

# THE 'GOODS' CONUNDRUM: THE QUESTION OF VALUE IN MOLDOVAN TRANSNATIONAL PARCEL-SENDING PRACTICES

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## SUMMARY

Informal transnational exchanges continue to attract the interest of migration scholars. This article focuses on the Moldovan practice of parcel-sending via private parcel van companies which continues to be an important way of keeping in touch in transnational families, and the role of informal parcel-sending in supporting Ukrainian refugees in Moldova. As Moldovans abroad sent high volumes of parcels with aid in the first weeks after the war in Ukraine started, these strong responses warrant more discussions around the value of such exchanges, particularly in relation to informal provisions of aid. Building on the notion of ‘social remittances’ and theoretical perspectives on value and sociality, the article shows that parcel-sending should be addressed in its socio-economic complexity beyond the financial and legislative implications of transporting ‘goods’. Making a case for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between sending costs, the singularity of sent items like homegrown produce, and the labour involved in collecting and sending parcels, the author discusses the socio-economic implications of parcel-sending in two ethnographic contexts: Moldovan transnational families’ everyday life, and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Moldova. This discussion includes ethnographic examples of Moldovan parcel-sending participants’ practices of sending personal parcels and aid for Ukrainian refugees from two fieldworks, based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Based on these examples, the article shows that participants in parcel-sending negotiate the ‘value’ of this transnational practice in relation to individual and collective experiences in both mundane and exceptional social contexts.

**Keywords:** *value, social remittances, exchanges, transnational practices, migrants, Moldova*

## INTRODUCTION

In the first three weeks following the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Moldova, a small country in Eastern Europe, received 336,377 Ukrainian refugees (World Food Programme, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. In response, Moldovans abroad collected and sent tonnes of parcels filled with aid via private parcel van companies regularly used by Moldovan migrants and their families as an important connection to the homeland. The Moldovan Customs Service and Border Police faced the challenging task of processing the passage of refugees and assessing incoming cargo classified as humanitarian aid, and parcels sent by Moldovans for the refugees were caught up in the resulting queues for transporters of goods (Caracentev, 2023). The importance of making the distinction between parcels and ‘goods’ has already emerged during my earlier research (Caracentev, 2020) which highlighted the tensions around the regularisation of private parcel van companies. While these companies, adherent to rigorous standards of packing, offer a faster, cheaper alternative to the traditional Moldovan post, an intimate knowledge of regular clients’ life histories, and a personalised approach to delivery, parcel contents continue to be classified as ‘goods’<sup>2</sup>. Considering the strong diaspora responses to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and the active role of parcel van companies in mediating this provision of aid, it is important to further investigate the value

attributed to parcel-sending by participants in these transnational exchanges. Moreover, since parcel van companies are part of complex transnational networks based on familiarity and trust, it becomes evident that such a classification is reductive of the sociality – the nexus of social relations and practices - associated with transporting personal parcels.

This article makes a case for private parcels not to be considered ‘goods’ in the economic sense. Building on the notion of ‘social remittances’ (Levitt, 1998) and insights from the anthropology of value, the article tests two hypotheses: 1) that parcel-sending becomes subject to negotiations of ‘value’ imbued in senders and receivers’ relations; and 2) that in different ethnographic contexts, socio-cultural factors beyond price and costs determine the value of parcels. These are explored in five further sections, starting with the analysis of the main scholarship and debates around the question of value in relation to parcel exchanges and social remittances. The discussion moves on to methods, followed by an analysis of the findings in two ethnographic sections: one on what parcels’ ‘value’ represents to Moldovan migrants and their families, and another on the sociality of transnational aid. The summary of the main findings and further research implications are then rounded up in the conclusion.

<sup>1</sup> The figures represent the number of Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Moldova by March 14, 2022; of these, by the third week of March 2022, around 100,000 remained in Moldova.

<sup>2</sup> Government Act 92 from 28-02-2023 on the application of Customs Code 95/2021.

## PARCEL EXCHANGES, SOCIAL REMITTANCES, AND THE QUESTION OF VALUE

Moldovans love to send parcels. The country, with a population of over 2.5 million, has an estimated diaspora of 1.11-1.25 million, with 47% living in the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, 2021)<sup>3</sup>. It is estimated that 64% of Moldovans send at least one parcel per year via private parcel van companies, in exchanges where foodstuffs constitute the main transported items (Cuza & Rusnac, 2015). In the Moldovan case, parcels started to be exchanged via private parcel van companies, mainly in the early 2000s, primarily among female Moldovan care workers in Italy and their families left behind in Moldova, to whom the service was often the only connection to home (Buza, 2021).

Parcel-sending is not specific to Moldova, nor is it a new phenomenon. Services similar in scope and operation have been widely explored in migration literature on transnational exchanges in Europe (Burrell, 2008; Mata-Codesal & Abranches, 2018; Khrenova & Burrell, 2021), care packages among Filipino migrants (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; McCallum, 2022), and other informal courier services across Africa, Central America, and Asia (Nyoni, 2012; Garni, 2014; Turaeva, 2020). The complexity of such networks and brokerage services underpinning transnational exchanges all over the world is telling, with some networks stretching across multiple continents and behaving 'like well-established business firms,' while remaining 'informal [...] in their transactions' (Ngo, 2019:29). The circulation of things facilitated by such services infers two-way flows of transactions in which participants are connected through their interactions and relations with each other, with economic activity intertwined with sociality (Carrier, 2018). This interconnection of economic activity and transborder practices has been acknowledged by Zelizer (2010) as a multifaceted global phenomenon facilitating the circulation of remittances, where far-reaching informal remittance networks expand beyond migrants' family members to local communities.

The link between informal exchanges and remittances is particularly relevant in Moldovan context, since remittances are often seen as development tools for underdeveloped countries (Sharma et al., 2011). In the two decades following Moldova's post-Soviet economic transformation, economic remittances' impact on migration patterns have been at the forefront of scholarship on Moldova (Cuc et al., 2006; Pinger, 2010). Lately, more explorations of the social implications of remittance-sending and their non-monetary forms have started to emerge (Cingolani & Vietti, 2020). However, only one recent account points to the complex and reciprocal migrant networks involved in Moldovan parcel exchanges while focusing on the socio-emotional

'worth' of sending parcels (Rosca, 2023). To flesh out this sociality of remittance networks and reflect on the non-monetary forms of remittance-sending in Moldovan context, this article proposes looking at parcel-sending as akin to, but not synonymous with social remittances. Coined by Levitt (1998:927) as the "combination of migrants' social capital, norms and behaviours," the concept moves away from the focus on monetary remittances. In applying this term, the article follows Levitt's suggestion that social remittances have an important social embeddedness in transnational life beyond the financial value of 'goods' – in this case, items sent via parcels. Later, Levitt & Lamba-Nieves (2011) make a distinction between individual and collective social remittances and acknowledge the dual flow of social remittances between the country of origin and the country of destination. In turn, looking at specific Moldovan remittance-sending practices, Bailey et al. (2021) differentiate between individual material remittances sent to maintain connections to family and 'civic remittances' that incorporate the ideologies and ideas acquired by migrants in their country of residence.

These insights are particularly useful in addressing the connection between established parcel-sending practices in Moldovan transnational families and the provision of aid sent via these parcels to Ukrainian refugees in Moldova. There is evidence that migrants engaged in regular social remittance-sending are also likely to provide some forms of aid to disadvantaged groups in the homeland, including refugees. The emotional and cultural identification with the receivers of remittances (Lindley, 2009) surpasses the costs involved in sending and the economic value of remittances. Moreover, social networks extending beyond familial links facilitate reaching out to individuals and families who may be isolated in the homeland, or have no relatives abroad, thus being excluded from receiving remittances. In many such cases, migrant networks harness the collective power of coming together to provide support for those in need, who are connected to these networks in socio-cultural ways (Vargas-Silva, 2017). These indications, and the Moldovan responses during the first weeks of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, warrant a closer look at the interconnection of remittance networks and specific contexts in which items sent to refugees acquire a high value to both distributors and refugee recipients. Considering the academic interest in transnational informal exchanges discussed earlier, the link between remittance-sending and transnational aid, and the ongoing legal challenge of formalising Moldovan private parcel transportation, it becomes important to address the conundrum of treating transnational

<sup>3</sup> AMinistry of Foreign Affairs, as of 2024.

parcels as ‘goods,’ or understanding them as a form of social remittances embodying transnational sociality.

While the elusive question of value in various social contexts has long been debated, the focus in this article is on the consensus around the essential role of sociality and individual, collective, and culturally informed value attribution, as applied to migrants’ transnational exchanges. Adopting the point Souleles et al. (2023) make on the attribution of value as a pan-human action requiring context-specific understanding of social life, the article builds on the argument that the concept of ‘value’ is applied by those engaged in transnational exchanges as a wider form of sociality rather than an evaluation of its material or financial equivalence (Graeber, 2001). Without dismissing the monetary value of items sent via parcels, the article argues that the attribution of value should be understood in relation to the sourcing and ‘biography’ of exchanged items, within the transnational social fields in which exchanges take place.

When parcels are seen as commodities, which Kopytoff (1986) defines as items that can only be exchanged for a similar value, a discrepancy between registers of value attribution emerges. For instance, thinking of some items as gifts, it is useful to look at the complexities of assigning an exchange value in specific social contexts in which exchanges are part of complex interconnections of obligations and reciprocity (Mauss, 2000 [1925]). This value is thus difficult to estimate because of socio-cultural meanings of items for exchange participants. In contrast to the notion of ‘commodity,’ Kopytoff (1986) points to items that are unique in their significance to their owners, and which become ‘singular’ in their value attribution. His idea of ‘informal singularisation’ as a process of value attribution in which the price – and, implicitly, pricelessness – of an item is negotiated differently in different exchange spheres is further discussed in the following sections which show that the discrepancies in the process of value attribution may fuel the continuing consideration of parcels as ‘goods.’

## METHODOLOGY

This article is based on my long-term research with Moldovan transnational families, based on two research projects that used semi-structured interviews and participant observation. During my 2016–2018 doctoral fieldwork on Moldovan transnational parcel-sending practices and private parcel van companies mediating these practices, I conducted a total of 51 semi-structured interviews in UK and Moldova. Of these, 12 informants were interviewed multiple times over the course of 18 months, allowing me to follow their sending practices in connection to their migration histories and biographies. I also gained an insider’s view on running such a company while observing one parcel van company in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, and joining two of their drivers on a trip to transport parcels from Chisinau to London. Then, during my 2023 postdoctoral fieldwork, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with Moldovans in UK, EU and Switzerland who sent aid via private parcels for Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, and Moldovan volunteers who distributed these parcels. Some of the 2023 UK informants already participated in my earlier research, offering a renewed perspective of their sending

practices over the past five years. As part of this project, I also visited an aid distribution centre for Ukrainian refugees in Chisinau to talk to volunteers and discussed parcel-sending at a roundtable with government officials from the Bureau for Diaspora Relations and the Customs Service who offered insiders’ views on refugee relief efforts in Moldova.

The informants are aged between 22 and 78, of both genders, and are either: legal Moldovan migrants, mostly in their thirties, most settled in the UK and some settled in France, Switzerland, and Italy; their family members in Moldova; or Moldovan volunteers who distributed aid sent by Moldovan migrants abroad via private parcels to Ukrainian refugees following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. A parcel van service user myself, I already had an intimate knowledge of these exchanges, while being mindful my position as a researcher of Moldovan origin. To ensure anonymity, all informants’ names used in this article have been changed to bear no resemblance to their real names, and their exact ages and occupations have not been disclosed.

## PARCEL-SENDING AS A VALUED TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICE

Addressing the complexities of parcel-sending as relational transnational exchanges, rather than exports and imports of goods, requires a better understanding of what ‘value’ entails. This section discusses the interconnection of costs and non-monetary value of parcels, as evaluated by Moldovan migrants and their families engaged in regular parcel-sending practices. The intention here is twofold: to see the exchanges in

the socio-cultural context of parcel-sending within transnational social fields; and to uncover the process of attributing value to items and the parcel-sending service itself. Following Carrier (2018:31) in approaching transnational exchanges as ‘economic activities carried out by people who have values and aspirations and who live and act in a meaningful world,’ this section makes a case for the important role of sociality in such

exchanges, moving away from the focus on the economic value of parcel contents. Speaking of parcel van services, informants often mention that the opportunity to send is 'priceless' ('de neprețuit') and the service is, thus, 'valuable' ('prețios', 'de preț'). To them, the opportunity to access the service becomes valuable through its availability to mediate the desired transnational connectedness. The practice takes place in close relation to the transnational family's background, experiences, and social environment, where senders and receivers evidence the social benefits of parcel-sending without seeing parcels as economic remittances. The following accounts, from informants who have been assigned code names to protect their identities, show useful insights on their sending practices.

*'My pension is very small, [in 2017] only 1000 lei, my husband's – only 800 lei. I only buy medicines and bread.'* (Rita, female in her seventies, retired Moldovan villager.)

Both sides of the family are aware of the sending costs and the couple's children always pay for all parcels, sent and received, to alleviate the financial burden on their parents. Despite their difficult financial situation, Rita and Denis do not see the parcels sent by their children, mostly containing chocolates, cheese, and occasional clothing, as subsistence remittances, and never rely on them in their everyday life. Moreover, the couple send back large parcels filled with homemade produce – vegetables, meat, preserves, and pickles. Rita and Denis value the service for the opportunity to send their children the 'taste of home' from the times when they were still young, something they cannot buy abroad. This becomes evident in other Moldovan senders' practices, as seen in the case of Moldovans in France attributing a higher 'value' to homegrown produce, making foodstuffs sent via parcels special and important to receivers (Rosca, 2023). This value is intrinsically higher because the producers of homegrown foodstuffs go on a personal

journey of growing and caring for plants and animals that cannot be replicated elsewhere. As value represents 'the way in which actions become meaningful' (Graeber, 2001:XII), the process of harvesting, processing, preparing, storing, and re-packing homegrown produce and sharing it with family members via parcel exchanges gains significant meaning to both senders and receivers.

Depending on the migrant's personal journey, this process evolves throughout the transnational family's life stages. Lia, in her early thirties, moved to Paris about eleven years earlier from an area far from the Moldovan capital. She is an active professional who used to send and receive quite often but has reduced her sending to a selection of 'essentials' because of difficulties collecting in such a vast city. In the beginning, both Lia and her mother used to send homemade food, but their sending later evolved into an embodiment of familial connection, facilitating intergenerational bonds.

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*'[...] the contents [of parcels] changed a lot [...]. Sometimes, I receive mint, flowers, chamomile from mum's garden picked by mum and dad. Of course, you can find these in stores, but they think that it's better from home. It's possible that now there are more toys and children's clothes. They say: "We don't see our grandson, at least we can compensate through parcels".'* (Lia, female in her thirties, Moldovan migrant in France.)

The use of the term 'to compensate' is particularly striking here. While costs involved are an important factor in reducing the variety and volumes of sending, the continuity of sending has the ultimate value for the family, as there is no monetary replacement for the tangible link between Lia's son and his grandparents. In this case, the sending itself acquires a singular, irreplaceable, future-oriented value which becomes an investment in the continuity of family relations.

There is also a broader impact of migrants' parcel-sending on the receivers' social standing in their local community. Iulia, in her mid-fifties, has a son and a daughter in the UK, and lives in the same village as Denis

and Rita, related to them through her son's marriage to their daughter. Iulia often sends produce from her land: mostly meat, vegetables, eggs, and pickles, while Iulia's daughter sends her weekly parcels filled with foodstuffs made in the UK. Iulia acknowledges that, through the van services, she can position herself in the village as one of the 'well-off' people who have migrant relatives and who can, therefore, access the perceived higher quality items produced abroad. This access places her at the heart of social exchanges in the village, where she can support other neighbours without migrant links and gain a certain 'privilege' of being able to show others the difference in taste. Thus, she can enjoy a quality of life which comes close to her children's experience

in the UK. *'There, they can afford to get "expensive" stuff, unlike here in Moldova,'* she says, assigning the 'expensive' label to non-luxury items that are perceived as having better quality than in Moldova.

*'When they send, I don't buy anything here. As I'm on my own, I don't need to buy anything here – except for sugar, rice, buckwheat – but their pasta, it's very good. It doesn't crumble. It's not muddying the water like here.'* (Iulia, female in her fifties, retired Moldovan villager.)

If she did not receive parcels, Iulia could afford to buy similar produce in Moldova. Like in Denis and Rita's case, the parcels she receives are not subsistence, but a slice of life in the UK. This experience is, in turn, perceived by other villagers, who do not receive parcels from abroad, as an expression of a higher level of wealth that incorporates 'knowing' what life abroad is like. As Mura (2023) shows, the consumption of foodstuffs received from migrant relatives embodies the experience of a better life abroad. Considering that this logic is informed by specific contexts – rural, often impoverished areas of Moldova with high levels of emigration –, it becomes evident that 'wealth' can be

understood as a broader concept beyond the economic value of commodities (Kusimba, 2020) received via parcels. Seeing parcel contents as commodities that are 'socially endowed' with a higher 'power' which has low correlation to its monetary value (Kopytoff, 1986:83), this informal singularity of items that cannot be purchased in Moldova is valued through the cultural and biographical lens of migrants' and their families' experiences. This singularity and its social value reflected in personalised aid sent to Ukrainian refugees via private parcel van companies is unpacked in the following section.

## THE VALUE OF AID

As seen above, parcel-sending is an established and highly valued practice in Moldovan transnational life, with sent items imbued with personal experiences that often allow recipients to get a glimpse of life migrants lead abroad. This section will discuss the question of value in relation to aid parcels Moldovans abroad sent in the first weeks of the Ukrainian war to contribute to the refugee relief effort in Moldova. Considering that the refugee crisis is unprecedented for the country, this is also an important opportunity to investigate how smaller-scale informal efforts valorise mass-produced, off-the-shelf items that gain value through the process of choosing, packing, delivering, and matching distributed items to individual beneficiaries. Some academic perspectives on humanitarian aid, addressing large-scale organised efforts, see beneficiaries become commodities through targeted selection for funding aid projects in which they have no voice (Krause, 2014). However, in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Moldova, numerous accounts of considerable efforts among Moldovan migrants to send items specifically required by refugees, using established parcel-sending routes, show that informal support is managed by social networks involved in previous charitable actions. In the first weeks after the war in Ukraine broke out, Moldovans abroad sent tonnes of items for refugees via private

parcel vans. The existence of these established sending infrastructures facilitated the relief effort proved essential at a time when international organisations faced temporary logistical issues delaying aid delivery. Informal migrant networks in most European countries came together to collect and send aid for Ukrainians in Moldova, shouldering an essential form of support which put strain on senders' already stretched resources. These in-kind contributions have been less visible in comparison with large-scale relief efforts. At the same time, Moldovan migrants' indispensable support for refugees required careful management on two sides: the collectors and senders of aid abroad, and the volunteer distributors in Moldova, with parcel van companies mediating these efforts.

On the one hand, Moldovans abroad took on the role of purchasing, packing, collecting, and loading aid parcels, while managing the logistics of sending, often in challenging urban infrastructures. Lia, the Parisian resident whose sending practices have been discussed in the previous section, organised a big collection to send aid via private parcel vans, using her experience of being involved in some charity initiatives to help disadvantaged Moldovans. The item selection was informed by social media posts by volunteer distributors in Moldova.

*'What we did internally for the Ukrainian campaign was setting an affordable budget for each of us, let's say, 100 euros, we went to stores, agreed on who gets what so that we didn't all turn up with nappies or hygiene items, and then there were about five cars, even six.'* (Lia, female in her thirties, Moldovan migrant in France.)

Her words echo other informants' experiences of matching the requirements for specific items needed at specific times. For example, many parcels with

children's winter clothing were pre-sorted according to gender and age, even topped with personalised messages of support for their families. In these circumstances,

the participants in relief efforts attributed a particular significance and value to items in a particular social context (Kopytoff, 1986): personalised aid parcel contents, sent during an unprecedented refugee crisis. Through recognising the labour involved and the care put into selecting items to match refugee needs, this significance, attributed to aid parcels, is thus tangent to the value attributed to personal parcels by Rita, Denis, and Iulia, discussed in the previous section.

On the other hand, volunteer distributors in Moldova had to manage the process of unpacking, matching items to specific individuals and families, and ensuring that refugee needs are met on time. Two factors determined the value of aid to distributors: the availability of a clear

legislative framework to process aid, and the timing of aid delivery. Emilia, a professional in her thirties, had been working in social care in Chisinau when the Ukrainian war broke out. As a care sector employee working closely with the Moldovan government, Emilia oversaw providing Ukrainian refugees with accommodation and food at her designated refugee centre. In the first week of the war, there was limited governmental guidance on aid provision procedures to follow, and limited supplies of aid. She recalls receiving private parcels filled with aid items sent by Moldovans from the diaspora, of which she was only informed at the last minute because the line of communication with border officials had not yet been established.

*'When they came in from customs, I did not know what was in them. So, if I don't know what's in these parcels, I don't know who to distribute them to. [...] It's as if I told you now that I have 20 kgs of sweets, what can I do with it? I only need two for a cup of tea, it was something like that, you know?' (Emilia, female in her thirties, Moldovan refugee centre administrator.)*

Although familiar with transnational parcel-sending through her own sending practices with relatives abroad, Emilia had not been expecting this informal support. As she had not been informed of informal aid being brought in, the contents of aid parcels could not be immediately established and evaluated, and the decision on the distribution process fell entirely on her. This, in her view, diminished the senders' efforts to match refugee needs, and wasted valuable time in meeting these needs at her refugee centre.

The timing of receiving the aid thus proved critical. Although she faced some logistical difficulties, Emilia acknowledges that parcels constituted a highly valuable contribution to the Ukrainian refugee relief effort in Moldova. For instance, in the first week of the war, the parcels sent by Moldovans abroad were the only aid she received when it was most needed. Like other informants who distributed similar parcels in Moldova, Emilia

praised the efforts of sending aid, saying that she was impressed with Moldovan migrants' mobilisation. In her own words, *'a parcel equals help'*, pointing to the value of support received on time. Other volunteer distributors in Moldova confirmed that they were also able to meet very specific needs of the beneficiaries they had at that moment, mostly mothers with small or disabled children, after receiving informal aid parcels collected and sent by Moldovans from many European countries.

At the same time, parcel van companies' contribution as mediators of these exchanges proved just as valuable. Van drivers took an active part in collection efforts, taking on larger volumes of parcels and offering discounts of up to 100% for transporting aid. Lia, like many fellow Moldovan migrant acquaintances and many other informants, confirmed this sizeable contribution and their own awareness of the parcel van companies' running costs and expenses.

*'They said: "pay what you can, we also want to help." So, we raised a bit of money ... the boxes weren't very heavy, but they were bulky. This was a nice gesture from the private van people. But I don't think they do this every day; they need to eat too.'* (Lia, in her thirties, Moldovan migrant in France.)

Such accounts recognise that, while Moldovan private van companies are businesses, their activity should not be evaluated in the same sphere as exchanges of 'goods.' As evidenced by volunteer distributors in Moldova, to their refugee clients, the value of aid parcels sent via private parcel van companies and the personal touches of putting together these parcels often overshadowed the

'impersonal' financial contributions or bulk truckloads of aid sent by international organisations. Once again, the 'good,' rather than the 'goods' sent to refugees via private parcels reaffirmed the sociality of transnational aid and the value of human connection in the direst of circumstances.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is a continuous need to re-evaluate the relationship between migrant sociality, transnational exchanges, and their implications for understanding the responses in different social contexts like the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Europe. Approaching informal Moldovan parcel exchanges as a form of social, rather than economic remittances, the discussion focused on the important role that social remittances play in transnational life (Levitt, 1998) and the theorisation of value production in transnational exchanges as informed by participants' experiences and social relations (Kopytoff, 1986; Graeber, 2001, Carrier, 2018), leading to three main outcomes.

First, as mediators of connection with the homeland, Moldovan private van companies represent an 'invaluable' service for their customers, beyond mere commercial transactions. Second, the economic costs of transnational exchanges facilitated by such companies appear to be surpassed by the 'value' these exchanges represent to the participants. This complex notion incorporates experiences like the growing of own produce by rural informants to offer the taste of 'home' that cannot be bought by Moldovans abroad or the acquired 'higher' value of mass-produced items from abroad, enjoyed by senders' family members in Moldova. Third, these transnational exchanges become a valuable tool in exceptional circumstances which constitute specific social contexts. The sociality of informal transnational exchanges, encompassing migrant networks and mediators like parcel van

companies, plays an important role in providing targeted and timely responses to refugee needs. Specifically, indications are that the socio-economic value of this transnational support was particularly high in the first weeks of the war, when the support from other governmental and non-governmental sources was not yet fully established.

This article argued that parcels sent via private parcel van companies should not be considered 'goods' in an economic sense. As the social 'value' of parcel-sending is negotiated in relation to individual and familial experiences, and in response to external events like the Ukrainian war, acknowledging the continuing role of such practices is an important contribution to better-targeted diaspora engagement policies and legislation regulating small transportation businesses. It is also important to recognise the limitations of this research, as it does not further engage with parcel-sending in other European countries or consider the role of the state in mediating transnational practices in more detail. More is needed to better understand both intrafamilial and institutional transborder power relations, as well as the financial implications of mediating transnational exchanges in more remote locations, and the impact of distance and costs on maintaining transnational ties.

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