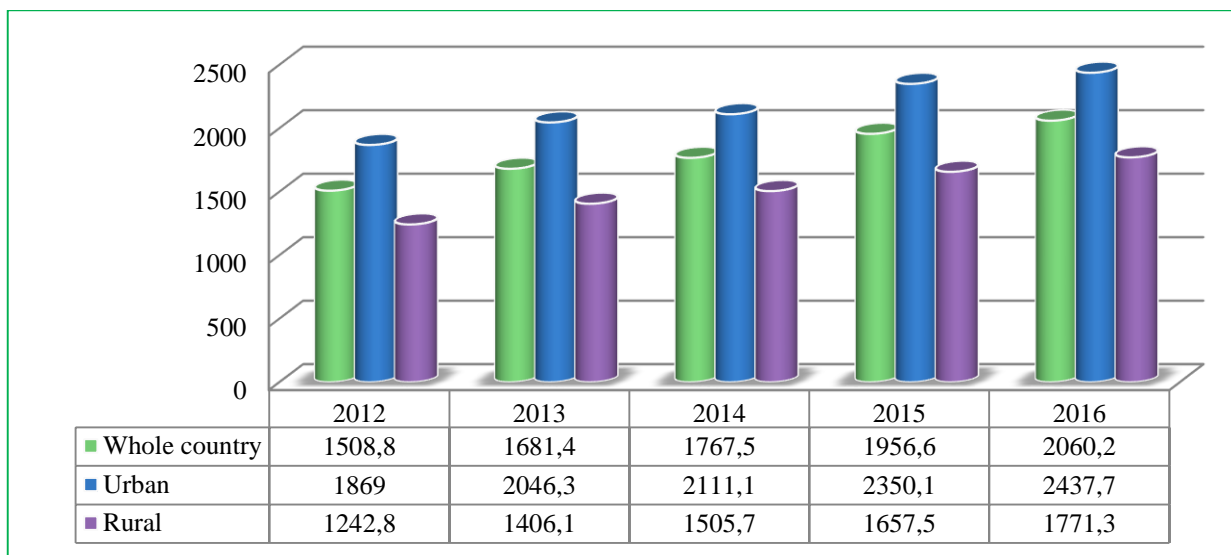
This article presents the results of the research regarding the links between the stratification and various form of inequalities. The main purpose of the research is to identify the role of economic inequality in social stratification and to form the middle class in the Republic of Moldova.

The study is based on the Household budget survey data (National Bureau of Statistics) for the years 2011-2016.

Despite the economic growth during the last years in the Republic of Moldova (in the last 10 years, the economy of the Republic of Moldova registered an average growth of about 3.5% per year [15, p.27], the income inequality is still high and is based on unequal distribution of goods and services, polarizing the society in a large number of poor population and a very small number of rich people, the middle class being

only in the incipient phase of formation. The income inequality is manifested through discrepancies between different statistical regions, urban and rural areas, gender, age groups, family sizes etc.

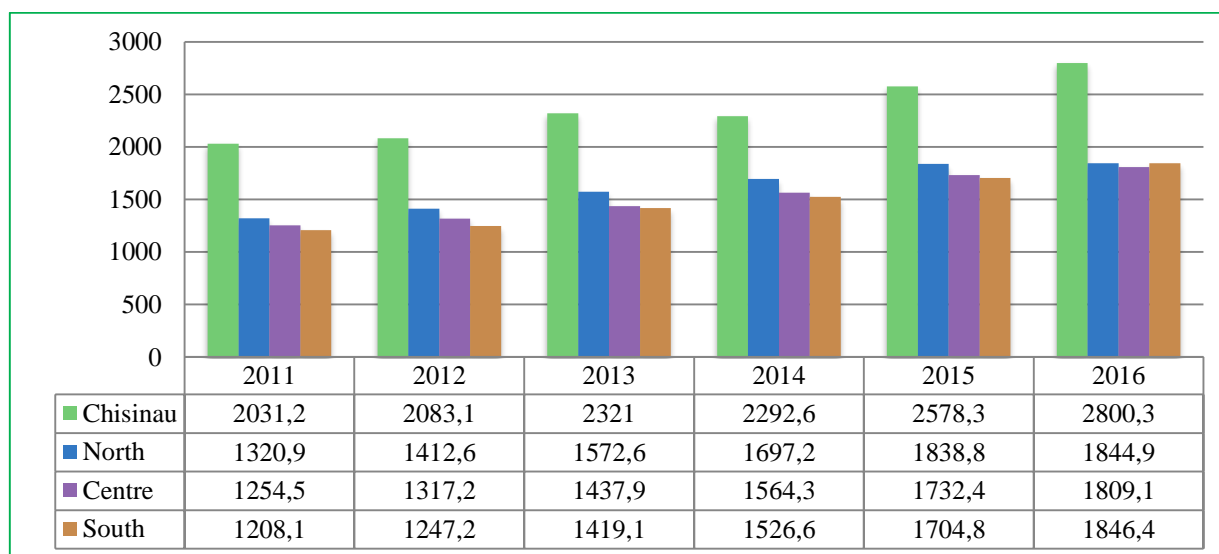
The analysis of the disposable income during the last five years shows an increase of 1.36 in the income of the population at the level of the whole country (from 1508.8 lei in 2012 to 2060.2 lei in 2016). However, despite the higher increase of the income of rural population (1.42 times) comparative to urban one (1.30 times), the discrepancy is still high: the income of rural population was by 1.37 times lower than the income of urban one in 2016 (figure 1).



**Figure 1. Average monthly disposable incomes per capita, Lei**

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

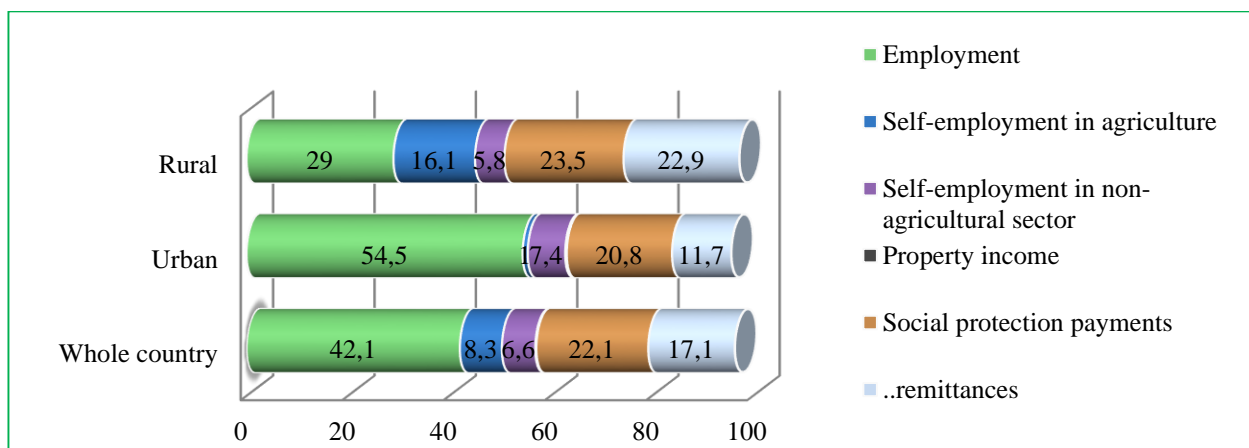
The income inequality persists also at the regional level. Over the last 6 years (2011-2016), the average monthly disposable income per capita increased in Chisinau by 1.37 times, in Northern region – 1.39 times, in Center region – 1.44 times and in Southern region – 1.53 times. However, the regional income differences per capita are still high. The highest average monthly income per capita is in Chisinau and constituted 2800.3 lei in 2016. Comparatively to Chisinau, the average income per capita in Center region was by 1.55 times lower (1809.1 lei), in Northern and Southern regions was by 1.51 times lower (1846.4 lei in North and 1844.9 lei in South) and in Southern region was by 1.52 times lower (figure 2).



**Figure 2. Average monthly disposable income per capita, statistical regions, years, Lei**

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

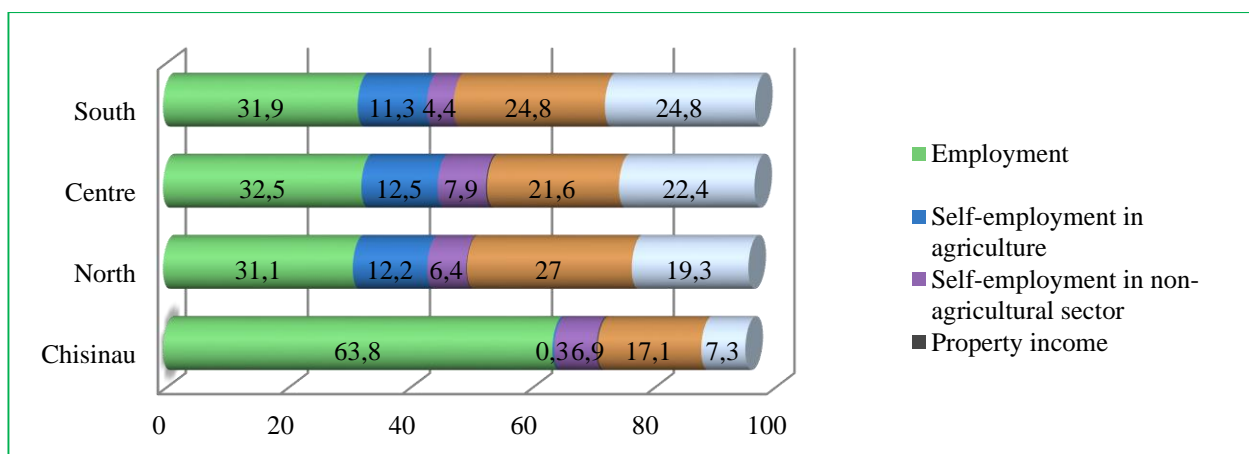
The main source of income per capita, continues to remain the salary: 42.1% of total disposable income in the entire country; however, in the urban area the salary constitutes more than half of income, and in rural area – 30% of income. The discrepancies can be explained by the lack of developed enterprises in rural area and limited employment opportunities. The second source of income are social protection payments – 22.1%, and the third one remain remittances from abroad – 17.1% of total disposable income per capita. The share of social protection payments and remittances is higher in rural area (46.4%) than in urban area (32.5), showing that the rural population is more dependent on social transfers and remittances from abroad (figure 3).



**Figure 2. Sources of average monthly income per capita in 2016, by areas, % to total disposable income**

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

As per the analysis of sources of income by statistical regions, the share of salary as the main source of income is higher in Chisinau (63.8%) comparatively to Center (32.5%), Southern (31.9%) and Northern (31.1) regions. Meantime the social protection payments are higher in Northern region (27%), due to the high share of aging population, followed by Southern region (24.8%), Center region (21.6%) and Chisinau (17.1%). The highest share of remittances in total monthly disposable income per capita is in the Southern region (24.8%) and the lowest one is in Chisinau (7.3%) (figure 4).



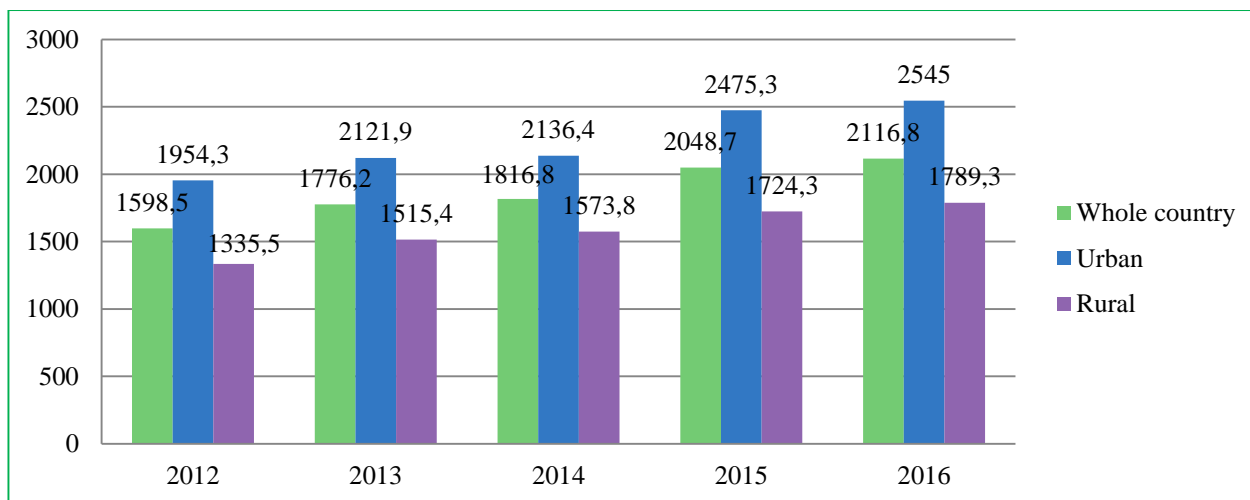
**Figure 4. Sources of monthly income per capita, by regions in 2016, % to total disposable income**

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

In the last years, the nominal gross average wage in economy registered an increase from MDL 3 477,7 in 2012 to MDL 5 084,0 in 2016 [11] or by 46.1%, which is, however, still below the level of salaries in the region. The unequal distribution by zones and economic sectors, type of property, etc. persists. The highest salaries are paid in Chisinau municipality (MDL 5951.5), while the lowest ones – in the

economic zones Gagauz Yeri (MDL 3867.1) and Southern region (MDL 3881.6), which shows unequal development of economic zones in the Republic of Moldova. In 2016 the difference between the gross average monthly salary in Chisinau municipality and economic zone Gagauz-Yeri was about 54%. The salary distribution inequalities are observed also depending on the economic sector. In 2016 the average monthly salary of an employee in social assistance sector (MDL 2778.7) was about 3.7 times lower than in finance and insurance sector (MDL 10152), which is a very big difference.

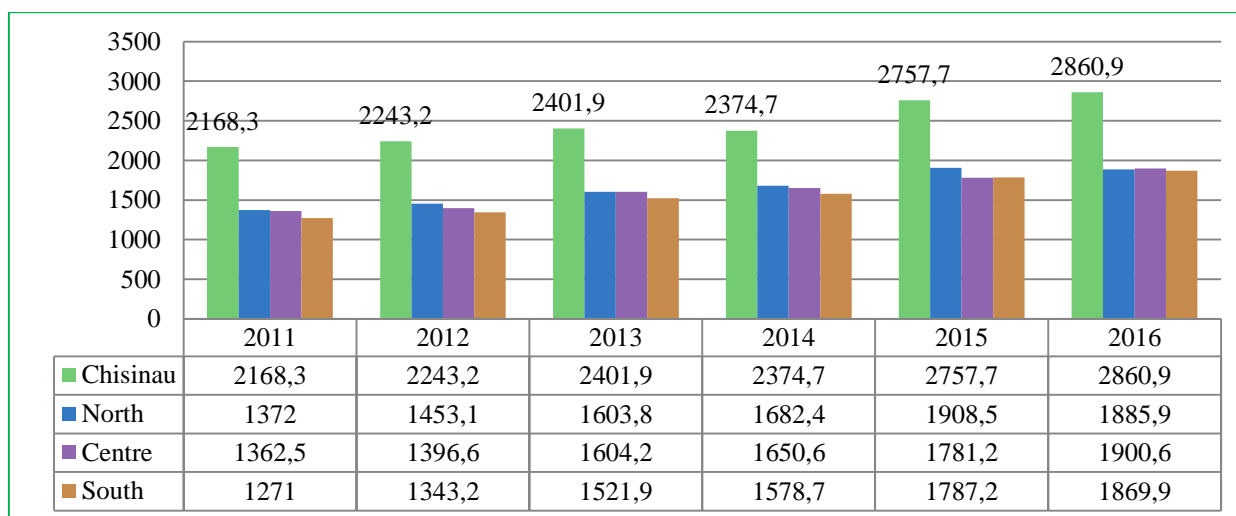
The analysis of the consumption expenditures shows also the differences in consumption between urban and rural areas, as well as between statistical regions. As per the statistical data, during the last five years the level of consumption per capita increased by 1.32 times across the country (from 1598.5 Lei in 2012 to 2116.8 Lei in 2016). In urban area the level of consumption per capita increased 1.30 times (from 1954.3 Lei in 2012 to 2545 Lei in 2016) and in rural area – 1.34 times (from 1335.5 Lei in 2012 to 1789.3 Lei in 2016). However, the level of consumption per capita in urban area is still 1.42 times higher than in rural one (figure 5). The discrepancies in consumption means less opportunities for population from rural areas comparative to urban ones to access qualitative food and educational, health and social services.



**Figure 5. Average monthly consumption expenditures per capita, by area, Lei**

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

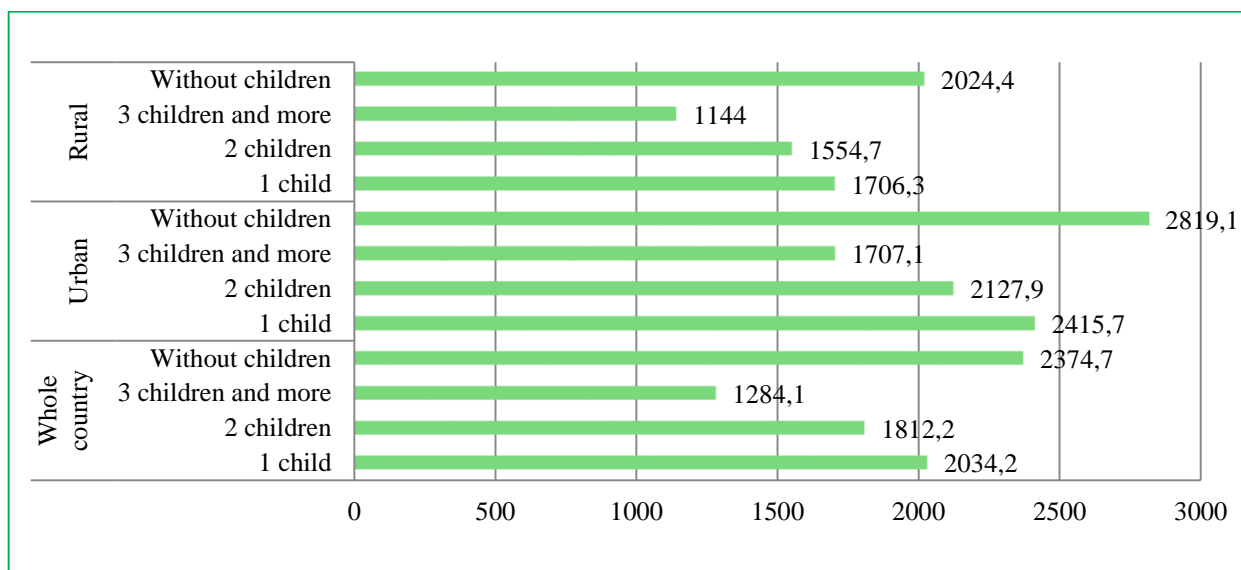
By statistical regions, the level monthly consumption per capita in 2016 was 1.51-1.53 times higher in Chisinau (2860.9 Lei), comparatively to other regions (North – 1885.9 Lei, Centre – 1900.6 Lei, South – 1869.9 Lei).



**Figure 6. Average monthly consumption expenditures per capita, statistical regions, Lei**

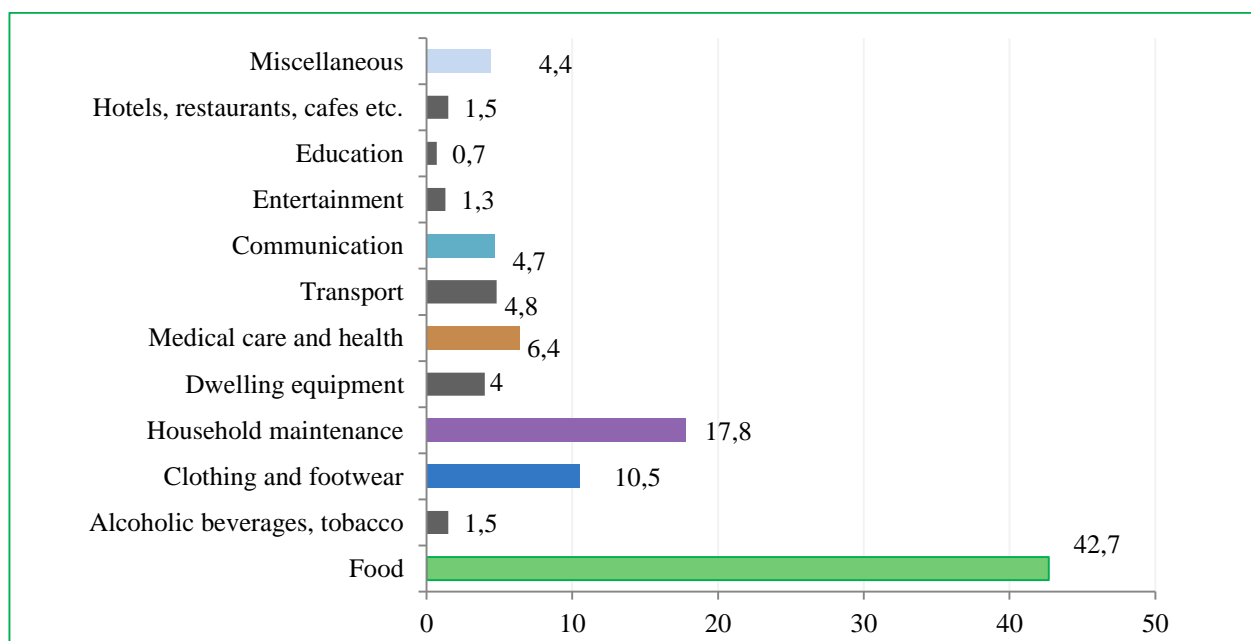
Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

By types of family and level of residence, the highest level of average monthly consumption expenditures was in 2016 in families without children from urban area (2819.1 Lei) and the lowest one in families with three and more children from rural areas (1144 Lei) (figure 7).



**Figure 7. Average monthly consumption expenditures per capita, by types of families in 2016, Lei**  
 Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

The inequalities in monthly consumption level per capita are well observed in the average monthly expenditures of the population by areas of residence, statistical regions and types of family. According to the statistical data, in 2016, the population of the Republic of Moldova spent monthly per capita 42.7% of their total consumption expenditures on food, 17.8% – on clothing and footwear, 10.5% – on housing and maintenance, 6.4% – on medical care and health, 4.8% – on transportation, 4.7% – on communication, 1.3% – on entertainment, 0.7% – on education, 1.5 – on hotels and restaurants (figure 8).

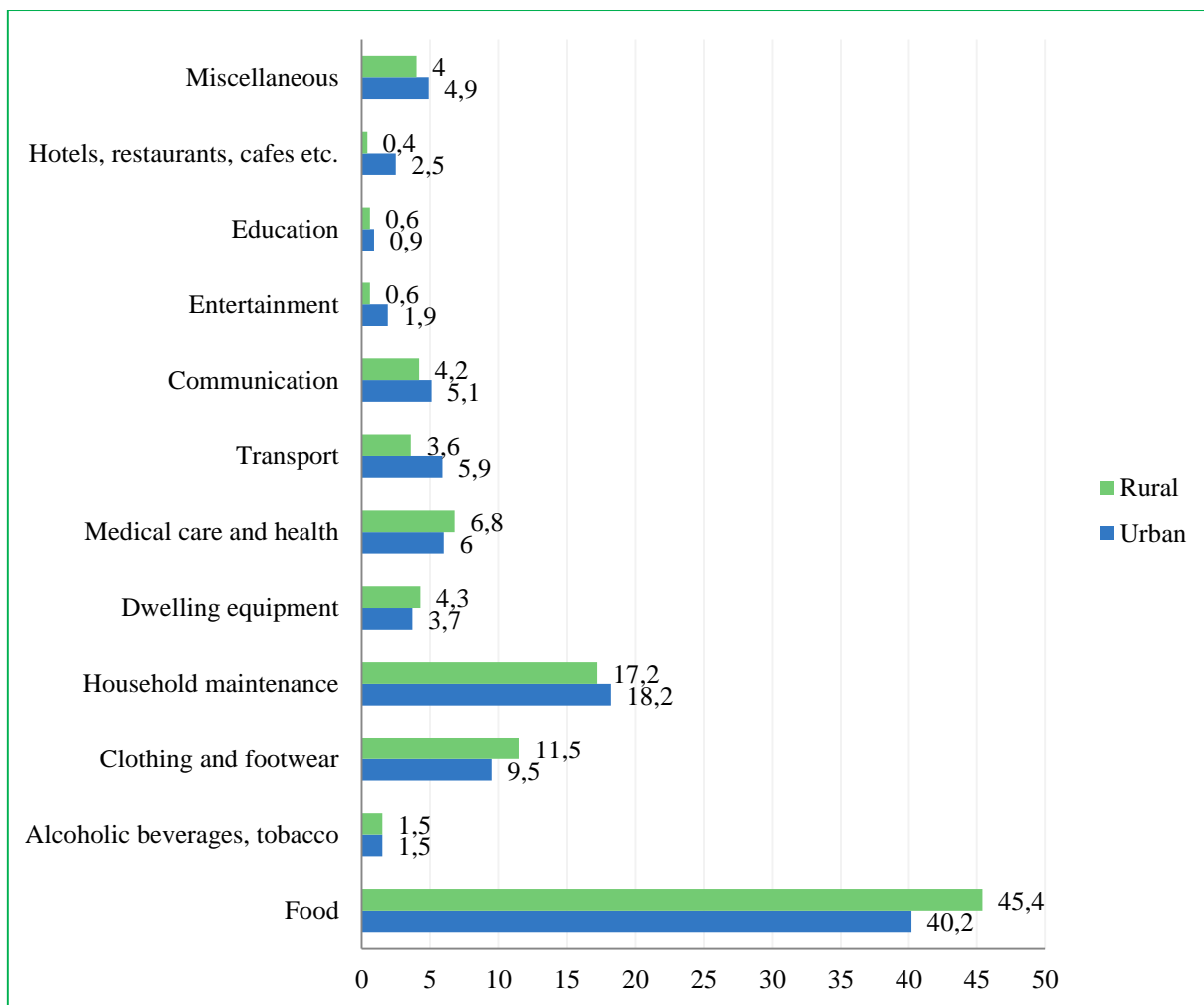


**Figure 8. Average monthly consumption expenditures, across the country, %**  
 Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

As per the Eurostat statistics, comparatively to EU countries, the average monthly expenditures of Moldova’s population for food were 3.5 times higher (EU countries – 12.2%) in 2016, for clothing and

footwear – 2.1 times higher (EU countries – 12.2%), for education – 1.7 less (EU – 1.2%), for restaurants and hotels – 5.7 less (EU-8.6%), for entertainment – 6.6 less (8.5%). On the whole, 70% of the total average monthly expenditures in Moldova in 2016 were spent for food, clothing and footwear and household maintenance, while in EU – only 41.6% were spent for the above-mentioned issues. The EU population spent in 2016 17.1% of their monthly expenditure on hotels, restaurants and entertainments, while Moldova's population – spent only 2.8% of the monthly expenditures on the above-mentioned issues. The comparative analysis is confirming once again the discrepancies between the standards of living of Moldova's population and population living in EU countries: the quality of life continues to be very low in Moldova with the main focus on how to survive in difficult economic situation.

The comparative analysis of the average monthly expenditures per capita in Moldovan urban and rural areas shows that in rural areas the quality of life is even worse than in urban ones. In 2016, the average monthly consumption expenditures of population from rural areas for food, clothing and footwear, health was higher than in urban areas, meanwhile the consumption expenditures for education, entertainments, hotels and restaurants, communication were lower (figure 9).



**Figure 9. Average monthly consumption expenditures, per capita, by areas in 2016, % to total**  
 Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

Similar differences in consumption were identified among the statistical regions. As per table 1, we can see the discrepancies in monthly consumption expenditures for food: in Center, Southern, Northern statistical regions, the share of expenditures for food is by 1.14-1.27 higher than in Chisinau. The persons from Northern and Central regions spent a higher proportion of their income on health and medical care than persons from Southern region and Chisinau in 2016, due to the higher level of ageing of population in those regions. The share of the monthly expenditures in education was very low in all regions comparatively to other expenditures, however in Chisinau it was two times higher (1.1%) than in Center (0.5%), Northern

(0.4%) and Southern (0.5%) regions. The share of monthly expenditures per capita on hotels, restaurants and entertainments is several times higher in Chisinau (5.4%), than in Center (1.7%), Northern (1.4%) and Southern (1.3%) regions. The people living in Chisinau spent also several times more on transportation (8.1%) and communication (5.5%) (table 1) in 2016.

Table 1

**Average monthly consumption expenditures by regions in 2016,  
% to total consumption expenditures**

	Chisinau	North	Centre	South
Food	37.3	42.6	46	47.7
Alcoholic beverages, tobacco	1.7	1.4	1.6	1.2
Clothing and footwear	9.6	12	10.4	9.9
Household maintenance	17.2	18.9	17.1	18.3
Dwelling equipment	3.6	3.9	4.4	4.1
Medical care and health	5.6	7.6	6.7	5.4
Transport	8.1	2.8	3.6	3
Communication	5.5	4.3	4.1	4.7
Entertainment	2.2	0.7	1	0.7
Education	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.5
Hotels, restaurants, cafes etc.	3.2	0.7	0.7	0.6
Others	5	4.7	3.8	3.9

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

In function of types of families, families with three children and more from rural area have had greater primary needs and the share of their monthly average expenditures on food (52.3%), was higher than in other groups of population. Meantime the share of expenditures on health care (3.9%), entertainment (0.7%) and education (0.4%) was lower than in families with fewer children or without children.

Table 2

**Average monthly consumption expenditures by various types of families in 2016,  
by areas % to total consumption expenditures**

	Urban				Rural			
	1 child	2 children	3 children and more	Without children	1 child	2 children	3 children and more	Without children
Food	39.1	39.8	46.6	40.3	44	46	52.3	45
Alcoholic beverages, tobacco	1.6	1.3	0.5	1.5	1.4	1.5	1	1.6
Clothing and footwear	11.3	11.4	13.5	8.2	13.5	14	12.6	10
Household maintenance	17.2	14.7	13.4	20	15.5	14.2	13.7	19
Dwelling equipment	4.1	4.8	2.9	3.2	3.4	5.2	3.3	4.4
Medical care and health	4.5	5.6	2.9	6.8	5.4	4	3.9	8.3
Transport	4.7	5.7	5.4	6.3	4.1	4.1	2.4	3.3
Communication	5.2	4.7	4.1	5.2	5.3	4.4	3.9	3.8
Entertainment	2.3	2.9	2	1.4	0.8	1	0.7	0.4
Education	1.1	1.2	2.3	0.5	0.9	0.5	0.4	0.5
Hotels, restaurants, cafes etc.	3	2.3	1.2	2.3	0.6	0.4	0.6	0.4
Others	5.9	5.5	5.5	4.2	5	4.8	5.3	3.2

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.



The inequality and inequity in life standards of the population of the Republic of Moldova is very well seen in the analysis of the average monthly consumption expenditures per quintiles. According to statistical data, in 2016, the population from the richest Y quintile, comparatively to the poorest I quintile, spent by 2.2 times more on food, by 3.8 times more on clothing and footwear, by 6 times more on medical care, by 23.9 times more on education and by 19.5 times more on entertainment (table 3).

Table 3

## Average monthly consumption expenditures per quintiles in 2016, Lei

	I	II	III	IV	V
<b>Consumption expenditures – total</b>	1072.6	1508.5	1866	2325.8	3806.1
<b>Food</b>	584.2	747.3	862.3	1017.6	1300.2
<b>Alcoholic beverages, tobacco</b>	18.7	21.4	25.9	33.9	58.1
<b>Clothing and footwear</b>	106	156.6	204	237.7	404.6
<b>Household maintenance</b>	173.6	275.9	340.3	437.6	655.8
<b>Dwelling equipment</b>	33.3	52.3	67.1	87	178.5
<b>Medical care and health</b>	48.6	77.6	104.5	151.3	290.9
<b>Transport</b>	14.7	32.3	57.2	88.3	309
<b>Communication</b>	42.1	68	85.6	107	190.9
<b>Entertainment</b>	7	10	17.4	27.7	72.2
<b>Education</b>	1.6	5.4	9.5	17.6	38.2
<b>Hotels, restaurants, cafes etc.</b>	2.3	6.9	12.8	24.9	109.5
<b>Others</b>	40.4	54.8	79.3	95.1	198.3

Source: NBS, Household budget survey.

The analysis of sociological surveys results for the last 5 years shows that the majority of the population is not satisfied with their incomes and considers that the income does not correspond to their needs. As per one of the latest survey conducted by the Center of Sociology and Social Psychology of the Institute of Juridical and Political Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova [14], 57% of respondents consider that their incomes are much lower than their needs, 24% – that income is slightly lower than their needs, 14% – that income is equal to their needs, 4% – that income is little higher than their needs and only 1% – that income is much higher than needs [8, p.69].

As part of the above-mentioned research, the population was distributed in 6 strata in function of socio-professional status, levels of education and welfare. Analyzing the degree of correspondence of the average monthly income to the needs of families by strata has highlighted that the share of people who consider their income to be much lower than their needs is higher in strata 1, 2, and 3 which includes persons with low or medium socio-professional status (workers in industries and agriculture, specialists with low or medium level of qualification), low or medium level of education and low level of welfare. However, the share of those who consider their income to be equal to or above household needs is higher in strata 4, 5 and 6 which includes persons with medium or high level of socio-professional status (specialists with medium or high level of qualification and managers), medium or high level of education and medium or high level of welfare. In residential settings, the share of people who consider their income to be much lower than their needs is higher in rural area (62%) comparatively to urban area (big cities – 57%). The share of those who consider their income to be equal to or above needs is higher in municipalities (24%) [8, p.70].

As per the research, the income inequality is manifested also through the properties the population own, the financial savings they have and the potential purchasing power. 88% of respondents said that they own some properties (house, apartment, cars, land etc.). However only 78% of the population in the lowest strata said they own properties. When asked how much financial resources would have after selling all properties and paying all debts, 36% of the respondents from the lowest strata comparatively to 17% of total said that nothing will be left.

As regarding the purchasing power of the population, 73% of respondents said that they cannot afford to keep a child abroad for studies, 22% said that they can, but with limitations and only 5% said that they can without any limitations. The share of respondents that cannot afford to keep a child abroad for the study is higher in small towns (83%). 59% of respondents cannot afford to travel with their families abroad at least once a year, every third respondent can do it, but limiting themselves other things, and 8% – can without limitations. In residential settings, the share of those who cannot afford to travel abroad is higher in rural

areas (67%) and is lower in large cities (45%). 89% of the respondents said they could not afford to buy a house/apartment, 9% said they could, if they would limit themselves other things and 2% can without any limitations. 83% of respondents said that they could not afford to buy a car now, 14% said they could if they will limit themselves other things and 3% can without limitations. Asked if they could buy new technical equipment in the house, 49% of the respondents indicated they could not, 46% of the respondents indicated that they could with some limitations, and 5% said they could without any limitations [8, pp. 73-77].

Respondents were also asked if they had a chance to rest abroad with their families the last year. 74% of respondents mentioned that they did not have a chance, 18% of the respondents rested with the family abroad and 8% rested alone abroad. In residential settings, the share of those who have rested abroad during the last year is higher in large cities (42%) and is lower in villages (19%) and in small towns (24%).

The researches show that the inequality in income and living standards of the Moldova's population reside in high level of unemployment, informal employment and salary payments in envelopes, migration, high level of corruption, limited access to education, health and social services, especially in rural areas and limited opportunities for better services [15, p.34]. Unemployment leads to more inequality and to mass migration of the population overseas looking for a job. Informal employment and salaries in envelopes contribute to social inequality and limited access to social insurance and social benefits. High level of corruption increases the income inequality and poverty by reducing the economic growth, progressivity of the fiscal system, level and efficiency of social expenses, human capital development, as well as perpetuating unequal distribution of assets and unequal access to education [15, p.35].

As per one of the last surveys conducted by the Center of Sociology and Social Psychology of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova, around 70% of respondents consider that in Moldova you can have a good life only if you are in power, have good relationships with persons governing, or you are stealing; hard work is not a prerequisite for a decent living. More than 2/3 of respondents said that in Moldova not every person can develop a honest business and not every citizen has access to qualitative medical and social care. More than 75% of respondents considers that to reach the top there is a need to be wealthy, to have political connections and to be a member of a party, to have good studies. More than 60% said that there is a need for relationships, as well as for some individual features, like intelligence, creativity, ambition, initiative [14].

The limited opportunities for a better life and high level of corruption make persons fill in inequitable situation comparatively to others. More than half of respondents said that they have obtained less or much less than they deserve as per their merits and 1/3 said that they obtained all they deserved or even more. 13% could not appreciate. The share of those who believe that they have obtained everything that they deserve and even more increases with the level of education (from 20% in the group with low level of education to 30% in the group with medium level of education and up to 35% in that with high level of education). The share of people who believe that they have obtained less, or far less than they deserve, is higher in respondents with low level of education (69%) [14].

The main question raised through the focus group discussions with experts was: what can be done in the Republic of Moldova in order to reduce the economic inequality in the process of association to European Union? The majority of experts consider that the main ways of reducing the inequality are as follow: a) redistribution of income by taking the income from those with high level of income and giving them to those with low level of income through the progressive taxation (the richest people pay higher income taxes than the poor ones); the opportunity grid, by development and implementation of inclusive social policies for increasing the access to mainstream and social services of the most disadvantaged groups of population, like preschool programs, family support services, afterschool programs, microfinance programs etc.; and increasing the social responsibilities of companies regarding the living standards and quality of life of their employees [14].

The application of these instruments by the government would allow a decrease of economic inequalities, and at the same time, should not affect the economic productivity, labor market, and respectively, investment incentives. Every instrument should be analyzed in details, so there is no poorly designed or imposed poverty reduction agenda, actions and measures that could damage the functionality of instruments for the implementation of investment attraction policy for economic productivity. Hence, the scenario for all stakeholders (win-win) may change into unhappy situation when nobody can win anything (lose-lose) [15, p.33].

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