Parcel vans and the materiality of staying connected in Moldovan transnational families

Sanda Caracentev

Department of Anthropology

University College London

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I, Sanda Caracentev, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Ongoing legal challenges regarding the regularisation of private van companies transporting parcels between Moldova, one of the youngest European democracies, and other EU countries, have highlighted the importance of the service's role in Moldovan transnational life. With increased scholarly attention focused on understanding the materiality of migration and how migrants stay in touch, my research contributes to current scholarship on the material culture of migration, global mobility and transnational life by unpacking parcel-sending as an embodiment of post-departure connectedness.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in both Moldova and the UK, this thesis incorporates semi-structured interviews and case studies conducted with migrants, their families and van company employees. Building on recent literature on social remittances and the role of couriers in maintaining transnational ties, this thesis explores how the dichotomy of proximity and distance experienced by Moldovan migrants and their families left behind informs the continuing negotiation of relations between people and objects. I show how these relations are created through exchanges of parcels, looking at transnational families as 'connected selves.' Instead of representing a static constituent of migrant infrastructure, van companies act as important participants in supporting connectedness through emerging sending practices.

In turn, these practices uncover how, similarly to the Korowai of West Papua (Stasch 2009), Moldovan transnational families create closeness through their own understanding of space-time and sensory connections. I show that, in close relation to communication technologies like Skype, parcel-sending creates co-presence, allowing these connections to persist, embodied in practices like sharing foodstuffs and redecorating dwellings. Moreover, migrants' return visits continue to reconfigure these material connections, indicating that parcel-sending as a practice represents more than a mere 'replacement' of the migrant's physical presence in the family home.

Impact statement

This thesis is written as a contribution to current scholarship on social remittances and as a response to the call for further anthropological exploration of material culture exchange in the context of migration. My research addresses the currently insufficient analysis of transnational families' practices of maintaining ties through material channels, specifically parcel-sending, by exploring the practices of material culture exchange emerging in transnational space. During fieldwork I established contacts with both governmental and non-governmental bodies working in policy-making and diaspora engagement in both Moldova and the UK. During the initial phase of my research, I completed a three-month internship at the Moldovan Bureau for Diaspora Relations, participating in conferences and debates on the legalisation of private van companies and their significance to Moldovan transnational families. As part of my internship, I also had conversations with other actors in the migration sector including the International Organisation of Migration, Swiss Cooperation Office and other organisations working with Moldovan migrants and their families.

This thesis reflects and engages with the issues and uncertainties highlighted by such conversations, offering a better understanding of the context in which van companies operate. My research also provides a voice for van company employees, as well as their clients, whose position on government level decisions continues to be unacknowledged. This thesis draws attention to the necessity of understanding transnational life in greater depth than policy-makers have regarded when addressing the legal issues surrounding private parcel van companies. Considering the continuing academic interest in social remittances, these legal issues must be thus understood in broader social contexts, including family relations, and not only in terms of economic impact and taxation.

I presented my research at the *Policy and practice of migration regulation in the context of modern challenges* conference in Tiraspol, Transnistria, which resulted in my working paper being published by the International Organisation for Migration in 2017. My research thus provides important insights on how transnational families stay in touch and contributes to current debates in the field of the material culture of migration.

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Introduction

In autumn 2016 the Moldovan government initiated a new series of public debates aimed to address the legal issues surrounding international parcel transportation by Moldovan private van companies. The problem of mediating and creating an appropriate legal framework for the weekly transports running between various locations in the Republic of Moldova and European countries of Moldovan migrants' residence generated opposing views on how parcel-sending should be treated on legislative level. The dispute remains unsolved despite the latest amendment to the law on transporting parcels and persons[1], dealing with parcels as cargo goods. On the one hand, the Moldovan government expresses concerns over van companies' taxation and customs checks for potential contraband. On the other hand, Moldovan migrants and their family members left behind, who represent parcel vans' clients, perceive the government's attempt at controlling the industry as an intrusion into their way of staying in touch.

Amidst the ongoing debates, the effort to save the parcel van service from legislative and bureaucratic pitfalls is indicative of the mediating role the service plays in Moldovan transnational life. For Moldova, a country still caught up in political and economic turmoil since its declaration of independence in 1991, with 20% of all households involved in labour migration (International Organisation for Migration 2014), the relationship between the government and the diaspora continues to be challenging. Considering that, on average, Moldovans exchange 20 parcels per transnational household per year (Cuza and Rusnac 2015), the existence of parcel vans negotiates Moldovan migrants' relations with their motherland.

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[1] Act 589 (24.07.2017), available [Romanian language] at http://lex.justice.md/md/372565/

What these relations entail from the material culture point of view and how parcel-sending helps understand connectedness in transnational life represent the scope of my project. This thesis is the result of an eighteen-month ethnography of transnational Moldovan families whose many parcels connect the distance between Moldovan migrants settled in the UK and their loved ones left behind in Moldova. The study uncovers the connections transnational families make to stay in touch by looking at practices of sending and receiving parcels transported by the disputed parcel van companies.

The initial interest in this study comes from my own experience of exchanging parcels with my parents who reside in the Republic of Moldova. After emigrating to the UK and discussing parcel-sending practices with Moldovans living in the UK, I noticed that parcel van companies serving destinations like Russia or Italy, long preferred by Moldovan migrants, have expanded. Considering that the UK represents one of the farthest and most expensive destinations to drive to, and that technology like Skype provides an affordable way of staying in touch, I became interested in exploring the parcel exchange and its role in forging transnational connectedness. Among Moldovans, this exchange has become embedded in daily life through aspects that include conversations, offerings of foodstuffs sent via parcels or images of people carrying raffia bags with parcel numbers written on. Having the privilege not only to observe what people pack and receive, but to place these actions and choices within a very tangible and personal experience of leaving the homeland, determined me to look deeper into the materiality of connections between migrants and those left behind.

The multi-sited fieldwork allowed me to gain access to informants on the sending and receiving ends of the parcel exchange. A new democracy like Moldova, with a high level of emigration, presents a very good opportunity to observe how van services help materialise the response to familial fracturedness

and provide a medium for re-stitching the transnational connection. After Moldovan independence, neighbouring Romania passed a law allowing ethnic Romanians in the Republic of Moldova, whose grandparents were born on Romanian territory, to regain Romanian citizenship[2]. As a result, the increased mobility facilitated by the acquisition of Romanian passports became an important factor that determined more Moldovans to settle in the UK. According to the latest mapping of the Moldovan diaspora in the UK (Cheianu-Andrei 2013), 95% of Moldovan migrants in the UK hold an EU passport, of whom 87% hold a Romanian passport. At the same time, the report acknowledges the limitations of data collection because of insufficient information on the number of Moldovan citizens settled in the UK[3]. Since 69% of Moldovan migrants in the UK send parcels (idem), an in-depth exploration of parcel-sending practices provides more information on Moldovan migrants' presence in the UK and offers an insight on social processes within transnational space.

The significance of these processes is also reflected in the media's interest in parcel exchange in Moldova and Romania[4], with Romanian media also reporting on Moldovan

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[2] Law 21/1991, amended in 2009 and republished in 2010, available [in Romanian] at https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/gy3dgmbw/legea-nr-21-1991-a-cetateniei-romane?pid=9040764#p-9040764

[3] Difficulties in estimating the real number of Moldovan migrants holding dual citizenship, residing in the UK.

[4] See articles [Romanian language] in: Publika [TV channel] (2013, https://www.publika.md/drumul-ilegal-al-coletelor--presarat-cu-mita-si-amenzi-video_1349771.html , accessed on 14.03.2019).
Stirilocale [news portal] (2015, http://stirilocale.md/coletele-moldovenilor-stabiliti-in-europa-si-nepasarea-autoritatilor-de-la-chisinau.html , accessed on 14.03.2019).
Timpul [newspaper] (2018, https://www.timpul.md/timpulmd/articol/coletele-diasporei---povara-nesabuinei-guvernanilor--133403.html , accessed on 14.03.2019).
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Adevarul reporting on Moldovan parcel services (2017, https://adevarul.ro/moldova/economie/banii-transmitereacoletelor-intra-buzunarele-transportatorilor-neautorizati_59266b475ab6550cb86cbbf3/index.html , accessed on 14.03.2019).
Profit.ro [information portal] (2018, https://www.profit.ro/insider/auto-transporturi/dpd-romania-romanii-au-trimis-cu-aproape-50-mai-multe-colete-in-strainatate-18363121 , accessed on 14.03.2019).

parcel services. While the Moldovan government is preoccupied with the legalisation of the parcel van service, Moldovan media reports show that both service providers and their clients feel that their concerns are not being addressed. A range of recent accounts reveal difficulties encountered by the service providers, including fines, increasing parcel volumes and the pressures to maintain the link between migrants and their families. Both clients and service providers express concerns about the government's response to such difficulties, fuelling the debate on the importance of parcel vans to Moldovan transnational families. Similar problems with increasing volumes and fines at border crossings are reported by Romanian parcel van companies, showing that the issues are also relevant in neighbouring countries.

This thesis aims to engage with the importance of the parcel van service and the interrelation between migrants and objects by 'unpacking' transnational families' parcels, specifically by asking what, how, when and why people send. By exploring transnational connectedness from the social, temporal and, ultimately, material point of view, I am asking three main questions that investigate the practices of staying in touch through material culture. Why is parcel-sending continuing to be important to transnational families, despite the availability of communication channels such as Skype? How does the materiality of parcel exchange express post-migration experiences? How does parcel-sending help migrants and those left behind make sense of the distance between the country of destination and the homeland?

The first question addresses the ways in which material communication across borders takes place and what the parcel van service represents to its users. The second question encompasses the choices of parcel items and sending practices that further uncover the role of objects in transnational families' daily life. The third question refers to how migrants and those left behind negotiate kinship ties, co-presence and physical distance through parcel-sending. Finally, my thesis raises relevant policy questions regarding the relationship between migrants and the homeland, drawing attention to parcel-sending

as a complex social phenomenon that should not be reduced to the problem of taxation and must be understood in broader social contexts.

This thesis is therefore situated at the intersection of current debates in three important areas of scholarship: kinship, material culture and migration studies. More specifically, the thesis engages with ongoing academic enquiries that are part of the international migration research agenda[5], with a focus on objects as 'palpable connections to places and people in different locations' (Povrzanovic Frykman and Humbracht 2013:65). In other words, the thesis addresses how relations unfold in transnational space-time through objects.

The following sections outline the theoretical framework of my research, drawing on the understanding of personhood (Carsten 2004) via the concept of 'relation' (Strathern and Stewart 2009) as critical to the transgenerational phenomenon of kinship. My understanding of space-time then employs the notion of space as an interplay of relational proximity and separation (Stasch 2009), in which individual perceptions of time (Gell 1992) create temporal reference points (Munn 1992) that allow migrants and their families to create co-presence. The materiality of this space-time connection is then explored in the context of migration studies, drawing on the notion of social remittances (Levitt 1998) and migrant infrastructures (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) to unpack the role parcel vans play in Moldovan transnational life.

Kinship and personhood in transnational families

This thesis contributes to the continuing anthropological explorations of how kinship ties are extended and continued. There is a long anthropological tradition that has looked at aspects of kinship and the way kin relations are formed and maintained (Morgan 1870,

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[5] Referring to current materiality of migration research groups, such as IMISCOE (with interest in global mobility, migration, integration and social cohesion) or HOMInG (with working papers by Paolo Boccagni and Pnina Werbner, interested in the making of transnational home through objects).

Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949], Leach 1961, Sahlins 2012). As social beings, people have always been related to one another based on consanguinity and affinity, prompting academic interest[6] in explaining the nature of this relatedness so that it is unaffected by the inconstancies of social life. However, these studies have addressed primarily structural and systemic aspects of kinship ties, with less emphasis on the factors wholly or partially effecting the replacing of kinship relations with biographically restricted friendship relations.

Building on Schneider's contribution to kinship as a cultural construct (1984), Janet Carsten (1995, 2004) reimagined the concept of kinship in relation to cultural and social categories employed by individuals to make sense of their kin connections. My understanding of kinship ties therefore draws on Carsten's idea of constructing kinship as 'relatedness,' achieved through the process of 'becoming kin' (Carsten 1995:223-224). By interacting with each other, individuals make sense of themselves and others through shared practices. Approaching kinship from a relational point of view, I also build on interpretations of 'family' as a social construct incorporating personhood to show the nature of bonds between individuals in the family. Instead of considering the family a union of people based on consanguinity, Ribbens McCarthy (2012) refers to kinship as closeness that provides the social 'glue' tying selves together. At the same time, Appuhamilage (2017) considers that personhood is constituted both through selves and activities shared with others, making kinship ties into a 'relational web'. Kinship ties symbolically become part of the individual through personhood, allowing for what Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart (1998:175) call 'the achievement of personhood' by means of relationality,' as a result of 'maintaining "proper" relationships with others.'

I argue that this relationality plays a significant role in how Moldovans make sense of their kinship ties. Besides consanguineous terms, my informants frequently use *ai mei,* or 'my people', when referring to family members or any others included in their

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[6] See Reiter (1975), Goody (1983), Meillassoux (1984), Kuper (1988).

household. For example, a mother in Moldova might describe as *ai mei* the husband, with whom she shares a house, the daughter, who lives in the UK, and the daughter's boyfriend, who occasionally visits them in Moldova. Thus, personhood and kinship become interlinked, making the constitution of kin relations a 'fluid' process (Carsten 1995), with the definition of households also becoming fluid in the sense of being fluid, not rigidly defined constructs. This fluidity means that using the general term 'families' can be problematic.

Since my informants maintain kinship ties across borders, in this thesis I am referring to them as 'transnational families' who form bonds as part of 'transnational life'. Transnationalism in the context of migration has been defined by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (1992:1) as 'processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement' and seen by Vertovec (1999: 447) as 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states,' in this case, Moldova and the UK. I am building on this understanding of connections across borders as constituting social fields[7] and a diversity of links between people, places and things, focusing on transnational bonds between migrants and those left behind, rather than on diasporic bonds[8]. While I acknowledge that Moldovan migrants in the UK are seen as a 'diaspora' by Moldovan governmental and non-governmental migration organisations, my informants do not specifically identify themselves as part of a Moldovan diaspora in the UK. Moreover, 41% of Moldovans in the UK are unaware of any diaspora organisations (Cheianu-Andrei 2013), as discussed in Chapter I. I am therefore using the term 'diaspora' to indicate the presence of Moldovan migrants in the UK in relation to migrant

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[7] Maintenance of ties through exchanges, including monetary and material contributions.
[8] I do not further engage in debates around diasporas, as these are outside the scope of this thesis – see Safran (1991), Clifford (1994), Faist (2008).

networks, which I will return to later in the discussion of migration infrastructure in Chapter II.

At the same time, I must briefly refer to Moldova's socialist past in order to clarify my engagement with post-socialism as a conceptual framework for my analysis of parcel-sending practices. Specifically, I want to address two main aspects that distance this ethnography from a post-socialist narrative – the post-transition focus on social transformation and the changing migrant demographic – before acknowledging the role of informal exchanges in post-socialist space that inform parcel-sending practices.

First, I will discuss the economic and social changes that have taken place since Moldova gained independence in 1991, after the period of transition that started with the fall of the USSR. While economic recovery was the initial focus of emerging post-socialist scholarship (Narayanswamy 1994), the socio-economic transformation facilitated by the influx of new information from outside post-socialist space (Kornai 2006) prompted the differentiation between the 1990s transition crisis and the more stable market systems that emerged at the turn of the millennium (Jackson and Evans 2017). Although economic instability in Eastern Europe may still drive migrants to seek their fortunes abroad (idem), Moldova is no longer in the same state of transition thirty years after gaining independence.

Second, Moldovan migrants to the UK no longer face the challenges of mid-1990s irregular migration, such as subsistence labour to support both children and parents left behind or restricted access to communication channels. Based on my informants' profiles, Moldovan migrants to the UK today represent a different demographic from those who left Moldova in the 1990s - mostly aged under 40, with small or no children, emigrated together with the spouse or waiting to join them shortly. For this new generation of Moldovan migrants, the motivations to migrate surpass economic need. The opportunities in the UK represent a stronger link to identity creation which is,

according to Young and Kaczmarek (2008), more connected to 'new futures' rather than contested pasts.

Moreover, although those left behind[9] engage with vestiges of the socialist past like purpose-built housing, the idea of 'being' post-socialist is also contested by those who continue to live in former socialist countries (Müller 2019). As discussed in Chapter V, Moldovans left behind who live in Soviet purpose-built blocks reconfigure standard flats with items received in parcels, without expressly considering themselves post-socialist. At the same time, this reconfiguration is not defined by a reiteration of Soviet domestic practices (Buchli 1997), but it is fuelled by the desire to create a closer link to the absent migrant.

Considering the aspects discussed above in relation to this ethnography, I am approaching post-socialism as a 'sensibility, a particular perspective, rather than as a concept' (Müller 2019:537), and a starting point for further academic reflection.

> Not only have social, political and economic realities changed, but so have scholars. A generation of new scholars has entered the scene who did not conduct research during socialism. For them, unlike for their predecessors, socialism is no longer the major reference point against which they analyse the social worlds of the former socialist countries. They are steeped in different debates, around neo-liberalisation, mobilities, materialities, globalisation and migration, focusing more on links and connections than on distinction and difference.
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> Müller (2019:540)

Thus, my intention in this thesis is to explore the materiality of mobility as an opportunity to add to the ethnographic exploration of social life in a young democracy with a socialist past. As post-socialist societies are subject to continuous transformation (Verdery 1996), and follow a path of changes, rather than reflecting a separation between the past and the future (Müller 2019), it is also important to acknowledge how some aspects

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[9] In most of my informants' case, parents of migrants of retirement age.

from the socialist past are reinvented in Moldovan transnational families' practices. The embodiment of post-socialist 'sensibility' reflected in this thesis is the predilection for informal exchanges and building connections based on familiarity, particularly in relation to the van companies' operation practices discussed in Chapter II. As Aliyev (2015:187) notes, in 'specific contexts'[10] that cannot be used to standardise post-socialist experience in different countries, there is a 'reliance on informal practices – contacts, connections, networks, reciprocal exchanges, one-time gifts, arrangements and many other forms of informal social interaction.' Specifically, as I discuss in Chapter III, sending Christmas gifts to close family and friends, as well as occasional offers of household items and food to extended family, is not seen by senders as an obligation or favour to be returned when needed (Ledeneva 1999, 2006), but as a voluntary contribution to the continuity of their transnational connections.

This importance of networks is reflected in my approach to understanding the transnational family and the popularity of van services. Therefore, while I do not elaborate on Moldovans from a diasporic point of view, nor engage in a further analysis of post-socialist space, I discuss transnational families in relation to migrant networks as being part of social fields. I argue that understanding how migrant networks come to be requires defining how Moldovan migrants and those left behind *become* a transnational family. Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (2002:18) view transnational families as 'most of the time separated from each other,' but whose members 'hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, […] even across national borders.' This separation, however, does not exclude the existence of a common goal. Drawing on the relationality of personhood and the notion of 'transnational families' as connected migrants working on creating links, I am therefore approaching the understanding of transnational family as close-knit selves, separated by distance, who maintain the common goal of keeping in touch.

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[10] In my informants' case, parcel-sending.

To unpack this dichotomy of separation and unity, I first need to refer to the notion of 'separation' as it relates to individual members of the transnational family, before referring to the notion of 'distance' as my informants understand it. In discussions on the experience of living apart, informants speak of transnational life in terms of *lipsă* (lack of, absence of), or 'separation' and 'absence', and *distanță*, or 'distance', using *departe* (far away) to denote the physical remoteness between Moldova and the UK[11]. As discussed in Chapter III, parents of newly-departed migrants refer to the feeling of not being able to 'reach' or 'touch' the absent migrant, while the sense of connectedness grows stronger, especially with the use of communication technology. In Chapter IV, senders in Moldova reflect on distance in terms of three-day parcel journeys that affect the foodstuffs' shelf life, while in Chapter V, the prolonged absence of the migrant prompts transnational families to materialise separation through practices of furnishing dwellings. Most evidently, those left behind refer to the distinction between the absence of the loved one – *îmi lipseşte* (I miss him/her) – and *nu-mi lipseşte nimic* (I don't lack or need anything), as shown in Chapter VI, emphasising the importance of maintaining relations.

The distinction between those who left and those who stayed behind is thus manifested as a 'lack of' physical, but not relational, proximity to the loved one. Since this interplay of separation, distance and proximity is central to how Moldovan migrants and those left behind make sense of *becoming* a transnational family, my reading of Rupert Stasch's exploration of kinship, personhood and social relations among the Korowai of West Papua (2009) provides the theoretical framework for interpreting 'distance' as a concept incorporating space, time and relations. Far from considering cultural aspects of kinship as universal, I endorse Stasch's ethnographic approach to understanding a non-Western culture by tapping into the social relations associated with expressions of

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[11] Informants use this term to refer to their loved ones as being both physically separated by distance and being inaccessible for face-to-face communication and shared activities.

personhood and materialising distance. Stasch observes otherness[12] as a quality that brings people together in a dispersed society. Among the Korowai, when a member of the household comes of age or marries, they cease to be part of the household and remain connected to other Korowai through the act of achieving physical separation. At the same time, sharing a history of living together does not necessarily imply closeness.

> Often the otherness at the core of a relation consists specifically of a mismatch between different *temporal* levels of people's relation, such as when persons who do not have a history of belonging are in close interactional contact or when persons with a history of living together are separated in the present.

> Stasch 2009:17

This paradoxical idea of creating ties by distancing from the kin shows that distance represents more than the lack of physical proximity. For the Korowai, building their houses a mile apart and on trees above the ground represents a delimitation of autonomy, manifestation of personhood and equality, as well as a separation of domestic space. While distance from the ground and from other houses provides scope for such separation, social interactions in the form of visiting practices negotiate closeness and kinship ties. Without this distance, the Korowai would lose their social unity.

While Moldovan migrants and their families do not employ otherness to make sense of their bonds in the same way as the Korowai, I show that two aspects of Korowai sociality are echoed by my informants. On the one hand, Moldovan migrants' families *become* transnational through migrants' departure. Leaving the Moldovan home thus allows migrants to establish their own autonomy and forge their own fortune abroad. On the other hand, distance is negotiated through practices like parcel-sending and return visits that create closeness. Distance is therefore understood here as separation constituted

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[12] The distinction between equal selves.

through migrants' physical absence from the household, starting from the moment of departure. In other words, the concept of 'distance' employed in this thesis is understood through relationality, instead of social or spatial proximity.

I will be returning to Stasch's explorations of Korowai practices around food, the home and absence focusing on the negotiation of separation and closeness throughout my own ethnography. To unpack how connectedness is achieved through parcel-sending, I will now discuss the interrelation of space and time allowing this negotiation to unfold.

Creating co-presence in space-time

The discussion of distance and proximity so far showed that transnational space exists in a nexus of relations, locales and interactions, and cannot be referred to solely in terms of well-defined boundaries[13]. The complexity of being present in a space dispersed among several physical locales (Appadurai 1996) and creating 'home' in transnational space (Sheringham 2010) point to the role of shared experiences and daily practices (Gustafson 2001) in constructions of place[14]. However, understanding how such practices develop in transnational space also requires a temporal dimension, encompassing the negotiation of the continuous relationship between time and sociality (Maya-Jariego and Armitage 2007). Previous scholarship addressed the importance of sharing time (Schutz 1932), common goals (Arendt 1958) or a 'common project' (Sartre 1960) with contemporaries, implying that no action is possible without the presence of others in the same time period. More recently, Findlay and Stockdale (2003) have drawn attention to the role of biographies and temporality in understanding migration decisions. However, these approaches have not addressed how the sharing of practices and experiences in transnational families occurs in space-time.

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[13] Physical, geographic or social proximity.
[14] In the sense of social exchanges, actions and processes that define the social configuration of space - see Low (2009). In this thesis I am not discussing the anthropological debates on the relationship between space and place any further, as my ethnography focuses on transnational space.

In this thesis, my understanding of time in relation to transnational life draws on Alfred Gell's notion of 'time-maps' and Nancy Munn's notion of 'temporalisation,' the symbolic and continuous process of constructing time through everyday practices that produce 'meaningful connectivities among persons, objects and space' (Munn 1992:116). People's ability to map time (Gell 1992) switches focus from the physicality of elapsing minutes to different subjects' perception of time and its social dimension. In my ethnography, I specifically refer to Gell's 'before and after' time[15] to argue that the moment of the migrant's departure represents the moment of *becoming* for their transnational family. When thinking about parcel-sending as a shared practice, informants identify this event as the starting point of their transnational experience, speaking of the separation in temporal terms of *când a plecat* (when s/he left). Subsequently, both migrants and those left behind place other significant events in their now transnational life's timeline in reference to this moment of separation. Therefore, I argue that this placement is not a chronological ordering of sequences in their family histories, but a practice of re-stitching connections.

Moreover, individual perceptions of the family timeline are reflected in choices of objects sent via parcels and in sending patterns. According to Munn (1992:104), individuals experience time as 'relations from and between themselves and temporal reference points' (Munn 1992: 104). I consider these temporal reference points to be closely linked to migrant experiences and specific events that incorporate, but are not reduced to, milestones, life stages or special occasions. I argue that parcel-sending reflects a strong interrelation between seasonality, back-and-forth movements[16], events and how objects sent via parcels become part of daily life.

Informants consistently use *când* (when) to add a temporal dimension to their experience of daily activities involving objects sent via parcels - 'when I tried the coat

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[15] Or 'B' series time, as a wider category (Gell 1992).
[16] Referring to parcel van journeys and migrant journeys, including return visits.

on,' 'when she tasted the cheese,' 'when they rode the bikes I sent.' Such accounts may originally appear to be indicative of the focus on past experience and the longing for the absence of the migrant to share that moment with. As Casey (2000) notes, the past manifests itself as embodiments of an experience in which the body only remembers in the context of a place, recalling its physical features. The absence of this context may thus trigger nostalgic reactions (Sedikides et al. 2008), connecting the past and the present and acting as a vehicle for self-continuity, with past moments creating a new material or temporal dimension of life (Crapanzano 2004, Boym 2001). However, I argue that, while there are nostalgic elements associated with sensory memories[17], the nature of transnational connection in Moldovan migrants' case is continuously reconfigured, rather than anchored in the past. Since time as 'past-present-future relations' is 'constantly produced in everyday practices' (Munn 1992:116), I argue that this connection continues to be negotiated through co-presence and associated practices related to the body, food consumption and homemaking. Moreover, while co-presence allows migrants and their families to share experiences in space-time, such daily practices emerge alongside other ways of keeping in touch.

Recently, there has been an increased interest in the role of communication technology in creating social relations[18] which tackled the question of how this proximity is achieved. Specifically, Mirca Madianou (2016) addresses the role of 'ambient co-presence' that includes combined use of Skype, smartphones and wireless services that create a new form of 'peripheral' connectivity. Transnational families are 'always connected' online, as a form of non-explicit co-presence that is less tangible, but as effective. However, this connection does not imply materiality. Loretta Baldassar (2008:252) refers to 'co-

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[17] As discussed in Chapter IV, the memory of taste and the longing for familiar foods.
[18] See Horst and Miller (2006), Horst (2009), Turkle (2011), Fortunati et al. (2011), Madianou and Miller (2012) on polymedia, Miller and Horst (2012), Miller and Sinanan (2014), Baldassar (2016). While I acknowledge the importance of technology in transnational life and engage with the role of Skype in Chapter III, a more in-depth analysis of communication technologies and kinship is outside the scope of this thesis.

presence by proxy' to reflect the role of objects and their tactile and olfactory characteristics in producing connections. While, in this thesis, I am not seeking to adhere to a typology of co-presence, nor to explore the emotional aspects of co-presence discussed by Baldassar, my interest lies in how connections are constituted via virtual and material channels. Thus, I argue that parcel-sending should be understood as a vehicle of material co-presence allowing practices like commensality to be performed on Skype, using items sent via parcels. I will show that parcel-sending provides the material connection between temporal sequences, as parcel van trips both occur within a short time frame and over longer periods of time.

In these temporal frames, objects become tangible anchors that create relations, with space-time connectivities produced through everyday practices (Munn 1992). To unpack parcel-sending as such practice, I will now address how co-presence can be achieved from a material point of view by engaging with material culture scholarship and, specifically, gift-giving.

Gift-giving and making connections through objects

Kinship studies have become intertwined with material culture scholarship, with recent accounts recognising material practices of kin relations as important avenues of enquiry (Goldfarb and Schuster 2016). At the same time, the role of objects in people's daily practices has been previously addressed (Attfield 2000, Miller 2008), while other scholars have focused on things' relationship with space and the body, particularly food and textiles (Fajans 1988, Küchler 2002, Duruz 2010, Douny 2013). The material culture of the home has also been well explored (Miller 2001, Garvey 2001, Miller 2010, Daniels 2010, Chevalier 2012).

In this thesis, I am building on these three areas of material culture studies to show that parcel-sending informs the same areas of materiality in transnational families' life. As Basu and Coleman note (2008:317), in the process of migration new forms of materiality

may emerge, with objects taking on 'an indeterminate variety of meanings.' For Moldovan migrants, parcels become a material manifestation of such new forms. Changing contexts triggers a renegotiation of relations and practices because 'through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting, and living with things, people make themselves' (Tilley 2006:61).

In transnational space, these material interactions can translate into the development of more complex sending practices, including parcels sent on special occasions and items brought on return visits home. In the process of sending, these material interactions often take the form of gifts, with gift-giving contributing to building transnational social fields (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). In this thesis, I look at gift-giving as an important theme, arguing that it plays a significant role in establishing first post-migration connections. A long-debated concept (Malinowski 1922, Mauss 1925, Lévi-Strauss 1949, Sahlins 1972), the Gift is one of the most significant manifestations of social interaction, a bridge between material culture and sociality with the associated web of obligations. While others referred to gifts as expressing power (Cliggett 2003), denoting social status (Taylor, Wangaruro and Papadopoulos 2012) or reflecting social and moral obligation (Akesson 2011), I am approaching gift-giving from a relational perspective and focusing on the materiality of the gift. My focus is thus on gifts' ability to forge connections, rather than become part of a web of obligations. While I acknowledge that 'not all that we give and receive is a pure gift' (Laidlaw 2000:632), my interest is particularly in how Moldovan migrants and their families use gift-giving to stay in touch. My informants often employ *cadou*[19] to talk about an object considered different from the other items in the parcels. While it is not necessarily of higher monetary value and can be consumable or non-consumable, the moment in informants' biographies associated with the receipt of this object, the special occasion, transforms it into a Gift. I will also show that, in case of reduced access to parcel van services, gifts brought by migrants on return visits remain

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[19] Gift. Normally used to denote an offering tied to a special occasion. In my informants' case, I will discuss both the 'mundane' and the 'extraordinary' aspects of gift-giving in Chapter III.

an embodiment of the migrant's presence within the parental home. Thus, the insight on the range of parcel items, coupled with my informants' personal histories, suggests that gifts can be considered as 'tools in maintaining relationships' (Werbner 1990).

Having discussed transnational families and kinship ties and how material culture contributes to creating co-presence, I will now focus on the remaining two participants in the process of parcel exchange: parcels and parcel van companies. While I place Moldovan parcel-sending within the body of literature on parcels, care packages and social remittances, I will discuss parcel van companies as brokers, playing an active, rather than a passive role in facilitating transnational connectedness.

Rethinking social remittances and migration infrastructure

The exploration of relationality, space-time, co-presence and associated material practices employed in maintaining relationships has highlighted one of the main arguments of this thesis: that Moldovan parcels should not be treated as goods. What remains to be uncovered is the part parcels play in migration studies and where parcel van companies are situated in the nexus of transnational life. I will now address the literature on remittances in relation to parcel-sending before looking at parcel van companies in the context of migration infrastructure scholarship.

Remittances as a form of financial contribution and material connection between migrants and those left behind have attracted a lot of academic attention[20], prompting parcels to be seen as integral parts of remittance sending systems or as accompanying informal monetary remittance sending. Some scholars have looked at the role of remittances in tackling economic inequality, with Stark and Lucas (1985) noting that

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[20] See Stark (1991), Glick Schiller et al. (1992), Taylor et al. (1996), De Haas (2005), Deneulin (2006), Vertovec (2009).

remittances allow a redistribution of wealth from the family member working abroad, which, in turn, helps reduce inequality, as shown by McKenzie and Rapoport (2004).

More scholars have explored the role of remittances in shaping migration decisions. According to Van Dalen et al. (2005), remittances play a role in determining new migration flows, causing a 'chain reaction' in terms of the number of people deciding to migrate (Leeves 2009). Improving the well-being of the migrant and those left behind is seen by Sen (1993) as the main goal determining the decision to migrate. Others have looked at the reasons behind remittance-sending, with both self-interest and altruism credited as the motivation to send remittances, informed by the level of embeddedness in the country of destination (Stark and Lucas 1985, Shimada 2011, Seshan 2012). The more time is spent in the country of destination, the higher the probability of remitting motives to change from altruistic to non-altruistic (Maher 2010).

Finally, more studies looked at the link between remittances and social networks, with Lindley (2009) noting remittances' compensating role in maintaining family ties over long periods of absence. This 'compensation' for absence is another important factor in remitting, as Duany (2010) points out, since social ties between migrants and those left behind tend to fade in time. According to Rindfuss et al. (2012), in dispersed families these ties may break, and new ties may develop, as migrating changes the nature of exchange between family members. In order to minimise the dissolution of family ties, migrants then create and rely on transnational networks that provide a framework for transnational exchange (Rubinov 2014).

With these several exceptions, most studies on remittances have acknowledged the contribution of remittance-sending to homeland economies, shaping the link between remittances and social networks without offering a better understanding of non-monetary aspects of remittances. Peggy Levitt (1998:927) has coined the term 'social remittances' to include 'ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital' that represent migrants' cultural and social resources. Further interest in remittances beyond economic

considerations (Faist 2000, Kapur 2004, Faist 2010, Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2013, Boccagni and Decimo 2013) have drawn even more attention to the social impact of migration. More recently, Lacroix et al. (2016) have reiterated the continuing expression of interest in social remittances and call to more discussions on the interrelation of people and objects in the context of migration.

Considering both female and male participants in parcel exchange, I must clarify that my focus here is on practices, building on Marilyn Strathern's understanding of gender through the lens of relations and bonds (1988). I argue that, in Moldovan migrants' case, parcel-sending represents a relation-making practice. Informants never speak of their parcels as 'goods' or 'remittances', neither do they feel compelled to send. In chapters III and IV, I discuss how the act of sending home-cooked meals by Moldovan mothers informs the mother-son and mother-daughter bond, while the act of sending household items by migrants, analysed in Chapter V, contributes to maintaining the migrants' bond with their parents and siblings. Chapter VI then shows how tools sent via parcels and brought in luggage on migrants' return visits are used to maintain the father-son bond.

To justify this relational approach to shared parcel-sending practices, I will now briefly focus on the gender dimension in the context of transnational life. First, I will discuss the feminisation of migration and the academic focus on women's migration as a care strategy in comparison to migrating as a strategy to pursue personal goals in Stasch's sense of gaining autonomy through the act of leaving home (2009). I will then address contested masculinities in the context of migration to show that parcel-sending should be approached as a shared and co-related practice manifesting a complex interplay of gendered identities.

There has been much focus on migrant women's caretaking and mothering roles, particularly in South-East Asia (Parreñas 2001; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Hoang, Yeoh and Wattie 2012), while in the regional context I am discussing, there are indications that married Moldovan women are the clients who are most likely to send parcels (Cheianu-

Andrei 2013). The increase in the number of women migrating to fulfil caretaking jobs abroad, taking on breadwinning roles and reconfiguring intra-familial gender relations has led to the feminisation of migration, a trend that has generated a lot of academic interest (Gamburd 2000, Piper 2008, Hofmann and Buckley 2013, Yeoh and Ramdas 2014, Donato and Gabaccia 2015).

Although these studies acknowledge the gender-related differences in migration opportunities, further debates bring forward more subtleties in women's involvement in transnational practices. As Vause and Toma (2015) note, the feminisation of migration can be understood as an increase in women's participation as 'autonomous economic agents.' At the same time, this phenomenon is 'highly contextual' and 'non-linear' (idem), distinguishing between individual factors that influence the differences in post-migration outcomes for women with similar migration opportunities. Moreover, in relation to women's migration experiences, Zontini (2010) draws particular attention to individual circumstances and family dynamics. In other words, even in similar circumstances, women tend to respond differently based on individual skills, using resources like social networks to achieve their goals. Considering the complexities of the feminisation of migration, Marchetti and Salih (2017) suggest looking at women's mobility as a 'livelihood strategy' to uncover 'gendered devices' that impact women's access to better work opportunities abroad. As the authors note, women often find themselves as 'workers with care responsibilities' that prevent them from achieving autonomy. However, as discussed in chapters III and V, intra-familial collaboration strongly contributes to the achievement of female informants' goals of being both financially and professionally fulfilled, particularly in the case of working mothers.

While the feminisation of migration prompted debates about women's shifting roles within the transnational social field, questions of masculinities in migration have also been addressed (Broughton 2008, Donaldson 2009), with more emphasis on the importance of social context and background in constituting the perception of masculinity (Ye 2014). Specifically, contesting the distinction between feminine and

masculine tasks as nurturing versus non-nurturing, Gallo and Scrinzi (2016) note how this distinction has become blurred.

This blurred distinction is reflected in my detailed analysis of the workplace practices of a parcel van company, whose predominantly male employees share a workplace ethos originating in long-distance truck-driving. According to Wallengren and Ottosson (2019), the specificities of driving trucks facilitated the emergence of a 'socially narrow' workplace characterised by a high level of autonomy and decision-making, as well as the proliferation of a culture of masculinity. As seen in Chapter II, van drivers, many of whom started as long-haul truck drivers in the 1990s, display a range of networking and communal skills acquired as a result of working with clients in parcel-sending, traditionally ascribed to women (Eagly 2009). The distinction between 'masculine' driving and more 'feminine' broker and caretaking roles in relation to clients thus diminishes. The variety of tasks van company employees engage in daily represents a broader set of skills than required for hauling goods. While the careful wrapping of clients' fragile items at collection points, the repackaging of damaged parcels at border control, the arranging for alternative pickup may all imply indirect interaction with customers, other activities like managing deliveries or dealing with requests and complaints involve good communication skills.

Such examples show that parcel-sending practices are relational, collaborative and nuanced. For instance, the caretaking aspect of women's contribution to family life discussed earlier is also reflected in father-child relationships across borders, embodied in parcels containing items essential for important life stages. The migration experience contests masculinity through complementing maternal caretaking with paternal involvement in child-rearing in transnational families (Fresnoza-Flot 2014, Kilkey 2014) – a perspective on male participation in transnational family life discussed in more detail in Chapter V, focusing on a stepfather's active role in his child's development, manifested through sending educational toys. In this case, while the mother continues to fulfil a traditional child-rearing role despite changing daily practices informed by

migration (Yeoh and Ramdas 2014), the two parents' collaboration shows that the division of labour in transnational families continues to be renegotiated (Donaldson and Howson 2009). Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge the non-binary aspect of men's participation in transnational family life.

> Masculinities are challenged, problematic, variable, changing, shifting, fluid, fractured, contextualised, contested, complicated, plural, different, diverse, heterogeneous, self-constructing and always emerging.
>
> Donaldson and Howson (2009:215)

The continuous process of reconfiguring men and women's position within the transnational social field also implies a plurality of contexts in which gendered identities are constructed. According to Walsh (2011:527), rethinking masculinity in the context of migration requires understanding 'the construction of gendered identities across the dichotomies of work/home, absence/presence, detachment/attachment, mobility/dwelling.' These dichotomies become most evident in Chapter VI in the discussion of domestic practices shared by migrants on return visits that reinforce the transnational connection. Thus, taking into account both male and female informants' experiences of contributing to transnational family life, my focus in this thesis is not on gendered practices, but on the collaboration that goes into parcel-sending and staying in touch. Moreover, while too complex to explore within the confines of this thesis, the transnational practices of migrant men embodying multiple masculinities and women's assertion of personhood through migration need to be understood in co-relation.

As seen above, a relational approach to gender within transnational social field allows a better understanding of how social resources are used by migrants to maintain connections across borders. In this thesis I am further drawing on Levitt's notion of 'social remittances' to show that parcel-sending represents more than economic transfers of goods from migrants to those left behind, particularly since the flow of

parcels is a two-way process[21]. Within regional scholarship on Moldova, social remittances have been addressed much less, in favour of in-depth explorations of the economic impact of remittances and labour migration (Munteanu 2005, Pinger 2010, Stratan and Chistruga 2012, Siegel and Lücke 2013, Borodak and Tichit 2014, Vanore and Siegel 2015, Waidler et al. 2016). These studies show that economic and welfare concerns remain the focus of academic enquiry, without addressing the relational aspect of material exchanges. The exception are some studies on the welfare of children left behind (Robila 2012, Cebotari, Siegel and Mazzucato 2018), integration (Cingolani and Vietti 2019) and social cohesion (Groza et al. 2018). Also, Böhme et al. (2015) have drawn attention to the positive effects of migration and remittance-sending on the elderly left behind in Moldova, emphasising that remittances maintain a level of social interaction with the family and provide economic stability.

I therefore aim to address the gap in regional scholarship and contribute to scholarship on social remittances by engaging with the material aspect of social remittance transfers. As Levitt (1998:936) notes, these occur 'between individuals who know one another personally or who are connected to one another by mutual social ties,' with some of the transfers taking place via objects (letters, videotapes) and telephone calls.

While the role of communication technologies has already been addressed, I will now discuss the aspects of object exchange via parcels in the context of existent scholarship on care packages and couriers. As seen above, monetary contributions reconfigure homeland economy and influence the welfare of those left behind. Studies on care packages reveal more social aspects of transporting embodiments of love for those left behind, beyond the economic value of the sent items. I will now discuss these studies in more detail and outline the contribution of my own ethnography in relation to the findings. Starting from a general outlook on parcel-sending which continues to be seen as circulation of goods, I will then move on to the main items that reflect the senders'

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[21] As I will discuss throughout this thesis, various sending patterns and practices develop. Both migrants and those left behind send parcels.

choices. I will begin by looking at literature on human couriers before discussing the main types of parcels sent, from care packages to more specific types of parcels containing foodstuffs.

An important body of scholarship connects economic remittances and the human labour involved in transporting packages for clients across borders. Guarnizo (2003) points to remittances as a resource empowering migrants, acknowledging the role of human couriers like Cuban *mulas*, occasional informal couriers who ferry hard-to-get items from the US (Orozco 2002), or Mexican *paqueteros*, whose use of own kin networks proves essential to successful operation (Hellman 2008). This theme of individual couriers playing an important role in supporting migrants in maintaining a link to those left behind has offered an insight on transnational practices and the human labour involved in parcel-sending. At the same time, these studies provided less detail of how such couriers operate or whether these exchanges involve collaborations among couriers themselves.

A further analysis of couriers' use of social networks, complemented by a system of liaising with clients, is offered by Anastario (2019) in a study of Salvadoran *viajeros* providing a service contributing to maintaining a memory of the homeland. An even more nuanced outlook on courier services with an added gender dimension is reflected in Garni's work on *viajeras* (2014), discussing the participation of female couriers in a traditionally male occupation, while building a relationship of trust with clients. These studies offer important insights on the intricate web of social connections associated with parcel-sending, particularly regarding the use of social networks. However, individual couriers' loads are limited by carry-on luggage policies, as well as tighter regulations at airports. In Chapter II, I look at more complex operations of medium-sized companies, organised into networks of drivers, office workers and scheduled bus services that allow for an ever-growing and fluid network of connections, collecting from and delivering to more isolated areas in both Moldova and the UK. The analysis of seasonal changes in parcel volumes and parcel van companies' business model also

offers an insight into the differences between parcel vans and the traditional postal service, further complemented by clients' accounts of carry-on luggage restrictions on return visits in Chapter VI.

If studies of couriers offer some valuable data on human brokers of transnational material exchange and their important role in understanding social remittances, another body of literature addresses the specificities of parcels' contents and the reasons behind parcel-sending. Parcels that represent 'care packages' point to the idea of sending as expression of care or mothering across borders, often perceived more as an obligation by senders than by receivers. The Filipino *balikbayan box,* a package containing small gifts (and a restricted range of foodstuffs) is considered the embodiment of transnational care and providing for the family, especially as a means to keep children left behind closer to their migrant mothers. According to Cohen (2015), Filipina mothers sending parcels to their children around holiday times is an act of nurture, with gifts helping to assert motherhood roles (Fresnoza-Flot 2009, Camposano 2012). Hof (2018) offers an interesting outlook on senders' significant act of choosing what to buy and pack that becomes an opportunity to fulfil mothers' obligation to be personally involved in childrearing. At the same time, the recipients view these parcels as 'unnecessary' and out of touch with their perceived needs.

While these studies acknowledge the importance of the choice to send and the care dimension, there is much emphasis on children left behind and a sense of obligation to send. I approach the notion of parcel-sent gifts cautiously, showing that, in this case, most parcels reflect little or no obligation to send, as seen in Chapter III. At the same time, since the main exchanges take place between adult children and their parents left behind, with only some separated spouses and children who are expected to join the migrant in the UK, the practice of sending is less indicative of a desire to provide for the family and seen more as an investment in the transnational family's future together.

A more specific type of parcel – the food parcel – has become the focus of more studies on parcel-sending. Among these, some addressed the sense of nostalgia brought on by the consumption of familiar foods that reflects the separation from those left behind. While Hellman (2008) refers to homemade foods as 'nostalgia products' that generate a constant flow of parcels to satisfy the need for the familiar taste, Rabikowska (2010) looks at sweetness as a nostalgic taste, bringing up memories of traditional confectionary for Polish migrants in the UK. Other studies focused on home-cooked food or traditional foodstuffs generating an emotional response in migrants who feel disconnected from their homeland. Sutton (2001) draws attention to the mnemonic qualities of herbs and local produce sent to Greek students in the UK by their mothers to evoke a shared tradition of quality and freshness that represents Greek food. Similarly, the taste of homemade cheese and salted fish sent to Russian migrants in Greece (Popov 2016) generates a memory of traditional food that creates an emotional connection to the homeland.

However, as I argue in Chapter IV, nostalgia plays only a partial role in sending food, mostly related to the length of the migrant's stay in the country of destination, while continuous exchanges of food allow for developments in perceptions and memory of taste. At the same time, I discuss the power of sweets to establish both transnational and local connections because of a shared familiarity of sweetness. Moreover, as Mata-Codesal and Abranches (2018) note, sending food parcels becomes a tool to make sense of the fracturedness brought on by migration and assert personhood in transnational space. While I acknowledge the centrality of food in parcel-sending, my ethnography incorporates aspects of material exchanges besides taste and care, adding on the van companies' participation in 'regulating' food parcel flows which prove not to be arbitrary, but dependent on weather, changing international regulations and packaging optimisation. Since most studies on food parcels are unidirectional and look at what migrants receive, I also look at what migrants send from the UK and the impact of these foodstuffs on local palates and markets.

Finally, fewer studies specifically address the complexities of parcel-sending beyond the care aspect or the particularities of food to include questions of status and 'Western quality' (Burrell 2008, Krzyzowski 2011). In chapters IV and V, I discuss the perceived quality of both homemade and Western foodstuffs and household items in relation to informants' migration experiences, following the biography of things within the receivers' households.

My work thus brings the senders, receivers and intermediaries' perspectives together, alongside an analysis of the parcels' journey, focusing on how connections are made through the diversity of items found in parcels. Therefore, in this thesis I ask why, unlike previous findings on Moldovan remittances, care packages and food parcels, parcel-sending practices are not necessarily motivated by the need to remit, nor solely determined by the expression of care, nostalgia or the desire to express status by owning 'quality' items. In unpacking the Moldovan parcel, I am building on Kathy Burrell's idea that mundane objects are just as important as emails, telephone calls and Skype for keeping the migrants feeling connected to the homeland and those left behind (Burrell 2008). I also build on Burrell's recent study of Polish and Zimbabwean migrants' parcel-sending via couriers (2017) by addressing the need for expanding current scholarship on post-migration connectedness and understanding proximity and distance in transnational families' sending practices. Moreover, I aim to further unpack the negotiation of distance in migrant lives, drawing on the fact that 'distance still matters' (Burrell 2017:814) and that 'the tangibility of "things", rather than electronically transferred money or communications, is highly significant in attempts to reconstruct a sense of proximity in the face of physical distance' (Burrell 2017:823). The material transfers thus involve physical distance and the idea of going through a 'journey' of meaningful objects (Steiner 1994), facilitated by participants in these transfers, other than the sender and the receiver.

First, I will address what 'meaningful objects' represent, before turning to the analysis of mobilities and infrastructures. Starting with the definition of commodity, I will discuss

how items sent via Moldovan parcels surpass their economic value through the social relations they create, rendering the Moldovan government's definition of parcels as 'goods' inadequate. Kopytoff (1986) defines commodities as items with use and exchange values that are both subject to fluctuations. At the same time, the biography of things that includes details on the provenance, the maker or the user of objects plays an important role in determining their value. Appadurai (1986) offers an even more subtle understanding of value, considering cultural and social aspects of the objects' production and use, leading to mapping human identities through the biographies of things.

The question of what happens when the object is taken out of a specific social context, namely the social life of artefacts, is particularly relevant in relation to parcel-sending. As seen in Chapter II, baptismal kits sent by Moldovans for christening ceremonies in the UK may have a high monetary value at purchase but are not intended for resale or exchange. Consisting of a gilded font[22], textiles, special clothing and other religious items used in the ceremony, such kits are difficult to pack, take up a lot of space and are expensive to send. Intimately related to the christened baby, the family and designated godparents, the kits begin their journey from the moment of purchase[23] before becoming part of family histories in the form of keepsakes or before being discarded after the ceremony. Thus, the value of this important cultural moment marking a life stage event translates into the significance of the parcel for both the sender and the receiver, surpassing the economic value of the items.

While the shared biography of people and things impacts the perceived value of possessions, interacting with objects also negotiates their owner's personhood. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) point out, there is a strong interconnection between objects and their users or makers. Moreover, the relationship

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[22] Although such full kits are less common, similar kits without the font or kits for weddings are more popular.
[23] Including the act of choosing/ordering every item, wrapping and transporting to collection points. These efforts are usually undertaken by new parents' extended family in Moldova.

between objects and the person who produces or makes use of them is often subject to change if the social context or network in which the object circulates changes (Hoskins 1998). The object may thus acquire the personhood of others who interact with the it within a changed context or network. As discussed in Chapter V, a winter coat that was bought by a left-behind Moldovan as a gift for his granddaughter in London, and that later needed mending, was sent back to Moldova for alterations instead of being discarded. After making the triple journey between Moldova and the UK, the coat became even more valuable to the wearer because of the invested effort and care. The financial costs of buying, sending, repairing and returning the item to the wearer faded in comparison to the significance of the strengthened familial bond brought on by this material exchange.

Such an intentional exchange points to the fact that things are only attributed non-monetary value through a 'lived materiality' (Attfield 2000), the interaction with objects in particular contexts. At the same time, the social relations involved make the exchanges of items perceived as valuable by senders and receivers very different to the market exchange value (Weiner 1992). Besides these important relational aspects, value is also generated by certain practices and qualities (Munn 1986) – in this case, parcel-sending practices reflect more implicit connections made within the domestic realm. Indeed, my informants speak of parcel items in terms of connections they make with their loved ones and explain that they send items that can be bought in both Moldovan and UK stores because the act of sending makes them 'more valuable.' Although senders and receivers do not consider their parcels 'commodities,' authorities fail to place parcel-sending within a more complex social context, depriving objects of social relations and reducing the parcels' 'estimated' value to the notion of economic remittances, or goods that supposedly have the same value to all senders and receivers.

However, as this ethnography shows, the same items can be valued very differently by different owners or, in case of foodstuffs, consumers. According to Kahneman et al. (1991), people consider objects they own and attribute with a symbolic or emotional

significance as higher value than the same objects they do not own, despite their seemingly equal exchange value. Moreover, this higher value appears to increase with ownership time. This makes it particularly challenging to assess the significance of parcels in monetary terms. In Chapter IV, producers and consumers evaluate the perceived value of homegrown produce at different levels of 'quality'. For example, while a Moldovan farmer perceives his produce as superior, his Italian guest seems to appreciate it much less, not having participated in the process of growing the fruits and vegetables. In another context, a villager's acquired taste for Philadelphia cheese, a product received from the UK, increases its perceived value over time, as it becomes a welcoming snack for the whole neighbourhood and a tool for social interaction. Similarly, the discussion of second-hand furniture in Chapter V brings forward the question of reattributed value of discarded items, rubbish that becomes a treasured possession. The new ownership of an unwanted oak dresser endows the living space with attributes of a desired 'ideal' home, becoming a loved and prized possession. Finally, in Chapter VI, the discussion of how a sent item can lose both its commodity and its emotional value through the process of sending reflects the complexity and fluidity of relations between people and the things they own.

The intrinsic connection between 'meaningful things' and their owners thus makes the parcel van 'business' difficult to assess and classify. According to Rakopoulos and Rio (2018), the production of value is intricately related to our social lives and cannot be reduced to purely monetary equivalents. Moreover, as the authors note, taking 'value' out of context and ignoring the associated social relations, particularly by state institutions, redefines the relationship between wealth and power. Ultimately, by considering parcels as goods, state institutions fail to take into account the journeys and the biographies of people and things. Leaving out these important aspects deprives objects of the ability to 'enchant' - or the ability to 'produce effects' in people (Bennett 2010). Without this ability and with no effect on humans within institutions, the understanding of this intricate connection becomes lost.

Having looked at the process of value attribution, I will now focus on how parcel-sending and the human brokers behind it become part of an equally complex nexus of links and relations. In addressing social processes in contemporary societies, Urry (2007) argues that different types of 'mobilities' inform physical movements of people and things that also represent forms of communication. At the same time, mobilities imply the existence of material and immobile elements of infrastructure like buildings and roads that, in the context of migration, are used to channel migrant mobility. In this sense, parcel van companies may be seen as mere transporters of goods because van journeys involve the use of roads and border crossings, as well as the arrangement of a network of collection points. However, this implies that parcel van companies play no particular part in developing transnational networks and connections. In this thesis I argue that, on the contrary, parcel van companies take active part in transnational life, drawing on Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist's notion of 'migration infrastructure' (2014) as a nexus of human and non-human actors facilitating mobility. Defined in terms of 'dimensions', migration infrastructure refers to intermediaries, legislation and regulations, technologies, organisations and migrant networks as interrelated domains that drive mobility through constant interaction and confrontation. The legal limbo experienced by Moldovan parcel van companies thus represents a reflection of such contradictions, while van company employees act as brokers in parcel exchange, placing van companies and their clients within the social field of Moldovan transnational networks.

Though dependent on immobile elements of infrastructure, or 'immobile moorings' (Adey 2006), the journeys both migrants and parcel vans undertake also involve technological elements, like mobile phones, and social relationships, or 'fluid moorings', showing that migration infrastructure is also flexible (Adey 2006). Moreover, parcel vans act as brokers moving people and things 'within specific infrastructural frames' (Lin et al. 2017:169). Indeed, as my ethnography of parcel van companies shows, most companies carry both passengers and parcels, pointing to an even more complex participation in migrant mobility.

Looking at parcel vans as active actors in parcel exchange, rather than a passive part of migration infrastructure, offers an insight on how parcel-sending succeeds in maintaining ties, since migration infrastructure maintains relative stability in relation to 'fragmented and short-lived' migration flows (Xiang and Lindquist 2014:132). To do so, I propose the term 'Moldo-*Vans'* [24] to differentiate from the passive role of van services in relation to Moldovan parcel-sending practices. Incorporating Xiang and Lindquist's view of migrant infrastructures as *actors* in this exchange (2014) and Burrell's observation (2017:824) of parcel-sending as a 'highly meaningful practice' that 'is infrastructurally fascinating,' I argue that Moldo-*Vans* are active participants in parcel exchange alongside their clients. Moreover, my ethnography of the parcel journey analyses van companies as primarily *constituted* rather than *constituting* migrant infrastructures, showing that their expansion does not facilitate increased migration. While van companies offer personalised pick-ups and drop-offs, the prices and journey durations are in direct competition with low-cost airlines, thus appealing to different segments of clientele. At the same time, the main cargo of such companies is always comprised of parcels. I argue that parcel van companies, migrants and those left behind all contribute to creating 'trust networks' (Tilly 2007) by tapping into the familiarity of Moldovan migration experience, seen by Levitt (1998) as an important aspect of social remittance transfers.

The infrastructure of parcel van networks thus becomes integrated into the transnational space in which connections are maintained. As shown in this thesis, the case study of a parcel van company indicates that migration infrastructure is, indeed, flexible and adaptive. During fieldwork, the number of 'usual' collection points and destinations of this particular van company in the UK changed in relation to the current van network (Figure I), indicating that migrants and van companies both respond to changing circumstances (Rubinov 2014).

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[24] Discussed in more detail in Chapter II.

Figure I Parcel van companies' destinations during and after fieldwork.

I thus argue that the process of developing parcel van networks is fluid and adaptive, answering to changes in Moldovan migrants' lives. Moreover, migrants also travel to send from more distant collection points, while parcel companies do not always consider serving a new route because of customer demand. In this entanglement of networks and journeys enabling communication and social relations, Moldo-*Vans* become subject to displacements and emplacements in space-time. The intermittence of absence and presence, changing volumes of parcels around holidays and the seasonality of sending all point to more complex processes related to the negotiation of distance in Moldovan migrant life. Through creating both physical and virtual elements of migrant infrastructures, the transnational landscape is further being reconfigured.

In defining the conceptual framework of this thesis, I discussed current debates in kinship, material culture and migration studies by looking at academic contributions to understanding relational personhood in time-space, co-presence, transnational families

and parcel-sending in the context of migrant infrastructures. As part of these infrastructures, parcel vans act as brokers for transnational families and their parcels that become embodiments of staying in touch and making sense of the distance. In approaching transnational families' material practices, the notions of human sociality and relations reproduce in new contexts, starting with the moment of the migrant's departure and separation. Connectedness through material culture thus incorporates communication technologies, physical distance and back-and-forth movements that reflect everyday practices of staying in touch.

Chapter outline

In the following chapters I set out to investigate how Moldovan transnational families create connectedness through parcels by exploring the types of items sent, the different ways in which these items are used and consumed, and the kinds of practices and patterns that emerge from parcel-sending. While the first chapter deals with methodological considerations, the remaining five ethnographic chapters will explore how transnational bonds are created through the materiality of gift, food, homemaking and practices materialising absence when parcel-sending becomes unavailable.

Chapter I starts with an immersion into the historical and geopolitical context of the two fieldwork sites, outlining the challenges faced by one of the youngest democracies in Europe and addressing the reasons behind the appeal of the UK as a newer destination. The presentation of fieldwork sites is followed by a discussion of informant profiles and the methods used to collect data in relation to fieldwork timeline. The chapter concludes with a reflection on my position as a native anthropologist in the field, with an emphasis on the importance of language as a tool in ethnographic work, and the evaluation of study limitations. Setting the methodological and contextual framework for the

ethnographic chapters, the first chapter provides a better understanding of the research problem and how this ethnography has been conducted.

In **Chapter II,** I present the first ethnographic accounts of the parcel van phenomenon in the context of Moldovan migration to the UK. Drawing on my fieldwork at a van company office, I discuss the emergence of parcel van services as a social phenomenon and provide an insight into how a parcel van company manages its operations. By discussing the active role of drivers and office employees in maintaining the material link between Moldovan migrants in the UK and those left behind, I point to parcel-sending as a negotiation of transnational life. I identify the types of items sent and discuss seasonal aspects of parcel-sending that indicate the emergence of trends and patterns linked to important dates in personal and national calendars. I continue by following a parcel van on its journey across borders to uncover the challenges of transporting biographies of people and things. The trajectory of this journey, analysed in comparison with the creation of parcel van routes, provides an insight on how migrant networks and infrastructures are constituted. The chapter ends with a discussion of the materiality of packaging, looking at the caretaker role van company employees take on when processing clients' parcels. This first ethnographic chapter reflects on the research problem from the perspective of the human actors involved in parcel transportation, while offering an overview of the general aspects of parcel-sending and pointing to the nexus of social relations reflected by migrant networks.

Chapter III takes this conversation further by exploring the moment of the migrant's departure, that becomes the starting point in transnational material culture exchange. I discuss how individual goals contribute to migration decisions and how departure creates a disruption in the web of social relations. Using ethnographic examples of both first-time and established senders, I show that the appearance of parcel-sending practices determines the emergence of gift-giving via parcels, aimed to minimise this disruption. The chapter concludes with an analysis of gift-sending as an attempt to re-establish these connections and expand personal networks across borders.

The discussion of re-materialising connectivity continues in **Chapter IV**, which addresses the sensory and cultural experience of food as a strong link in negotiating transnational life. The chapter discusses why informants credit food, the most commonly found item in Moldovan parcels, with the highest ability to recreate a sense of home across borders. The discussion begins with tracing foodstuffs from purchase or production to consumption, emphasising how food journeys leave material traces in transnational space. I then discuss the role of parcel-sending in transforming palates in Moldova and the UK, following up with ethnographic accounts of the reasons why certain foods are chosen to be sent and consumed. Finally, I revisit the idea of co-presence in the form of commensality in transnational space, focusing on the otherness of food and the mediating role of sweets in creating gustatory closeness. While foodstuffs are more dependent on journey lengths and seasonality presented in Chapter II, sweets become the universal foodstuff that can take on the form of gifts discussed in Chapter III.

Household items presented in the next chapter are subject to even more complex transformations. **Chapter V** looks at the practices of transnational homemaking through placing and replacing non-consumable objects within the home. The chapter begins with the discussion of the link between migrant biographies and object biographies, starting with the moment of the migrant's departure. I then address constant elements and changes in object placement that indicate the reconfiguration of the bond between the migrant and those left behind. I continue by comparing the sending and the use of second-hand items in the home to the act of reassigning value to discarded items through repossession of things. Finally, I discuss why some objects are displayed, while others are hidden, before looking at Moldo-*Vans* as removal vans for migrants' relocation abroad and Moldovans' practices of furnishing empty homes.

The two last ethnographic chapters - Chapter V and Chapter VI - are strongly interconnected, as they both explore the dichotomy of the material and the immaterial in forging transnational connectedness. While Chapter V addresses hidden objects by looking at object biographies, associated relations and hidden materialities within the

home, Chapter VI focuses on the materiality of the immaterial, reflecting on ethnographic examples of absent objects.

While Chapters II, III and V discuss how connections are made through tangible things, **Chapter VI** uncovers how connections are made through return visits, when sending practices fail to develop. The chapter opens with the reiteration of the role of distance and the discussion of how proximity is achieved with the help of material culture. I then explain how the loss of the opportunity to send continues to create social relations. I discuss how, in the context of disintegrated material practices, switching the focus from indices of *need* to indices of *desire* for objects helps materialise absence. Following ethnographic accounts of dealing with absence of foodstuffs, household items, furniture, and other items discussed in the previous chapters, I show how other forms of materiality, such as tools used in sharing skills in common projects, inform relational continuity. The chapter concludes with the analysis of an object biography going through the process of dematerialisation and being rendered 'relationally invisible'. In the material realm of transnational life, however, nothing is ever doomed to complete nothingness.

Finally, the conclusion discusses this thesis' contribution to scholarship on transnational personhood, connectedness and materiality of migration, and, more specifically, social remittances, in addressing the question of how transnational families keep in touch. The findings pertaining to material culture as integral part of transnational life, and to the emergence of sending patterns and habits, point to the fact that 'sending as a practice, then, opens up new areas of exploring our ever-shifting relationships with time, space and distance' (Burrell 2017:824). These areas, as this thesis suggests, represent avenues of enquiry for further research in the fields of kinship, material culture and migration studies.

Chapter I

Being in the field: Research design and methodological considerations as a native anthropologist

This chapter sets out to provide the context for doing the ethnography of Moldovan transnational families in Moldova and the UK. My intention is twofold: to introduce methodological considerations in relation to the specificities of fieldwork sites and to reflect on my position in the field as a native anthropologist. With this intention in mind, I must be clear from the beginning that I am not doing an ethnography of post-socialism[25], nor do I intend to explore gender roles in relation to everyday practices[26]. Instead, in this opening chapter my aim is to place the parcel van phenomenon within the historical and linguistic context in which I conducted this research.

In the first half of this chapter, the discussion will focus on the presentation of fieldwork sites, from general historical considerations to the history of Moldovan emigration, before focusing on the selection of informants and research timeline. I am approaching this analysis from the point of view of managing multi-sited fieldwork which highlights the negotiation of the challenges I faced doing research in two different countries. I will begin with a discussion of the choice of locations and the history of the Moldovan state[27], followed by an explanation of the rationale behind the selection of starting dates.

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[25] As this term has been contested (Verdery 2002, Makovicky 2014a) to surpass the idea of 'transition' and 'uncertainty', I approach the discussion of Moldova's socialist past as experience that calls for 'more meaningful ways of framing' expressed through the 'need to explore multiple connections' (Müller 2019:545). I return to aspects of socialist past in the discussion of practices around consuming food in Chapter IV and in a brief discussion of socialist architecture in Chapter V.

[26] In this thesis, my focus is on relations created through daily practices, rather than divisions of labour in the domestic sphere or other aspects related to traditional gender roles which my informants never addressed in their accounts of transnational life. I am, however, considering aspects of 'mothering' through cooking practices in Chapter III, parenting at a distance in Chapter V and shared practices around construction tools creating father-son bonds in Chapter VI.

[27] After independence, the country gained the official name of the 'Republic of Moldova' to avoid the confusion between the independent state of Moldova and the Romanian region of 'Moldova'. However, in this thesis I will continue to refer to my fieldwork site as 'Moldova' and to my informants as 'Moldovans', since my focus is not on the Romanian counterpart.

Discussing these temporal aspects will facilitate understanding the fieldwork planning phase, before presenting the methodological framework and the research timeline.

The second half of the chapter focuses on the discussion of my position as a native anthropologist in relation to the temporal aspect of my presence in the field. Referring to my informants' perception of me as one of their own[28], I will discuss how creating co-presence with informants and temporary returns to the field allowed me to overcome the challenges of working in the field.

Finally, this chapter will address the complexities of dealing with the challenges associated with participant recruitment, interviewing and establishing rapport with difficult informants, before providing a short outline of identified study limitations. I will then emphasise the special attention paid to the role of language in doing anthropology 'at home'. Considering the cultural and historical divides presented in the first half of this chapter, understanding the intricacies of communicating with informants in three languages becomes essential to conducting qualitative research.

1.1 Contextualising fieldwork sites

This research stems from an initial interest in parcel-sending that comes from my own family's migration experiences. Having shared the practice with other Moldovans, I decided to investigate the service used by 69% of Moldovan migrants to send at least several parcels home, with 52.1% of Moldovans in the UK sending parcels home at least once a month (Cheianu-Andrei 2013)[29]. The question of migration and absence of a

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[28] As shown further in this chapter, informants saw me as a Moldovan and a fellow migrant.
[29] The most extensive research mapping Moldovan diaspora in Italy, Portugal, France and the UK, providing data on Moldovan diasporic presence, and parcel-sending in particular. In contextualising fieldwork sites, I rely heavily on this study and much less on a later mapping of Moldovan diaspora in the UK and other five countries (Mosneaga 2017) as the main sources of relevant data on Moldovan migrants in the UK. Diaspora mapping research conducted in 2017 uses a smaller sample size and does not address parcel-sending.

family member represents a big part of Moldovan life, as most of my extended family and contacts in Moldova experienced a loved one's departure abroad or know someone whose family member emigrated. As explained in this section, the choice of fieldwork sites is informed by my personal experience of migration and Moldova's long history of emigration.

On the one hand, choosing to do research in Moldova and the UK is determined by my own experience of being half-Romanian and half-Russian from Moldova, settled in the UK. I have access to diverse communities in the homeland and the Moldovan diaspora in the UK, and a good knowledge of local and regional history and traditions.

On the other hand, the UK is becoming a new preferred destination for Moldovan migrants and their parcel-sending, despite being one of the most geographically distant European country of destination. Materialising this experience and understanding how Moldovans maintain their relationship with the homeland by negotiating this distance are additional contributing factors in choosing Moldova and the UK as fieldwork sites.

1.1.1 Historical perspectives on Moldova as fieldwork site

I will begin by emphasising the significance of the ethnic divide that exists in Moldova, which I will show to have an important influence on Moldovan migrants choosing the country of destination. I will then discuss the UK as a new preferred destination for Moldovan migrants, addressing the issues of referring to Moldovan migrants in the UK as 'diaspora'.

Officially known as the 'Republic of Moldova,' this landlocked country (Figure 1.1) is situated between Romania, an EU member, and the Ukraine, a CIS[30] member until 2018. Transnistria (or the Trans-Dniester region), a strip of land sandwiched between

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[30] Commonwealth of Independent States, formed after the fall of USSR in 1991.

the Dniester and the Ukrainian border, is currently an unrecognised territory. De facto, Transnistria is a state with its own government and currency that has not been recognised by Moldova or any UN member state, being the subject of a military conflict in 1992 that created tense relations with the Moldovan state.

Figure 1.1 Regional map of Moldova with its capital, Chisinau. (*Source: BBC Moldova Country profile)*

An ex-communist state, Moldova is currently considered to have a good degree of 'interethnic tolerance and mutual acceptance at the grass-roots level' (Groza et al. 2018:6), despite post-Soviet tensions caused by Russian-speaking ethnic minorities' loss of their elite status. Still, as authors note, such ethnic minorities – mainly Russians and Ukrainians – remain divided, particularly in terms of language[31] and education[32]. Within this divide, mixed families like my own navigate tensions and cultural diversity in everyday life, with Moldovans of all backgrounds often choosing to seek better opportunities abroad.

Political tensions and economic difficulties have long been part of the country's history. The Moldovan territory went through a succession of relatively turbulent times, from the

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[31] The official language is Romanian, however, not all Moldovan citizens speak it. Russian is used as a second common language.
[32] The Romanian-speaking majority mostly choose Romanian-language schools, while most minorities prefer Russian-speaking or minority-language schools.

formation of the ancient Dacian kingdom to the Roman conquest and subsequent periods of foreign rule. In the 1940s, as part of the Soviet Union, Moldova experienced deportations and persecutions of ethnic Germans and Jews, successful farmers, landowners and intellectuals, as well as people seen as 'enemies' of the regime. Subsequently, population numbers decreased dramatically and prompted an influx of Russian-speaking population from other Soviet republics, mainly as the result of the colonisation policy imposed by the government. Although sciences and culture enjoyed a period of development, many highly educated Moldovans chose to move to cities like Moscow or Leningrad[33], which offered better opportunities, or emigrated to other European countries and USA to escape the regime (IASCI/CIVIS 2010)[34].

This marked the beginning of the ethnic divide determining Moldovan migrants to gravitate either towards a Russian-speaking country or EU countries and the USA in their decision to emigrate. Even after Moldova gained independence in 1991, the political tensions did not end. On the one hand, Russia has had a big influence on politics and trade ever since, having imposed several bans on Moldovan produce and having controlled the natural gas supply. On the other hand, Romania has strengthened ties to ethnic Romanians in Moldova by introducing the policy of granting Romanian citizenship[35] to descendants of those who lived on Moldovan territory under Romanian rule before 1940, when Moldova became a Soviet republic.

Moreover, although it has been argued that different ethnicities established a tradition of good interethnic relations that contributed to enriching the country's cultural heritage (Groza et al. 2018) and despite the lack of open interethnic conflicts, the country's 2.9 million population represented by 24.9% ethnic minorities, mainly Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians and Gagauz (National Bureau for Statistics 2014), continues to be divided

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[33] Main cities in Russia – the Soviet name of 'Leningrad' has been changed to 'Saint-Petersburg' after the fall of USSR.

[34] IASCI (International Agency for Source Country Information) is an international development organisation, while CIVIS is a Moldovan non-governmental social research centre.

[35] For a more detailed discussion of the legitimacy of citizenship restitution in the case of Moldova and the perception of the Romanian government's policy in the UK, see Knott (2017).

by historic and linguistic factors, as well as political preferences. These divisions also reflect in migration destinations chosen in the past three decades, namely the CIS (mainly Russia and Ukraine), EU countries (Germany, Italy) and non-EU countries (USA, Israel). After independence specifically, the main countries of destination have been Italy, Portugal, Greece, Russia and France (Cheianu-Andrei 2013).

The choice of countries of destination can be closely linked to the specific periods in Moldovan history that generated emigration trends, generally grouped into three waves: 1991- mid 1990s, mid 1990s – mid 2000s, and from 2006 onwards (Mincu and Cantarji 2013). The first wave in early 1990s was brought on by insecurity in the form of economic and political instability, triggering outwards migration with the intention of permanent settlement (Mincu and Cantarji 2013). If during Soviet rule it was more difficult to move elsewhere in the USSR for work and almost impossible to travel abroad, the newly gained independence offered more freedom to seek better employment opportunities (Figure 1.2).
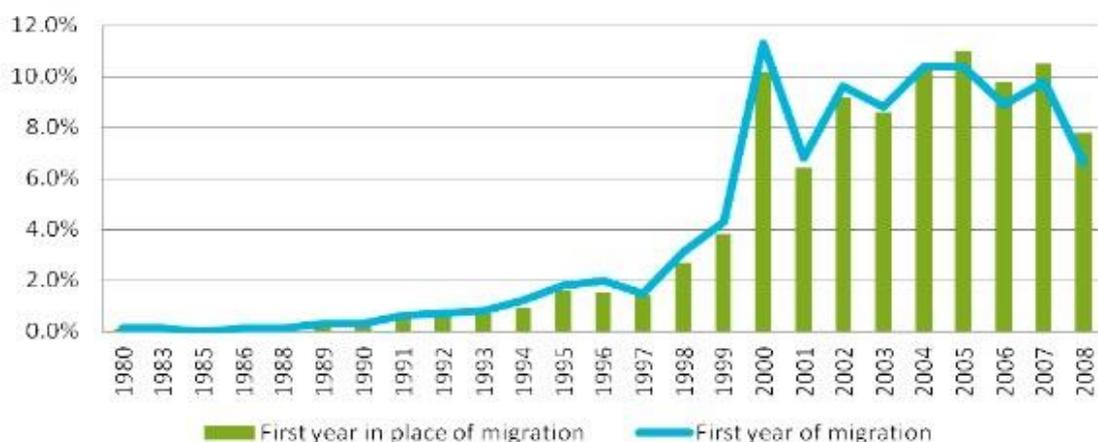
Figure 1.2 Emigration rates in Moldova in the last decade before independence and first two decades after independence. (*Source: IASCI/CIVIS 2010)*

The second wave was largely determined by the economic crisis of 1998, when many Moldovans faced the challenge of finding a source of income and turned to temporary labour migration (Vanore and Siegel 2015). After this dramatic increase in migration

after 1998, the emigration rate has been significantly higher and remained high in the late 2000s.

The third wave started in mid-2000s and saw an increase in emigrants. Considering that economic push factors continued to be primarily responsible for Moldovan emigration (European Training Foundation 2015), and that over 50% of rural households were still living in poverty in the first decade after independence (UNICEF 2008), for those who emigrated remittances became the best option to improve their family's financial situation. The third wave was also characterised by the steadiness of migration flows, the expansion in the number of countries of destination (Mincu and Cantarji 2013) and improved migration management undertaken by the state, with the search for better opportunities abroad as the main motivation to emigrate (IOM 2013).

Considering this history of seeking better opportunities abroad, I must emphasise that 'migration has become a life strategy for Moldovans' (IASCI/CIVIS 2010:57), with my informants generally speaking of parcel van companies in terms of 'lifeline' or 'good service' for staying in touch. While Moldovan migrants and those left behind who send parcels to Israel and USA do so via Moldovan post[36], most CIS and EU destinations are served by private parcel vans. The redirection of migration patterns towards the EU (IASCI/CIVIS 2010) has also shown the increased importance of the European migration system (ETF 2015) and has contributed to the expansion of parcel van routes. As I discuss next, the UK has become one of such important European destinations, more popular with younger Moldovan migrants.

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[36] Which severely limits the selection of items because of long delivery times, border controls and customs regulations and weight restrictions. While an ethnography of parcel-sending via traditional postal services is outside the scope of this thesis, I spent a day at the main post office in Chisinau to gain a better understanding of parcel-sending where parcel van services are not available. A brief discussion of the choices of items to send, packaging, parcel processing and challenges outlined by traditional post senders is presented in Chapter II.

1.1.2 The UK as a new country of destination for Moldovan migrants

The UK has become one of the more recent destinations for Moldovan migrants attracted by job opportunities, the existence of migrant networks and language skills (IOM 2013). More specifically, 81% of Moldovan migrants in the UK credit the job market as the main reason for the decision to migrate, with 43% considering a previous history of migration to the UK among family members, and 28% citing the knowledge of English as the reasons for migrating (Cheianu-Andrei 2013). The emergence of low-cost airlines with direct connections between Chisinau and London showed an increased interest in travel between the two countries. Acknowledging the important role of connectivity via air travel, Akgüç, Beblavý and Simonelli (2018) note that for Moldova, among other non-EU countries, signing the Common Aviation Area agreement regularising air travel in European space has been a step in ensuring this connectivity.

While in the first fifteen years after independence, the number of Moldovan migrants to the UK was insignificant, after Romania joined the EU the interest spiked. This spike later started an upward trend (Figure 1.3) in the years before January 2014, when work restrictions for holders of Romanian passports were lifted. One of the important differences to previous migration trends to the UK is that, since 2007, and particularly after 2014, UK-bound migrants in possession of dual Moldovan-Romanian citizenship[37] have used the opportunity to migrate legally.

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[37] Romanian government policy, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

Distribution of migrants by the year of their first entry in the United Kingdom, 1996-2011 (%)
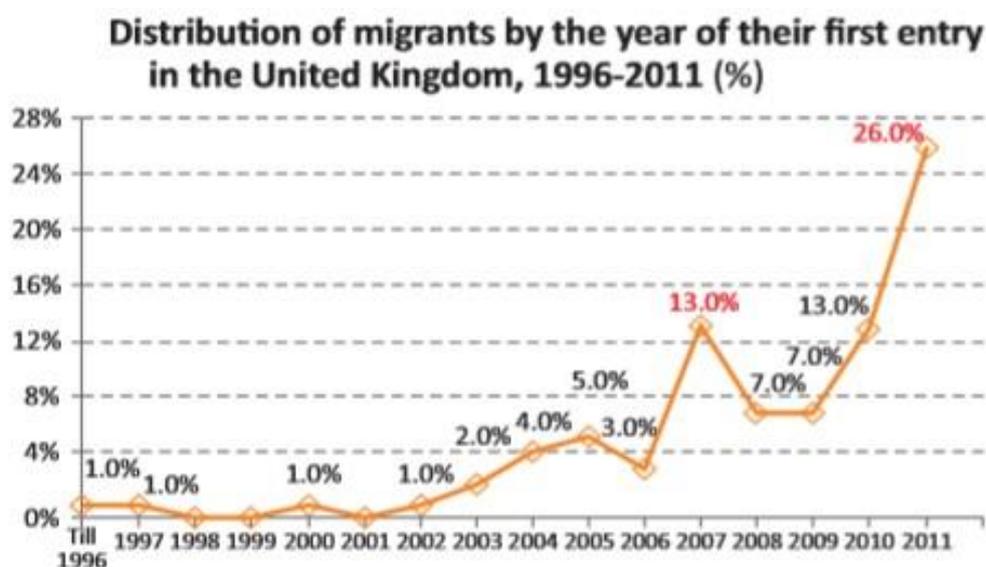
Figure 1.3 Percentage of all Moldovan migrants choosing the UK as the country of destination, by year. (*Source: Cheianu-Andrei 2013*)

Perceived as a high-income country, the UK has become more popular with younger Moldovan migrants (IASCI/CIVIS 2010). As a result, the number of Moldovans in the UK has continued to grow, reaching 20000-30000 according to different estimations[38]. Despite this growing number, there are indications that it is too early to refer to Moldovans in the UK as 'diaspora', partially because Moldovans do not identify themselves as such (Mosneaga 2017). In addressing this discrepancy, I am approaching the question of diaspora formation from two perspectives: the Moldovan state, considering Moldovans abroad as 'diaspora', and Moldovans residing in the UK, identifying themselves as 'migrants', rather than part of the 'diaspora'.

On the one hand, the Moldovan government has initiated a series of diaspora engagement efforts showing a focus on acknowledging the growing number of Moldovans abroad. Initiatives like engaging diaspora members in their countries of residence in activities, events and collaboration on projects meant to improve the lives

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[38] Cheianu-Andrei (2013) reports 20000 based on estimations by diaspora organisations, while the latest diaspora mapping study reports 30000 (Mosneaga 2017). Reported difficulties in data collection regarding the number of dual EU-Moldovan citizens in the UK indicate that these numbers are underestimated.

of Moldovan migrants and their families in Moldova have created a starting point for the development of a dialogue. Other efforts have included mapping diaspora and working towards better-informed migration policy. The creation of the Bureau for Diaspora Relations, a dedicated body promoting the National Strategy Diaspora-2025 (approved in 2016), has shown the Moldovan government's interest in acknowledging the human potential of diaspora. From my discussions with the Bureau for Diaspora Relations representatives and non-governmental partners (International Organisation for Migration, Swiss Cooperation Office), it appears that important steps are being taken towards recognising that diaspora plays an important role in homeland development.

On the other hand, Moldovans do not necessarily see themselves as part of the Moldovan diaspora, with 41% unaware of any diaspora organisations (Cheianu-Andrei 2013) and not taking part in any diaspora-related activities. Moreover, Moldovan migrants turn to migrant networks in the UK, rather than diaspora organisations, followed by law enforcement bodies and local non-Moldovan contacts, with less than half planning to return to Moldova (Migration Policy Centre 2013). While some events organised by diaspora organisations are promoted on social media, the main purpose of online groups like *Moldovans in the UK* or the *AMMB (The Association of Moldovans in the UK),* which also organise offline events, is to provide information and a communication platform for Moldovans, mainly in London.

Therefore, in this thesis I am referring to my informants as 'Moldovan migrants' to focus on their practices of staying in touch, rather than engage in an exploration of Moldovan diasporic presence and participation in the UK. As parcel van services continue to be subject to contentious debate between Moldovans and the Moldovan government, the continuous development of parcel van routes offers an excellent opportunity to observe the processes that take place in Moldovan migrants' lives. The distrust for the state is also reflected by the issues surrounding the regularisation of parcel van companies. Parcel exchanges are particularly interesting, as these exchanges occur on the backdrop of the difficult developing relationship with the Moldovan state, interested in

migrants' permanent return despite indications that return is not a priority for Moldovans abroad (Cheianu-Andrei 2013).

As discussed in this overview of fieldwork sites, there are multiple historical, political and social factors to be considered in understanding the relationship between Moldovans and the homeland, as well as the decision to choose the UK as the country of destination. In the next section, I will present the methodological framework and aspects of fieldwork planning in Moldova and the UK that show the importance of considering the calendar of holidays and significant events in transnational families' timelines.

1.2 Methodological considerations

The objective for data collection was to obtain in-depth accounts of parcel-sending practices at different moments in participants' lives, as well as to observe overall trends and investigate the types of objects sent and received. As previous studies have shown, considering a multifaceted approach to data collection is essential to ethnographic research[39]. In this study, I employed an ethnographic approach to data collection, seeking to incorporate three perspectives on parcel-sending - from parcel van companies, Moldovan migrants in the UK and their families in Moldova.

First, I sought to get an insight on how van companies operate to uncover the types of items sent and the kinds of trends arising from general parcel-sending practices. Tracking parcel journeys provided an important outlook on physical distance, the negotiation of obstacles and the labour involved in intermediating transnational connectedness.

Second, I sought to observe how packing and unpacking takes place, both in the UK and Moldova. These data provided an insight on the materiality of packaging, the

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[39] Rebecca Empson on Mongolian Buriads (2011), Inge Daniels on Japanese homes (2010).

relations between people and things, as well as the rationale behind the placement of items within receivers' homes.

Third, I sought to uncover any sending patterns developing over time and the changes in how items sent via parcels are consumed, handled or replaced, indicating processes taking place in domestic space. Considering these data collection objectives, the following section discusses the methods used and informants' profiles in more depth, before addressing the challenges of managing multi-sited fieldwork.

1.2.1 Research methods

Reflecting the importance of the multi-faceted approach to providing balanced data, the methods employed in this research represent a combination of semi-structured interviews, case studies, participant observation, ethnographic photography and secondary data analysis. I conducted 51 semi-structured interviews with Moldovan migrants in the UK and members of their families left behind in Moldova. The informants, 28 women and 23 men, were all adults between the ages of 22 and 78 who had used the parcel van services at least once since the migrant's departure. I interviewed migrants in the UK and their parents, grandparents and spouses[40] in Moldova. While most parents were between the ages of 45 and 65 with an average age of fifty-five to sixty, migrants were aged between 22 and 45, with an average age of thirty to thirty-five. Of these, there were 29 rural and 10 urban residents, since most Moldovan migrants to the UK come from two villages and two cities in Moldova (Cheianu-Andrei 2013). I chose semi-structured interviews, common in ethnographic research (Mason 2002), because of data depth and comparability and the possibility to focus the discussion on my main research questions, while allowing participants to discuss any other aspects relevant to them. With all interviewees, I sought written consent to be interviewed, as well as an

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[40] Three grandparents and two spouses of migrants, two parcel van company employees.

agreement for the interview to be recorded. As a result, two informants consented verbally to a recorded interview, while the remaining informants gave a written consent.

Besides semi-structured interviews, 12 of 51 informants (six women and six men) agreed to participate in case studies that involved multiple interviews, joining in daily activities, visits to the home and workplace, as well as receiving updates on their parcel-sending patterns and migration experiences. The twelve case study subjects represent four transnational families and two individual informants, including three rural and nine urban residents. The case studies added a temporal dimension to interview data, allowing for multiple interactions in ethnographically significant contexts over many months, data that would otherwise be unavailable in a shorter period of time.

In addition to the interviews and case studies, I engaged in participant observation during five months of following the operations of a van company in Chisinau, which included assisting office employees with parcel registration and processing, packing and unpacking parcels, dealing with customers, loading and unloading vans and taking a three-day parcel van trip on the regular route from Chisinau to London. Participant observation proved particularly effective in my incursion in the inner dealings of the van company, whose employees were difficult to approach because of initial apprehension regarding the nature of this study. I explained and reiterated the purpose of the research multiple times and offered additional information on how the data would be used and processed, reassuring that participants' anonymity would be protected. Once rapport was established, I was able to 'see through the eyes' of the courier, a method which is, according to Bloch (2017:39), often the 'only full way' to 'get an insider's point of view' and gain an insight on what an outsider would have no access to. Thus, used in conjunction with interviews (Mason 2006), participant observation offered invaluable information and provided a reference point for data comparison.

Besides interviews and case studies, I approached most major non-governmental organisations working in the field of migration in Moldova[41] for comments on parcel van companies and completed a three-month internship at the main governmental agency – the Bureau for Diaspora Relations. This collaboration allowed me to have access to most recent reports and gain important insight on current issues regarding Moldovan migrants and the relationship between the state and the Moldovan migrants in the UK. Consulting relevant reports and regional research on these current issues helped contextualise parcel-sending as an important practice for Moldovan transnational families.

Finally, I sought to obtain photographic images to aid visualising and materialising interview data. In all the interviews and interactions in the field, where participants consented to the use of photography, I either took photographs of parcels or objects and their placement in participants' homes or received photographs taken by participants. As the materiality of photographs persists in 'time and space,' images 'become enmeshed in, and active in, social relations' (Edwards 2002:67-68). Thus, photographic images and the web of connections associated with the pictured subjects and objects became an integral part of analysis in the ethnographic chapters.

I will now consider the temporal aspects of doing multi-sited fieldwork, before discussing the encountered challenges and the strategies employed to overcome the difficulties. I will focus on the ethnographic significance of the fieldwork timeline and case study informants' timelines that link personal biographies and sending practices.

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[41] International Organisation for Migration, Swiss Cooperation Office, International Agency for Source Country Information (including local partnerships Nexus and CIVIS), United Nations Development Programme in Moldova, Sociopolis research centre.

1.2.2 Managing the calendar of fieldwork sites and fieldwork timeline

Multi-sited fieldwork involved strategic timing related to participant recruitment and parcel van company schedule. Having to approach Moldovan migrants in the UK and their families in Moldova, I planned to observe each category in three situations: sending parcels, receiving parcels and temporary reunification during visits. Where possible, I aimed to explore both the wrapping and the unwrapping of the parcel, sometimes using Skype video calls.

The main objective was to negotiate the eighteen-month fieldwork between the two fieldwork sites and adjust to any seasonal aspects of my informants' activity. Considering that holidays are a major part of Moldovan culture and are closely related to the Orthodox calendar, I planned my fieldwork around two dates when I anticipated increased parcel-sending: Christmas and Easter. Therefore, I started in Chisinau, the city with most parcel van collection points, in late September 2016, to allow for participant recruitment before Christmas, when many Moldovan migrants return to visit. With September being the beginning of the academic year, it was also the best time to approach academic institutions for partnerships and potential participant recruitment. The partnership with the State Pedagogic University Creangă was instrumental in gaining ethical clearance for the Moldovan fieldwork site and the first point of entry for informant recruitment. Contacting several van companies and gaining access to one van company in Chisinau was another essential step in recruiting key informants in the parcel van business. Building trust with the employees of the van company allowed me to shadow their activities and participate in the parcel transportation trip.

During the first five months I identified and interviewed several key informants and built up the informant network. I began working with the first three case study families, before recruiting the remaining case study participants shortly afterwards. After the 2016 winter holidays, I already built a good relationship with several informants whose lives I

followed in more detail and gained the opportunity to observe the family dynamics related to the period of absence. At the same time, I continued looking for more informants in Moldova. Besides contacting students, I approached schools, migration organisations and charities, while actively seeking to recruit participants via advertisements in local media, at parcel collection points and online. I asked interviewees to relay the information on the study to other potential participants, based on the connections established during the interviews. Besides looking for participants in Moldova, I followed Moldovan communities in the UK via discussion boards and social media and used social media platforms for participant recruitment in the UK.

Having conducted interviews with informants residing in Moldova, I then planned to return to London six months later to meet with informants in several locations in London and across the UK. In the last six months, I travelled in the UK, and between the UK and Moldova, reaching informants residing in remote locations (Figure 1.4) and consolidating established connections, while continuously working with case study participants in both countries and via Skype.
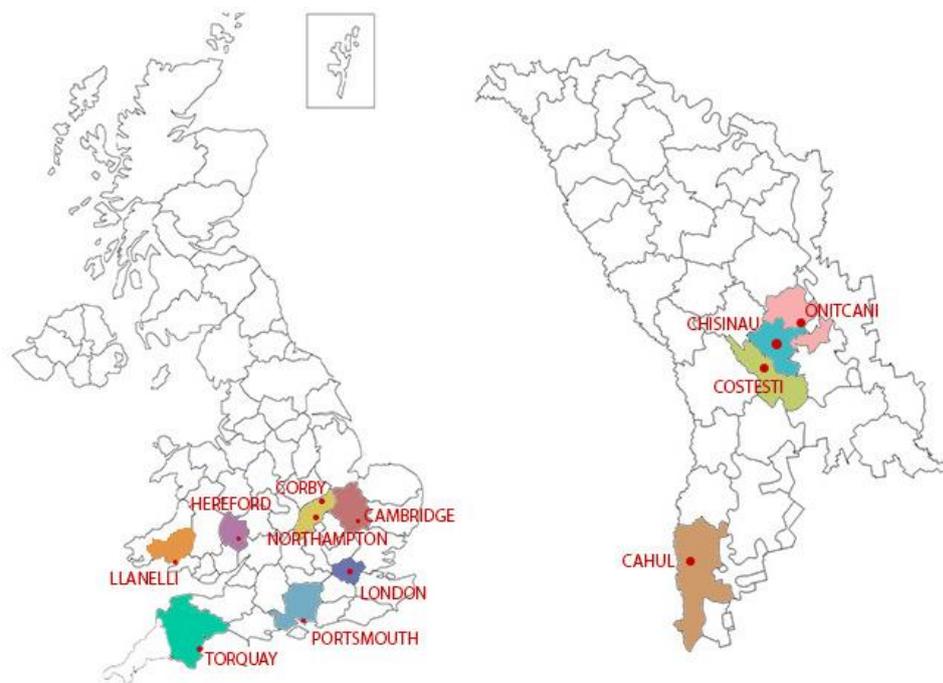
Figure 1.4 Distribution of informants in the UK and Moldova.

Finally, I followed up at Easter 2018 with case study participants to get an update on their sending practices and significant events on their families' timelines. Encompassing a year and a half of data allowed me to look at seasonal sending practices, as well as changes in participant personal histories. While in the field, I created and updated individual timelines for each Moldovan migrant in the UK who agreed to participate in case studies, showing important temporal reference points, including parcel-sending patterns. I will return to these timelines in more detail in chapters III-VI, presented in relation to each informant's migration experience. Managing timelines, leaving and returning to the field became an important aspect of presence in the field, as discussed below.

1.2.3 On returns and farewells and other challenges of multi-sited fieldwork

Reflecting on the experience of crossing borders to reach informants on both sides of transnational space, I identified the moment of establishing first contact, returning to follow-up and leaving the field as significant events defining my own timeline in the field. This experience encompassed both the advantages of multi-sited research and the drawbacks brought on by the complexities of managing aspects specific to each site.

On the one hand, working in multiple fieldwork sites presented an opportunity to learn in more depth about informants' transnational life, experience periods of presence and absence from informants' perspective and maintain connections with both migrants and those left behind. As Whyte (2013:120) notes, 'by returning again and again, [researchers] are not simply being brought up to date,' participating in a 'temporal process that is also transformative: we are ourselves updated, […] we learn more - and we become capable of understanding more.' Thus, returning to the field allowed me to observe changes in the homes and personal histories of my informants.

On the other hand, negotiating arrival and departure, presence and multiple returns to the field proved challenging. The difficulties encountered concerned three main areas: participant recruitment, navigating the spread of informants' areas of residence and emotional attachment. Some of intended entry points – universities, schools, non-governmental organisations working with families of migrants and parcel collection offices – did not supply any contacts. Advertising on social media and local newspapers did not yield any results either. I had to rethink my strategy and start small, working with two initial informants, then using their connections and word of mouth to reach more informants. This strategy worked well for recruiting both migrants and members of their families, as it facilitated establishing a good level of trust.

With some informants residing in remote areas of the UK and Moldova, the lack of financial incentives, busy schedules and the time difference between Moldova and the UK have added to logistical issues. Such issues included rescheduling interviews, extended travelling and working unsocial hours. These challenges were tackled through adapting my own schedule to informants' needs and showing willingness to travel and respect commitments.

Finally, leaving case study families was particularly difficult because of shared activities and the generosity shown when I was visiting their homes. In order to deal with the emotional implications of being in the field and coming across issues related to familial separation, I took precautions not to become involved in my informants' family life, while understanding my position in the field as a native anthropologist allowed me to manage informants' expectations regarding my role as an observer.

1.2.4 Study limitations

Careful management of difficulties encountered during fieldwork did not have a negative impact on data collection, since I addressed each challenge while in the field by adapting to circumstances and adjusting participant recruitment strategies. Despite successful fieldwork that yielded a wealth of ethnographic data, I am aware of some limitations to this study. While some emerging themes were beyond the scope of this study, financial and time constraints specifically affected two themes that would benefit from further investigation. The first theme refers to the materiality of personal luggage in relation to return visits[42], which could offer further insight on the practices of bringing gifts in relation to family histories. The second theme refers to the changes in object biographies over longer periods of time after unpacking the parcel, which could uncover further transgenerational practices within the domestic space.

These themes point to the benefits of a longitudinal study of transnational family histories in relation to object biographies, intermediated by parcel vans. Such a longitudinal study would contribute to the understanding of long-term processes that take place in transnational life beyond the second generation of migrants.

In the last part of this chapter dealing with the intricacies of doing anthropology at home, I will continue the discussion of the strategies employed to overcome the limitations and difficulties encountered during fieldwork. I will focus on the importance of understanding the cultural context and creating co-presence with informants before making concluding remarks on linguistic competence shaping ethnographic research.

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[42] An area of research that already gained academic interest, but which does not become the focus of explorations in Chapter VI.

1.3 So close, yet so far: Being in the field as a native anthropologist

Arriving in Moldova as a researcher was, at first, uncomfortable. Despite visiting at least once a year since my own relocation to the UK, this trip was different because of my concerns regarding my pre-existent knowledge and experience of the fieldwork site. However, I found that my own experience of parcel-sending, a good knowledge of local customs, languages and slang facilitated communication with informants. As Ingold notes (2017), doing anthropology at home and keeping a critical mind while interpreting ethnographic data are not mutually exclusive if aspects familiar to researchers can be used to their advantage (Strathern 2014). In the following two sections I will discuss how the familiarity of the context and creating co-presence with informants, as well as understanding linguistic subtleties, contributed to the informants' perception of me as an 'insider'.

1.3.1 Being 'in the moment'

I started working in the field straight after my arrival, without spending too much time to adjust (Jackson 1987). This advantage allowed me to participate in more activities and discussions that helped place myself in the field as an 'insider' (Kuwayama 2003), while the transition from an 'outsider' to an 'insider' depended on two aspects: managing informants' expectations of me as a Moldovan émigré, and being 'in the moment' by creating co-presence with informants.

The first important aspect was the informants' perception of me as a *fellow migrant*. With all informants, I made sure to share my own experience of migration and identify with any common difficulties I had to overcome in the UK. This approach led to key informants saying '*e de-a noastră*' – she's one of ours – when introducing me to others.

Thus, being 'one of ours' acknowledged the fact that I shared a similar background and migration story to them or their relatives. At the same time, I was mindful of the values, gender and the power relations affecting reflexivity, as suggested by Hammersley and Traianou (2012), leading me to adopt the role of an 'experienced Moldovan migrant', ready to offer information on life in the UK. Answering informants' questions and being open about some aspects of my personal life placed me on the same level with informants, although my gender and age contributed to certain differences in communicating with parcel van company employees, rural and urban residents. In all interactions, however, commensality represented the most important aspect of making connections with informants.

With all-male van company employees, there was an initial period of adjustment to my presence, as the use of insider jokes and coarse language was deemed inappropriate 'in front of a lady'. Gradually, I was accepted as part of office staff and all operations continued as usual, with drivers feeling more comfortable to share journey stories with me, like they did with their colleagues. Bringing and sharing traditional Moldovan pies with van company employees was particularly important in overcoming communication barriers and the moment one of the employees told me which filling he preferred marked a turning point in establishing rapport with him and his colleagues.

With city residents with busy lifestyles, I found that being available to come to most informants' workplace or home at short notice was essential. Sharing coffee and joining in activities and trips was also important for few other informants.

With villagers, particularly women, I found that longer conversations involving questions about my marital status and some less comfortable questions about my family were more common. In these circumstances, I continued the conversation by answering their questions with fewer personal details. Sharing homemade food with villagers and having a 'sit-in', a more traditional get-together with relatives and friends where I was welcomed as a precious guest, was central to establishing good rapport. At the same time, with all

informants, making initial contact and gaining trust represented a continuous process of learning, adjusting and negotiating my position in the field[43]. Moreover, with case-study informants it was essential to maintain continuous contact via Skype and social media where face-to-face contact was not possible at a particular time.

These experiences of sharing food and time in the field bring the discussion to my second point: the importance of the focus on present time, not only for my informants, but for me as a researcher. Being 'in the moment' allowed me to see the 'bigger picture' offered by the power of ethnography (Miller 2017:28) and helped understand how informants talk and think in terms of cycles of movement and their family's migration experience. As Otto (2013:76) notes, 'doing fieldwork means engaging with people in the present in such a way that differences in timescapes can be revealed and articulated.' Thus, creating co-presence with my informants like they create co-presence with their relatives via Skype calls, as well as taking part in parcel exchange and meaningful activities, determined me to become an 'insider' in my informants' view.

Finally, while sharing time-space with informants facilitated communication, speaking the same language as my informants without using a translator allowed me to respond immediately to changes in interviewees' availability and interview informants from different ethnic backgrounds. Using the knowledge of linguistic intricacies in the field, I managed to address the divides discussed in the opening of this chapter to include informants from different backgrounds, as shown in the following section.

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[43] See Narayan (1993).

1.3.2 Words, not swords: Language as a tool in a divided fieldwork site

This final note on the role of language in doing anthropology at home aims to clarify the important role the *perception* of words and accents play in understanding informants. First, I will present some historical aspects of language spoken in Moldova, explaining the level of my own linguistic knowledge. Second, I will focus on how this knowledge was applied in the field with informants speaking languages other than Romanian.

The history of the Romanian language and my migrant informants' personal histories are closely related, with some as young as the language's official status, conferred in 1989. Before the adoption of the official status, Cyrillic script (Figure 1.5) was officially used in press between 1924-1932 and 1940-1991, leading to some changes in spelling of common words.
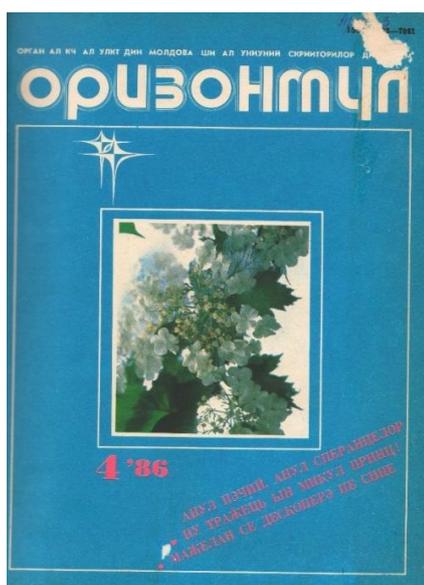
Figure 1.5 The cover of the *Horizon* magazine in Cyrillic-script Moldovan, Issue 4/1986. In Latin script, the cover reads: 'Orizontul. Anul păcii, anul speranțelor / Nu trageți în Micul Prinț / Magelan se descoperă pe sine' (Horizon. The year of peace, the year of hopes / Don't shoot the Little Prince / The self-discovery of Magellan). (*Source: National Library of Moldova)*

The significance of the official language as a symbol of independence was represented by the decision to adopt a new national anthem in 1995, titled *Limba Noastră (Our Language)*. Today, language still constitutes the subject of debates[44]. According to the

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[44] During the Soviet rule, Romanian was rejected as the official language. Instead, the language was transcribed into Cyrillic script and renamed *Moldovan (Moldovenească),* later disproven to exist as a separate language (Chinn 1997). The latest Census (2014) reveals that 23.3% of Moldovans refer to the country's official language as Romanian, while 57% consider it Moldovan, representing the ongoing battle for defining Moldova as a nation state (Groza et al. 2018).

latest Census (2014), besides the disputed official language, the main spoken languages are Russian, Ukrainian, Gagauz and Bulgarian. Commonly, ethnic Romanians would speak Romanian, while other ethnic groups, like Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Russians, would speak Russian. Ethnic Romanians may still speak conversational Russian today, as it was mandatory in schools before the independence.

This multitude of languages spoken in Moldova and the history of linguistic influences determined the emergence of Moldovan slang[45], a combination of Romanian and Russian words with a mixture of prefixes and suffixes in both languages. This is an example of a simple conversation in Moldovan slang:

Where are you heading to? To the petrol station.

Unde mergi? La zapravcă.

In this conversation, the respondent used a combination of Russian acronym for 'petrol station' and Romanian suffix, together with a Romanian 'la', which means 'to'. Besides the specificities of slang, pronunciation is another aspect that might impede understanding interlocutors. For example, the word 'cine', which means 'who', is pronounced as 'chi-neh' in textbook Romanian, while Moldovans would pronounce it 'shi-nee'. Another example is 'bine' ('good, well'), sounding as 'bee-neh' in textbook Romanian, while Moldovans would pronounce it 'ghee-nee'.

These aspects reflect the difficulties a non-speaker may come across doing ethnography in Moldova. Coming from a mixed family – a Russian mother and a Romanian father[46] - I am a native speaker of both Russian and Romanian. I am also fluent in Moldovan slang, since I grew up speaking it with neighbourhood children in Chisinau. Considering the diversity of ethnic groups my informants came from, I spoke Romanian or Moldovan slang with most informants, Russian with two, and English with

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[45] I am using the term 'Moldovan slang' to define the slang spoken within the borders of the Republic of Moldova.
[46] Ethnic Romanians whose grandparents were born during the time when Bessarabia was part of Romania, before becoming part of the USSR.

one informant[47] as main interview languages. In all my interactions with informants, I focused on using the same linguistic medium as my interlocutors to establish a relationship of trust. These aspects also influenced the way I communicated with urban and rural residents. Rural residents were more likely to use Moldovan slang, while urban residents were more likely to speak Romanian or Russian.

This lack of language barriers gave me a clear advantage (Strathern 1987). Instead of excluding participants speaking a different language or using an interpreter, I was able to speak freely with all informants, particularly when discussing a sensitive topic, like the feelings of loss experienced after the migrant's departure. As Murray and Wynne (2001) note, using the informant's first language is essential in approaching sensitive topics, while using an interpreter can present problems with selective translation or interpretation reliability. Speaking the informants' first language allowed me to operate within commonly understood terms for instantaneous interpretation.

Finally, by including this discussion of linguistic considerations as an important aspect of doing anthropology at home, I addressed the long-standing concern with the lack of anthropologists' reflexivity on the level of linguistic competence (Borchgrevink 2003). Moreover, as Moore (2009) shows, language competence plays an important role in shaping ethnographic research. Thus, the knowledge of the aspects discussed above gave me greater freedom and flexibility to adapt to informants' circumstances and to use language as a tool to establish good rapport with each informant.

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[47] Moldovan from a mixed family who grew up in the US and currently resides in London. While she considers Russian her mother tongue, she feels more comfortable to converse in English.

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the methodological considerations of multi-sited fieldwork in Moldova and the UK, showing that understanding the historical and cultural context of fieldwork sites, good fieldwork calendar management and reflecting on the power of language and the advantages of being a native anthropologist became key to successful informant engagement. Starting with the section on the history of the Moldovan state, the chapter progressed from contextualising both sites to relating research methods to temporal and cultural aspects of each fieldwork site, before analysing the challenges and advantages of doing anthropology at home. The final discussion of language competence connecting historical, social and cultural factors explored in previous sections emphasised the importance of reflexivity and the quality of communication with informants from different backgrounds.

While Moldova was selected for a long history of migration, geopolitical situation and increasing use of parcel van companies, the UK was selected for being one of the newer destinations for Moldovan migrants and developing parcel van networks. The two fieldwork sites were discussed from two points of view: the Moldovan government, viewing Moldovans in the UK as diaspora, and informants, viewing themselves as 'migrants', rather than members of the Moldovan diaspora. This showed the importance of approaching informants in the context of their migration experience and transnational family histories.

The selection of qualitative methods – semi-structured interviews, case study and participant observation – allowed for a wealth data to be collected, complemented by ethnographic photography and secondary source analysis. This choice allowed for more depth in different ethnographic contexts to be achieved and provided important insights from van company employees' perspective, as well as the informants' perspectives on parcel-sending practices. While data collection in multiple fieldwork sites presented

challenges regarding participant recruitment, travelling between sites and negotiating returns and farewells, this chapter showed that overcoming these challenges presented a valuable insight on effective strategies of managing being in the field.

Considering the historical, cultural and linguistic implications of doing fieldwork in both countries, planning around important holidays like Christmas and Easter and creating co-presence with informants proved essential for successful fieldwork and represented the most efficient ways of establishing rapport. This approach showed that temporal implications must not be overlooked while in the field, since informants' timelines link personal biographies and sending practices. Sharing meals and important activities with informants, adapting to their circumstances and understanding linguistic subtleties contributed to the informants' perception of me as an 'insider'. Thus, from my own position as a native anthropologist looking into how migrants and their families make sense of separation and distance, dealing with arising issues like participant apprehension or emotional investment became a negotiation of its own.

Finally, the discussion of linguistic implications of doing anthropology at home showed that language must be used as a tool in the field, particularly when conducting interviews allows avoiding the downsides of translation. Speaking informants' language thus became a significant advantage when dealing with sensitive topics and relating with rural and urban residents, as well as speakers of other languages.

In the following chapter I will look at how van companies operate in transnational space, exploring their active role as actors in maintaining connections between Moldovan migrants and the homeland applied in first ethnographic contexts. Uncovering the types of things people send, the significance of sending trends and parcel journeys, the following chapter can also be treated as an incursion into the parcel van business as an integral part of migrant infrastructure.

Chapter II

Moldo-*Vans* on a journey: Building connections in transnational space

Good customer service is key. These people, they depend on us, on

passing the parcel from their hands into their loved ones' hands.

Iurie

Moldovan parcel van services have been running and evolving for the last three decades, regardless of legal challenges and economic instability. This chapter looks at the parcel van phenomenon in the context of Moldovan transnational life and asks how van companies operate in order to make a difference to migrants and those left behind. Deflecting from the focus on legal and economic aspects of parcel-sending and considering the history of Moldovan emigration discussed in the previous chapter, I will show that the existence of parcel van services taps into a much more complex web of interconnections that transcends the view on parcel-sending as an economic contribution to the household. To incorporate these connections, I refer to parcel van services as 'Moldo-*Vans*,' revealing a level of understanding beyond an economically viable alternative to traditional post or courier services – their fundamental role in developing and maintaining transnational connectedness.

This chapter is structured around three main elements of parcel-sending that configure the relationship between the parcel van services and their clients. The first section addresses the human resources and labour involved in transporting parcels. Drawing on ethnographic accounts of a parcel van company operations, I argue that Moldo-*Vans* are active participants in parcel exchange alongside their clients, showing that company

employees base their service on a shared experience of separation from loved ones abroad. Building on Tilly's notion of 'trust networks' (2007), I will show that the familiarity of this shared experience and the collaboration between employees and their clients represent an investment in the longevity of the parcel-sending phenomenon.

The second section will then look at parcel-sending negotiating distance and reflecting the shared journey of people and parcels. Building on the interconnection of Moldo-*Van* employees' biographies and their clients' personal histories, I will show that distance informs the journey drivers and parcels embark on by determining the trip duration and materialising as additional challenges at border crossings. Drawing on Xiang and Lindquist's idea of 'migration infrastructure' (2014), I argue that 'routes', or the adapting and evolving trajectories for parcel-sending, rather than physical infrastructures like roads, determine Moldo-*Vans'* active role in creating connections. Considering the mutual trust between van company employees and clients, the familiarity of the parcel service and the temporality of van journeys, I will show that Moldo-*Vans* connect people with one another in ways that are eagerly anticipated at either end of the journey, constituting flexible networks. The collaboration with scheduled bus services in Moldova allows parcels to be distributed to a wider network of clients in most parts of Moldova, indicating that Moldo-*Vans* as migration infrastructure are, indeed, flexible and adaptive.

Finally, the third section will address the social significance of the materiality of packaging, focusing on two aspects of preparing a parcel: the role of Moldo-*Vans* as mediators and caretakers in the parcel's journey and the anticipation of unwrapping the parcel that becomes a shared experience between the sender and the receiver. Drawing on Stephan and Flaherty's understanding of anticipation as 'lived experience' that entails social interaction through packaging (2019) and on Gell's notion of 'social reproduction' (1993) in relation to wrapping that bears the sender's touch, I will show that through wrapping and unwrapping a material connection begins to be made that precedes the connections created by parcel items.

2.1 Parcel vans as active actors in establishing transnational connections

There was a life before parcel vans. The informal, privately owned courier services emerged in the early 1990s, following the declaration of independence, in response to a growing demand for cheaper alternatives to postal services. While several attempts were made at legalising aspects of van companies' activity, as discussed in the introduction, consensus has not yet been reached on defining regulations for parcel transportation on legislative level. The long-expected regional study[48] on the subject was conducted in 2015 and made available in 2017; according to the study (Cuza and Rusnac 2015), the existence of parcel vans negotiates Moldovan diaspora's relations with motherland, providing an alternative to traditional courier services. However, this outlook on parcels as goods and van company clients as 'Moldovan diaspora' does not explain the role of parcel-sending in Moldovan transnational life.

This section sets out to uncover the interconnected participation of parcel company employees and their clients in parcel exchange and the emergence of general sending practices. Starting with an overview of parcel vans in comparison with traditional postal services, the discussion will move on to the inner dealings of the parcel service in relation to personal biographies of employees and clients. I will show that the active role of office employees in processing the parcels and the migration experiences shared with clients determine the long-term development of parcel van services.

For this study I gained access to one van company based in Chisinau, assisting at parcel collection, registration, dispatch and receipt and observed parcel-sending at peak times, particularly around winter holidays. Drawing on the understanding of clients' life events reflected in the choice of parcel items as temporal reference points (Munn 1992), I argue that negotiating parcel-sending around special occasions like Christmas informs

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[48] From discussions with colleagues and partners from other migration organisations during my internship at the Bureau for Diaspora Relations in Chisinau, this study on parcel-sending has been expected for several years before being published.

establishing connections between all participants in parcel exchange. Building on this biographic approach to understanding how parcel van companies operate, I will then discuss how observing seasonal parcel volumes fluctuations and the diversity of items sent by clients reflects significant moments in their transnational life.

2.1.1 How the wheels are turning: Understanding the Moldo-*Van* phenomenon

The activity of parcel van companies is strongly related to the history of Moldovan migration to other EU and CIS countries. As shown in Chapter I, Moldovan migrants base their choice of countries of destination on socio-political divides, language competence and job opportunities. Reflecting these preferences, parcel vans run between countries with higher numbers of Moldovan migrants – mainly Russia, Italy, France, Spain, UK, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Portugal and the Czech Republic (Cuza and Rusnac 2015).

At the time of writing, in Chisinau alone, there were more than six[49] companies transporting to the UK, for a price of £1.5 per kilogram. In comparison with Moldovan postal services, parcels are almost ten times cheaper, with fewer restrictions on the types of items allowed. While there are seasonal bans on raw meat transportation, strict alcohol allowances and a ban on tobacco products, the vans will accept almost anything else. On the contrary, the Moldovan post only accepts relatively small parcel sizes (31.5kg maximum weight and 2m maximum length, all sides) and does not accept any meat and some canned foods. Moreover, packaging must adhere to strict standards and any parcel that does not meet the standard must be repackaged on the spot with packaging materials provided by the post office at a price. Every parcel goes through

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[49] The exact number of parcel van companies driving to the UK is hard to identify because of changing routes, collection points, emergence of new services and shared operations with other companies. The approximation given in this thesis is based on discussion with parcel van company employees at the office where I conducted research and on advertisements for such services collected online or photographed in various locations in Chisinau (see Appendix A).

customs at drop-off, making sending a lengthy process, and senders must often queue to dispatch their parcels.

To gain a better understanding of traditional post practices, I spent a day at the only post office in Chisinau that accepts international parcels, observing the items packed at the counter and talking to senders about the parcels they sent. Most clients used the post service to send gifts to their emigrated loved ones in difficult to reach destinations like the USA and Israel, expressing dissatisfaction with severe restrictions to the selection of items accepted by customs, as well as prohibitive prices and reduced volumes accepted for dispatch. Waiting times to send a parcel varied from 20 minutes to over 90 minutes, during which office employees checked every item – an intrusion of privacy that clients considered inconvenient. Most common items sent via the service were non-perishable, like clothing, but senders also packed tea and coffee, chocolate and jams. From discussions with post office clients, they mostly sent an occasional parcel to mark a special event, like a birthday or the birth of a baby, and complained about a lack of alternative services accepting larger volumes and offering lower prices. One woman in her early fifties told me that she would not consider sending if the parcel did not 'mean so much' to her son studying in the USA. Another woman in her sixties said she did not have 'any other option' to 'send presents' to her grandchildren in the USA. Asked whether they also received parcels, most senders said they received a rare parcel, but in case of shipments originating in the USA, an import tax was often due, making parcel-sending a financial strain on both senders and receivers. At the same time, as senders considered, post office employees often appeared to assume a position of power when going through parcel items and deciding on which items could be sent.

In parcel vans' case, I argue that the relationship between employees and clients is mutually negotiated and based on familiarity and trust, as well as shared experience of migration. I will address this mutual relationship first, before discussing how drivers and office employees relate their own experiences of working abroad to their clients' sending practices. The parcel van company I followed closely collaborates with other companies

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and drivers, including regular bus route services. As the implications of this collaboration will be discussed in more detail in the following section, my focus here is on the human actors involved in establishing a relationship of trust underlying the operations of parcel van companies. Drawing on Tilly's notion of 'trust networks' in the context of migration that 'consist of ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others' (2007:7), I argue that the relationality through trust represents an essential element of the parcel exchange 'business'. Moreover, parcel van companies must not be considered solely commercial enterprises, since employees and clients become part of such trust networks. As my informants say about choosing the van company to send their parcels with, they must be *de încredere¸* trustworthy, in order to get their continuous custom. Informants also refer to drivers as *de încredere* when speaking of long-term sending with the same company. On their side, parcel van companies often address their clients on social media, thanking them for using their services. More evidently, some companies acknowledge the importance of building trust on their business cards (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Example of a parcel van company business card showing the network of locations in Moldova where delivery can be arranged. The message to customers reads *Thank you for trusting us!* (highlighted in yellow). *(Source: parcel van company webpage)*

The complexity of relations associated with parcel van services thus leads me to consider the necessity of differentiating Moldovan parcel van companies from commercial couriers. Referring to Moldovan parcel vans as Moldo-*Vans*, I will further engage with their important role in Moldovan transnational life by emphasising the human aspect of parcel exchange, including the labour and caretaking involved in creating and maintaining the trust networks on which parcel exchange is based.

Starting from the contribution of office employees and drivers, I will show that Tilly's idea of 'long-term enterprises' (2007:7) being collectively constituted by trust network members is based on a lasting collaboration between Moldo-*Vans* and their clients, using ethnographic examples from my experience with the parcel van company. The company I followed delivers to 12 cities in England and four locations in London (Figure 2.2), where drivers collect and give away parcels during set hours over each weekend.

Figure 2.2 Parcel van companies' delivery locations in the UK[50].

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[50] As previously discussed, such a list is an approximation and must be used for reference only. Parcel van routes continue to be added and changed.

In Chisinau, collection and pickup are arranged at the office where parcels are stored and processed. There is a data journal with names, parcel descriptions and phone numbers, written down next to the city of origin and city of destination. While most companies deliver to London, some companies cover a larger area by offering door-to-door delivery, often subject to a weight minimum. The company I followed offers an almost custom delivery service within Moldova – agreements with local bus drivers are in place and parcels can be delivered to villages and towns outside Chisinau via buses at no extra cost. The drivers and the office workers, the 'tradesmen', possess the knowledge and the experience required to run the service. The company employs around 40 part-time and full-time drivers who usually work on assignment basis. About 7-8 are running weekly trips, having been in the business for longer than two years. They know they have to deliver every week in order to fulfil that trust because, as drivers say, Moldovan migrants and their families 'rely on us'. Therefore, subject to shifts, all employees are required to work every week, regardless of weather conditions. Drivers told me that vans getting stuck in snow in Central Europe in wintertime or waiting for several hours at border crossings were a usual occurrence. With salaries depending on the amount of business and payment not reflecting the number of hours worked, the job is not easy.

Sharing the small office space (relocated and extended after I left the field to accommodate growing numbers of parcels) equipped with shelves for storing parcels, and only one chair, used for short naps during particularly long working hours (Figure 2.3), was challenging, but offered the opportunity to learn about office workers' own migration stories and understand how parcels are processed. Moreover, within the trust networks of parcel-sending, drivers and workers' stories of migration and parcel processing become intertwined with their customers' experiences.

Figure 2.3 Sketch of the parcel van company office. (*Source: Own drawing*)

This connection thus becomes twofold - the drivers' perspective shows the human effort invested in covering physical distance and creating material connections, while the migrant perspective relates to the migration experience and the choice of things to send. Most parcel van drivers either spent time living abroad and decided to return or experienced the migration of a loved one. During my time with the company employees, I became acquainted with two office workers and several drivers whose contribution to the service offered valuable insight on the human resources involved. Pavel, in his thirties, had been a UK-bound van driver for two years before becoming the main frontman of the office. Company employees often alternate office work with driving - however, the long hours took their toll on Pavel and his family. When he used to drive vans to the UK, the long and daunting road saw him leave home for a week at a time, something he found difficult to endure. While some relatives remained there, after the

birth of his son, he and his wife settled back in Moldova – as Pavel put it, 'I'm a patriot, I still like it here better – better for the family to be together.'

It took me almost two months to gain Pavel's trust, as he told me he found it hard to believe 'anyone would have a genuine interest in parcel vans' without being a 'government spy'[51]. After long hours of working together and sharing lunchtime meals, he and his colleagues accepted that my intentions were not at all shaped by the desire to provide the government with what they called 'insider information'. Moreover, in time, Pavel became a key informant, introducing me as 'trustworthy' and 'one of ours'.

While shadowing Pavel at the office and helping him pack and register parcels, I gained a better understanding of the life of a van company office worker. As these excerpts from my fieldnotes show, the labour involved in processing parcels is considerable.

> Pavel's small and crammed office measures about 1.8 by 3.5 metres. […] in cold months he wears a dark winter jacket because of low temperatures, as the office is not well-heated. […] the door opens every couple of minutes to let in a customer who has brought a parcel to send and, at different times of the day, there may even be more than five customers queuing in the narrow unlit corridor in front of the office door […].
>
> On a regular day, Pavel has to make sure all the parcels are loaded, that any late customers are served, that the driver on the day is paid and that the papers are all in order. Pavel's task is to serve the customers quickly and without error; in the past there have been plenty of mistakes when some people have not received their parcels on time because they have been sent on the wrong van. Therefore, Pavel is very careful with the three piles of packages going into three different directions served by the company: he puts the parcel into the correct pile straight away and assigns it a number. Then he proceeds to checking whether anything prohibited has been packed, as most people do pack

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[51] A reflection of the dissatisfaction with the government's position on regularising parcel van services and the debates discussed in the introduction.

prohibited items. Then he writes down the recipient's name and phone number - the recipient will pay for the parcel once it arrives.

[…] Sometimes, there will be difficult customers who would argue and refuse to remove prohibited items. Pavel then has to repack and make sure that the customs officer understands that packing is the responsibility of the sender. Normally, each parcel is considered to belong to one person, the sender, and a personal allowance is let through. However, when customs find something prohibited, the item is confiscated. […] Pavel knows that if the parcel does not arrive in one piece, he would get the blame despite the efforts to explain the rules to customers.

[…] Besides problems with contents, Pavel has to do a lot of packing and re-packing when customers bring flimsy packaging or just prefer to have it packed by the office. Armed with boxes and tape, he carefully seals the package in front of the customer and proceeds to putting it on the scales, a process taking up most of his working time. […]. At peak times he often works long hours, having to sleep at the workplace on the night before the van leaves.

While Pavel's contribution to the smooth running of the company office is essential in providing good service, the difficulties of office work are perceived as part of Moldo-*Vans'* mediating role in providing an important service. The continuity of the service reflects in new employees' vision of the office experience as a step forward in their own migration story. Pavel's colleague Iurie, in his late twenties, has been with the company for over a year and is still learning the ropes. His job is to assist with parcel-sending to Switzerland, another destination the company deals with. The main reason for choosing this direction of work for Iurie is his dream of moving to Switzerland where a few of his friends and relatives reside already, boasting good salaries and living conditions. Before the move, however, his plan is to improve his language skills, get the appropriate driving licence and gain experience as a van driver. Like Pavel, he deals with a variety of

customers in person and on the phone and puts in some long hours at peak times. Undeterred by older drivers' stories of difficulties on the road, he is hopeful that, once his training is complete, he will be able to incorporate his knowledge of the parcel trade in his own future professional activities. Reflecting on the opportunities of working in the same field after the move to Switzerland, Iurie acknowledges the value of multifaceted experience and the quality of customer service, which he considers important to a good running of the business.

Customers share their own stories of migration when passing by the office and packing their parcels. According to Pavel's approximation, 60% of customers are regulars, while the company gets a first-time customer every week. Despite knowing the regulars' stories, nor Pavel, nor Iurie felt it was appropriate to share such details with me. However, their accounts are not unique to parcel van companies. In the long history of parcel-sending, folk songs and laments of the migrant condition emerged, whose musical form and sound reflects longing for the missing family member (Feld 1982). A notable example is the recitative account of driving the parcel van to Rome by Gigi (Figure 2.4), himself a former driver-turned-musician, speaking from his own experience working for Moldo-*Vans*.

Figure 2.4 Screenshot of the YouTube video for the song 'Rome-Chisinau' by Gigi, 2018.
[accessed 15.12.2018]

The lyrics specifically address the stories behind regular customers' migration experiences in relation to their parcel-sending practices. The storyteller – a parcel van driver serving the Chisinau to Rome route – talks about the difficult journey, the financial sacrifice of the senders and the hardships migrants go through. A young woman missed by her parents, an old widower working menial jobs, a construction worker living in crammed conditions and tied to his workplace, a mother whose gift of a new motorcycle led to her son losing his life in an accident. As drivers say, such stories are representative of Moldovan migrants' experiences abroad, defining a way of 'making sense' of the migration experience (Coplan 2006).

Thus, the connection between Moldo-*Vans* and their customers is informed by strong ties represented by the creation of trust networks, based on the shared migration experiences of separation and longing. Regular clients' personal accounts of transnational life are recognised by employees as familiar narratives experienced by many participants in parcel exchange. I will now discuss the temporal aspects of these biographic connections by looking at seasonal fluctuations in general parcel-sending practices.

2.1.2 Cyclical temporalities and personal biographies carried by parcel vans

Moldo-*Vans* carrying personal stories of hardship and fortune represent an important aspect of parcel exchange, as seen above. While preparing and sending parcels becomes a complex activity involving human resources and the contribution of both company employees and their clients, I will now look at the temporal aspects of parcel-sending and practices emerging around important dates in public and personal calendars, before relating these temporalities to the types of items found in Moldovan parcels.

Moldovan parcel-sending peaks significantly around winter holidays and Easter, two special occasions on which Moldovans reunite with the extended family for a festive gathering. In untangling this seasonality of sending, I am drawing on Gell's notion of time maps (1992) to argue that Moldovan parcel-sending is related to sequences of events in senders and receivers' lives that can be connected to one another through choices of items to send. If at quiet times (second half of January onwards and after Easter into the summer) the observed van company would process around 400 parcels one-way, other busier times would see 500 parcels sent one way. At peak times just before the holidays, the processing of parcels becomes hectic, when office employees deal with long queues and over a thousand parcels each way (Figure 2.5). Besides general collection peaks and lows, their collection day routine is also subject to regular fluctuations. In low season, there is usually a higher peak around 2pm and a lower peak at 4pm, with an average of fifteen clients per hour and fewer towards the evening. In high season, they can face long queues throughout the day.

Figure 2.5 Parcel dispatch and collection day at peak time, in Chisinau (left) and London (right), December 2016. (*Source: Own collection, informant photograph*)

Christmas and Easter thus represent the times when most Moldovans send[52]. Reflecting on Christmas as an important date and a family-oriented social construct, Burrell (2012) notes that the festive materiality of Christmas triggers reactions around the presence or absence of objects associated with the holiday. More specifically, for her Polish informants, the absence of a traditional Christmas wafer or carp accentuates the distance. While Christmas-related gifts are addressed shortly in the next chapter, in my informants' case, the absence of the parcel sent for the occasion, rather than a specific Christmas-related item, accentuates the distance.

Participants in parcel exchange move in tides – weekly collection, three-day journeys, last sending dates before holidays and on special occasions, rarer parcels in hot months and more frequent sending during colder months[53]. For rural residents, the distinction between winter and summer is particularly important – the limitations to sending fresh produce from family land are perceived to emphasise the distance. Taisia, a 45-year-old villager whose 19-year-old son moved to London to look for work, speaks of the impossibility to provide her son with homegrown vegetables and fruit he used to like. Despite a convenient parcel van service offering pickup in her village, she sees the duration of the parcel trip and the seasonality of available produce as the main impediments to her parcel-sending. Therefore, she chooses not to send regularly, having sent the first parcel after her son left on her son's request, followed by rare parcels in the winter.

> Since he left, I sent two or three times. He's been gone a year and a half. In the summer, what can we send? When I ask if I should send some tomatoes, some cucumbers. [When I ask whether to send some cherries] they rot, they are too hard to send.

Thus, Taisia and her son, who only asks for homegrown produce to be sent, map time starting with the moment of her son's departure to the UK, in relation to agricultural

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[52] Christmas gifts will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III.
[53] Mainly because of foodstuffs sent, discussed in more detail in Chapter IV.

cycles of production on her land. As opposed to summertime hot temperatures, in wintertime she managed to send some meat and pickles that would 'last the journey' and 'if they had a similar service by plane,' she 'would send by plane,' providing the journey is shorter for the same sending price. If for Taisia's son, the move to London marked the transition to independence and adulthood – 'he's all grown now,' she says - for other Moldo-*Van* clients, parcel-sending evokes sequences in life events, reflected in choices of items in their parcels (Figure 2.6).

Foodstuffs	Appliances, homewares and home décor	Personal items	Educational items, sports equipment and toys	Other
Alcohol: wine, cognac, vodka, grappa	**Appliances:** microwaves, kettles, hobs, vacuum cleaners, coffee makers, TVs, central heaters, washer/dryers, dishwashers	**Children:** Pampers, strollers, clothes, medicine, shoes	**Toys:** doll strollers, cars, various building blocks, doll houses, model railways, rocking horses	Full sets of double-glazed doors and windows, wooden wine barrels, building materials (including paint), agricultural machinery, car tyres
Confectionery and snacks: maize puffs, biscuits, sweets, homemade jams and cakes	**Furniture:** wooden beds, wooden tables and chairs, children's furniture, kitchen furniture	**Adults:** medicine, clothes, bags, jewellery, shoes	**Educational:** toddler/picture books, 3D puzzles, art supplies	
Meat: frozen poultry, pork or lamb; homemade meatballs, sausages, roast meat, lard	**Linen and décor:** blankets, pillows, bed sets, towels, vases, ornaments, rugs/carpets	**Electronics:** laptops, mobile phones, music players, tablets	**Sports:** bicycles, rollers	
Other: pickles, preserves, dairy products and eggs, sunflower seeds	**Other:** cutlery, glasses, jugs, bowls			

Figure 2.6 The range of items sent and received at the van company office in Chisinau.

There are clear indications that the materiality of practices around celebrating milestones, traditions and spirituality, as well as maintaining connections between generations are reflected in Moldovan parcels. From weddings to christenings, to celebrations like birthdays and anniversaries, there are numerous examples of important life stages embodied in items sent via parcels. A group of four young men send 101kg worth of household items – four blankets, a set of pans, a cafetière, an icon, cutlery, clothes and a microwave. Such a selection is indicative of the Moldovan tradition to provide the newlyweds with an orthodox icon to protect the household, impossible to source in the UK, and household items the young couple might need in the first year of marriage. Another lot includes four bottles of cognac, nine bottles of wine and four kilograms of sweets to be used at the party table. Two other families send a gilded baptismal font, complete with sets of blankets[54] and a collection of a baby bath, holy water jar[55], dried basil bunch[56], wine and chocolates indicative of a traditional christening party. Finally, a middle-aged couple sends a laptop, clothes, some wine and food for their daughter who left to study in the UK the previous day. Like Taisia's son, their daughter left the parental home for the first time, marking the beginning of a new stage in her independent adult life.

While parcel van company employees are actively involved in providing the material link between Moldovan migrants and those left behind, their clients experience distance through temporal sequences of parcel journeys and seasonality. I will now focus on parcel journeys in more detail, before discussing how Moldo-*Vans* become vehicles of sociality.

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[54] Traditionally offered as christening gifts to the godparents.
[55] Blessed by a priest, often kept at home and consumed for purification.
[56] In Moldova, basil is considered a holy plant and is often used in religious practices or hung in corners to protect the house.

2.2 Distance matters: Moldo-*Vans* on the move

Looking at how distance is negotiated in the process of parcel transportation is instrumental in understanding the materiality of transnational life. In the previous section I discussed the role of Moldo-*Van* employees and the seasonal aspects of parcel-sending related to clients' biographies. This section takes the discussion of interlinked biographies of people and things further by exploring the infrastructural aspects of Moldo-*Vans* and their journeys. Drawing on the notion of physical infrastructure as immobile moorings (Adey 2006), as opposed to social aspects of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), I argue that distance is tangible and material, informing the development of transnational connections. In exploring the journey lengths and costs, the drivers' effort and the challenges of border crossings, I show that distance 'matters' (Burrell 2017) and that Moldo-*Vans* represent 'dynamic, responsive and relational' (Burrell 2017:822) elements of migration infrastructure. Furthermore, mapping parcel van journeys shows processes indicative of Moldo-*Vans* informing transnational sociality, acting as brokers that provide connections between locales and Moldovans separated by the migrant's departure.

2.2.1 The enchantment of infrastructure: Moldo-*Vans* and the 'power of the road'

The development of van services covering a wide network of destinations and tightly related to Moldovans' migration trajectories is indicative of an important distinction between the physical presence of roads and the signified meaning of the social relations involved. To better understand this distinction, I will discuss 'roads' as immobile moorings (Adey 2006), or physical manifestations of infrastructure, as opposed to 'routes,' adaptive linkages between senders and receivers, constructed in transnational space. While roads possess physical characteristics that impact the speed and spatial

distribution determining how distance is covered, routes use and adapt immobile moorings, as well as human resources and networks, to create connections reaching more clients.

Roads as immobile moorings provide important trajectories of movement, channelling the journeys of people and things. Moldovans have long had a troubled relationship with road infrastructure that began to disintegrate in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The bad quality of Moldovan roads is notorious, often subject to a bittersweet auto-irony embedded in local oral culture, also reflected in the previously discussed account of driving the parcel van to Rome by driver-songwriter Gigi. According to Kernaghan (2012), roads as symbolic entities help spin local narratives, acting as tools of remembrance and social interpretation.

In Moldovan case, these narratives incorporate migration experiences. After independence, the rebuilding of Moldovan roads manifested itself as an expression of newly acquired mobility and pursuit of a better future. As Dalakoglou (2012) notes on the infrastructure of post-socialist space, infrastructure transformation can be seen as an act of civil participation. In Moldova, where road resurfacing has become a long process, often involving foreign aid and investment, roads became the embodiment of a better future. Elaborating on the agency of roads as symbolic constructs, Dalakoglou and Harvey (2012) argue that these seemingly mundane elements of infrastructure hold an incredible power of social resistance, future imaginaries and boundary creation. Ideas of freedom and fast movement thus confer roads the ability to 'enchant' (idem), drawing their users in by projecting the promise of personal success.

Routes, on the other hand, represent flexible elements of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). For Moldovans, Moldo-*Vans* have become a manifestation of freedom of movement, providing the material connection with the homeland. When referring to Moldo-*Van* journeys, there is no continuous road that transports the load between two locations. The alterations and adjustments due to weather, road works and

varying necessity to serve clients in additional locations mean that the actual contact with physical infrastructure may change from journey to journey. Moreover, while the transit journey between Moldova and the UK follows the same trajectory, parcel delivery destinations may change every week, depending on circumstances. For example, drivers may stop by a town they would not normally serve, posting on social media to let any potential clients know they would be collecting parcels. Clients may also ask drivers to deliver to a location where the company does not have a collection point to collect a larger parcel. In Moldova, most parcel van companies use scheduled bus services to distribute parcels to remote areas of the country or to serve villages that are not located on their usual route.

Through these alterations and collaborations, Moldo-*Van* networks 'change structure and geographic distribution,' while persisting 'in the process' (Tilly 2007:9). Thus, both Moldo-*Vans* and their clients participate in constituting the connection across borders, in which the infrastructural aspects of the journey must be understood as the interrelation of roads and routes. Next, I will focus on the relational aspect of negotiating distance involving human effort and the overcoming the challenges of border crossings.

2.2.2 All aboard: The shared journey of people and things

Based on ethnographic accounts of the parcel van journey from Chisinau to London that I went on, I will further discuss how drivers and clients refer to the journey as a process of labour that involves overcoming physical distance and the difficulties related to border crossings. Thus, alongside van passengers, the parcel goes through the 'process' of crossing borders 'during the time in movement' (Talmi Cohn 2018:337). On these journeys, I argue that Moldo-*Vans* act as brokers (Lindquist 2012, Lindquist et al. 2012), facilitating this movement. While brokers' role is to facilitate migration, my primary focus is on the mediating role Moldo-*Vans* play in creating connectedness. I therefore build on

the understanding of the parcel van journey as a process involving human effort and overcoming difficulties encountered during the journey, similar to migrants' experiences. Moreover, since parcel vans often run as joint passenger and parcel transporters, I emphasise that the parcel journey becomes a shared movement of people and things.

Regular drivers who go on a trip almost every week are the most involved in this journey. One of them, an energetic man in his fifties who has been with the business for a decade, recounts yet another story of migration. He spent two decades working as a long-haul lorry driver in Russia before returning to Moldova, while his son moved to Germany with his family. Like office employee Pavel, he returned to the familiar environment despite difficulties finding a well-paid job. Switching to driving parcel vans proved to be lucrative and he has been driving vans ever since. He knows all the other regular drivers and collaborates with other companies, offering advice and volunteering to go on a trip if a driver becomes unavailable. His mediating role in facilitating parcel exchange becomes evident when he talks about his regular working day.

> I got up at 4.30 today to do some work, I went to the Circus [another collection point] and picked up some parcels, talked to the drivers, then I came here to help the boys out. Now I need to drop some parcels off at the bus stop. They are going to Ustia [village North-East of Chisinau] – the van drivers send the parcels via the [local regular] bus.

Apparently trivial, the parcel's journey (Figure 2.7) hides a plethora of difficulties. According to Cuza and Rusnac (2015), most van companies face difficulties in crossing the border into Romania, which is also the EU border. Transporting things important to the customers requires effort and negotiating obstacles. Among the problems encountered on a typical trip would be uncomfortable temperatures, the lack of respect at customs and the night-time driving which makes shifts exhausting.

Figure 2.7 Parcel journey from Chisinau to London. This van company delivers to the UK, Switzerland and France. The vans travel together to Germany, where they split.

To experience and better understand what happens to the parcels and the drivers on a trip, I followed one of the vans on its way from Chisinau to London in February 2016. As my fieldnotes below show, drivers continuously coordinate the distribution of people and parcels, while for passengers the journey becomes part of their migration experiences.

> Inadvertently tied together on three vans, six passengers and hundreds of parcels start in front of the collection point in Chisinau. The vans are fitted with a suspended bed that allows one of the two drivers to take the legally required nap. The passengers' luggage goes in the back, next to the parcels which we help load. The trip cannot start before all parcels are sorted and loaded and an extra passenger added to the list. […]. After a three hour delay, the van leaves and heads for the Moldovan border, picking up the remaining passenger on the way. Migrants, just like parcels, are 'loaded' en route, adding stops to the trajectory.

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[…] After skimming through Moldovan customs, the Romanian border proves to be more challenging. It is already night and the temperatures drop. The van has to be unloaded and the parcels scanned. Passengers and drivers form a human chain, with every parcel passing through every agent's hands. Some of the parcels [about 10] are cut open to be inspected by the officer and, at this early stage, several boxes are already damaged. There is a strong smell of pickle brine in the back of the van […]. The opened parcels are re-taped, and all parcels make their way back through the human chain. The heaviness of some packages weighs down the hands. The parcels are loaded quite carelessly and fast […].

[…] Late at night the vans stop on a Romanian motorway for a traditional tripe soup at the roadside restaurant. The treat is paid for by the drivers. The warmth and the smell of the soup ease the difficulty of sitting down for more than 12 hours. […]. The Hungarian border spares us the trouble and the vans fly through the night to reach Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

[…] The drivers stop every 2-3 hours, almost always at petrol stations, where they communicate with the other two vans and share information and money to pay for road tax, food and fuel. In Germany, one van splits up and heads to Switzerland. On the way, the drivers switched some parcels from one van to another 3 times, once in Moldova, once in Hungary and once in Germany. This time six 25kg crates of textured paint were put on top of the parcels.

[…] The final border is crossed in the early hours of Friday morning at Calais without unloading the parcels. Just before the border, those heading for Stratford are switched to the other van transporting six men heading for work in constructions. […] They had all previously worked in other countries, mainly Russia.

[…] The [new van] passengers are all going to the UK for the first time: a woman in her late forties with her son, a couple in their thirties and two young men in their thirties. The young couple have 2 children - a son is in 9th grade, and a six-year-old daughter they left in Moldova. The couple are going to Northampton

from where they will get a transfer to Leicester where their friends found them jobs. They are planning to take the children to the UK once they start working. […]. [One of the men] used to work in Moscow, where earnings were considerable, but was forced to leave because of the financial crisis there.

[…] The older woman and her husband used to work in Gelendzhik [Russia], earning good money, but decided to return to Moldova, where things got worse. She used to work in a factory, but since it closed, she decided to follow some acquaintances in Northampton. […] Her son and the single men are all planning to work in construction. Two of them have work in Northampton and one has a job and accommodation in Stratford.

[…] On the ferry to Dover, they all run into difficulties adjusting to the currency and the few aspects of the new culture. Despite obstacles, [all passengers] are hopeful and determined to improve their lives. […] The excruciating trip that started at 1pm Wednesday and ended at 10am Friday was finally over.

[On arrival] the parcels would be handed out straight away, in Stratford. After collection, Gants Hill and Northampton-bound passengers would be transferred [onto another van] and on Sunday the drivers would collect the remaining parcels and start the return journey.

As drivers say, this van trip is not outstanding – the only difference may be in the number of transported parcels and that some passengers would not be travelling for the first time. Passengers, their personal belongings and the parcels thus embark on the same journey where the final destination is only reached after long hours and multiple stops along the way, making distance matter once again.

Finally, parcels also go on the journey alongside drivers and migrants. From discussions with several of the 40 drivers, 100% of the parcels would be occasionally checked at continental borders. At times, less often than once a month, all the parcels would be unloaded in Calais and hand checked by the UK border officers. On occasions, parcel delivery would be several hours late, and some parcels would be ripped apart, damaged

or lost. While most of my informants are aware of these difficulties and accept them as inherent part of the parcel-sending process, others feel that some of the difficulties could be avoided. Taisia, the villager who found sending fresh produce difficult, is concerned with border controls, saying that customs officers do not understand the story behind each parcel, treating parcels as taxable goods. Speaking of her son's experience of trying to send a refrigerator home, Taisia reflects on the detrimental impact of such misunderstandings on parcel-sending.

> Like my boy said, [in the UK] a [second-hand] fridge costs twenty pounds! And he asked [a parcel van employee] how much would it be [to send the refrigerator to Moldova] and he said it was 2 pounds per kilogram because it was an appliance, because it depends on the border crossing [import tax or fees], and in the end it came to 400-500 pounds. […] At customs, you never know what's going to happen, they look at these parcels like they [people] send who knows what.

Thus, some parcels are prevented from reaching the receiver before the journey even takes place. Treating parcels as goods also neglects the social contexts in which parcel exchanges take place, specifically the way Moldo-*Vans* become carriers of livelihoods and sociality, as discussed further.

2.2.3 Moldo-*Vans* as vehicles of sociality

The discussion of the drivers' role in mediating parcel-sending showed that Moldo-*Van* journeys represent more than links between dispersed locations, particularly as 'mobilities operate within social contexts' (Macdonald and Grieco 2007:1). At the same time, I showed that parcels contain items indispensable in important moments of Moldovan transnational families' lives, like baptisms and weddings.

Besides items reflecting life events and special occasions, parcels contain items related to occupations and projects undertaken by Moldovans. Tools used in construction work, agricultural machinery, construction materials, teaching aids all point to Moldo-*Vans'* contribution to Moldovan migrants' everyday activities and livelihoods. Building on Altman and Hinkson's ethnography of Kuninjku people's sociality mediated by the off-road truck use (2007), I argue that Moldo-*Vans* also become carriers of sociality in transnational space. Kuninjku trucks driven between remote locations provide much more than transportation. These trucks represent essential links between dispersed people through 'lived practices of movement' (Lelievre and Marshall 2015:441), incorporating social and material aspects of life on the move. The trucks' cargoes containing arts and crafts that help negotiate Kuninjku kinship ties reflect the occupations, trade and material interactions essential to Kuninjku livelihood.

Moreover, the mobility gained by owning trucks has transcended location limitations and created new connections. Like the Kuninjku trucks, Moldo-*Vans* have become a social phenomenon that has outgrown its geographic locales. In locations not normally served by services, but which are not in remote areas, there are minimum weight requirements to send parcels. In that case, several migrants may join together to reach that minimum and the location will then be added to the route that week. Migrants residing in other locations may be recommended to use a van company and their location would also be added to the route. Eventually, new collection points may be added to regular trajectories in the UK.

The routes discussed earlier in this section are thus another manifestation of Moldo-*Vans* informing sociality. By connecting the community via parcel van stops, 'each station takes on meaning and becomes a place, primarily constructed by the movement, ties, and influence of the other places' (Altman and Hinkson 2007:342). When van companies have a customer in a Moldovan village, the drivers would call each other and see if the van or a small car can drop by a certain bus stop in the village. Drivers would then call the customer to bring to or collect the parcel at the bus stop at a certain hour.

These interactions are fluid, with more and more stops added or diverted on the van route. Connecting people and locales becomes another important role Moldo-*Vans* play as mediators of transnational life.

2.3 Waiting to unpack: On the materiality of packaging

Having discussed how van companies operate and uncovered the process of creating symbolic connections through delivery networks, I will now address the last aspect of the shared journey of people and things: the materiality of packaging. Since the duration of the parcel van trip and the seasonality of parcel-sending showed that distance is materialised through temporality, I will begin this section by addressing one particular temporal aspect: the *anticipation* of receiving a parcel. I am, again, employing Munn's concept of temporal reference points (1992) to unpack the moment of waiting for the parcel to arrive by approaching the process of sending the parcel from a temporal perspective. I am considering two sequences of sending a parcel which become such reference points: the preparation and the unwrapping of the parcel. These sequences are shared by all informants as part of their parcel-sending practices.

To clarify the notion of *anticipation* employed here, I must specify that I am not referring to the anthropological explorations of the future or the question of how future is constructed (see Appadurai 2013, Pels 2015). Instead, I refer to the well-defined temporality of the three-day trip in which my informants reported the anticipation, the wait, as inherent part of the parcel-sending process. My informants speak of anticipation in terms of temporal reference points related to the parcel journey, using temporal pointers like 'when she receives the parcel' or 'on collection day'.

Therefore, my approach aligns with Stephan and Flaherty's understanding of anticipation as 'lived experience' (2019), mainly rooted in present time and involving interaction with others. While packing the parcel may be taken for granted because of

its perceived triviality, I show that packaging is particularly important from two points of view, both related to the idea of parcel journey as a process. First, I will focus on preparation as an act of care on the Moldo-*Vans*' part as brokers. Specifically, I will address the effort put into packing at the collection office and the packaging's ability to produce an iconic image of migration that becomes recognisable by the participants in parcel exchange. Second, considering wrapping as part of the preparation, I will show that anticipation culminates in the act of unwrapping the parcel.

2.3.1 Personal touches: The caretakers of parcel exchange

The preparation to send a parcel begins at the sender's home, before the arrival to the parcel van company office. With parcels in transit, receivers speak of anticipation as the process of waiting - '*de-abia aștept'* (cannot wait [to receive]) - that ends after the three-day journey with the unwrapping of the parcel. Most senders package the parcels themselves, with some senders using new packaging materials and others, especially frequent senders, reusing packaging materials left over from unpacking other parcels.

When the parcel reaches the van company office, employees check if the packaging is suitable for transportation, often offering free boxes and packaging materials (Figure 2.8).
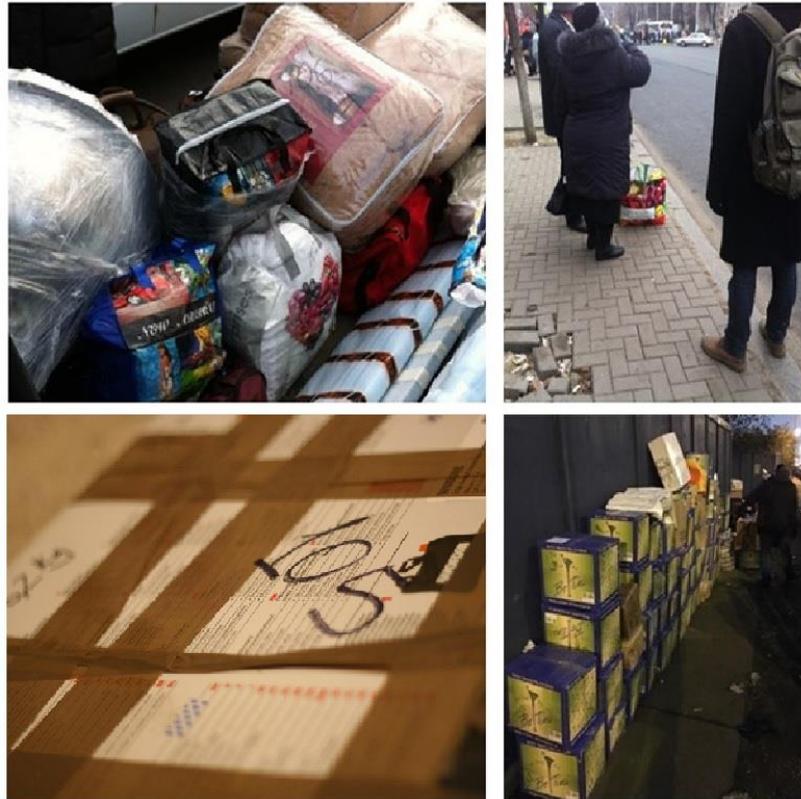
Figure 2.8 Clockwise from top left – variety of packaging materials, UK supermarket raffia bag reused for shopping in Chisinau, parcels packed in new boxes offered by a parcel van company, an individually packed and numbered parcel (*Source: Own photographs, informant photograph*)

Since there are senders who bring parcels in plastic bags, the safety of the parcel cannot be guaranteed. Pavel, the office employee in charge of dispatching and handing out parcels, says such instances are not rare.

> What do I do with [the parcel] if they [customers] bring me bags? They want it sent, and they want it to be received as they sent it. What about that wine bottle that bounces about without any cardboard? […] We re-pack most parcels anyway, just to make sure they make the journey, to deliver them safely.

The packing is 'shared' with the customer, as re-packing inadequately packaged parcels always takes place in front the customer to reassure that all items remain intact. Pavel personally checks that any bottles or jars are double-wrapped for protection and offers

new small or medium flat-packed boxes depending on the weight and volume of items to be sent.

Thus, by mediating the process of packing the parcels, Pavel acts as a caretaker – a role that is further passed on to drivers during the parcel van trip. According to the drivers and to my own observations of border checks on the trip I took, if parcels are opened at customs, the drivers re-seal them before loading them back into the van, trying to keep parcels addressed to the same receiver together. To do so, office employees assign the same number to all such parcels, writing it on several sides which becomes a shared image of connection to the homeland for both Moldovan migrants and those left behind (Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9 The materiality of a packaged parcel. *(Source: Own photograph)*

In his analysis of packaging labels, Weiss (2004) observes the impact of the relationship between the packaged item and the symbolism of its visual appearance. Specifically, the image on the packaging represents a 'timeless construct' (Weiss 2004:51) of a shared experience associated with packaging content. In Moldovan parcels' case, this iconicity explains why the image of the parcel has become so recognisable and identifiable among Moldovans who experienced a loved one's departure abroad.

Through its fragile materiality of construction and deconstruction, of putting together and taking apart, of using and reusing, the act of packaging thus carries an important aspect of care, mediated by parcel van employees. I will now conclude this section with a note on wrapping as extension of the sender's touch and the moment of unwrapping creating material connections.

2.3.2 Wrapping and unwrapping creating material connection

Packaging the parcel is a process, in which preparation requires skill, experience and resources. As seen above, both senders and office employees secure fragile items and co-participate in this process to secure the parcel's safe journey. Thus, the wrapping of items[57] involves the transformation of materials from one state to another, including the social function of the process of packaging. In a final bid to uncover the materiality of preparation and anticipation, I draw on Gell's notion of wrapping as social reproduction (1993) to show that parcel-sending begins to create material connections when unwrapping takes place.

My informants speak of the moment of unwrapping as the 'special moment' when they can feel the 'touch' of the sender's hands. Thus, it is not the physical quality of the wrapping materials that matters, but the human effort invested in preparing the parcel.

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[57] Including both individual wrapping of items within the parcel and the parcel packaging.

There are two aspects to the materiality of packaging that informants speak about. On the one hand, the act of wrapping becomes an extension of the sender's touch (Gell 1993) that creates a tangible connection to the receiver. '*My mother sent this*,' says a teenage girl at the parcel van office standing in the queue to receive her parcel. '*How do I know? She always wraps it up nicely.'* The way the parcel is prepared refers to a specific set of skills that makes it recognisable to the receiver. The sender's body thus becomes involved in the process of anticipation through the act of packaging.

On the other hand, depending on the agents performing the action and on the social context (Hendry 1995) where the action takes place, the act of unwrapping can become devoid of the sender's touch. As one of my informants notes, the parcel van company she uses packs all parcels in identical boxes, without allowing senders to use their own outer packaging. Inside, however, the items are individually packaged by the sender. '*My grandparents always tuck everything in so tightly*,' she laughs, '*that I know straight away they sent me the usual stuff*.' The 'special moment' of unwrapping thus begins with unpacking individual items, while the parcel box prepared at the van company office does not bear the same significance in this context. In the next chapter I will discuss in more detail this individual packing of special items in parcels, focusing specifically on gift wrapping of Christmas presents. What I emphasise in this section is that, before considering individual items, it is important to understand what the materiality of packaging entails as part of the complex social phenomenon of parcel-sending.

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the role of parcel van companies as active actors in the process of creating connections through parcel-sending, operating within the social field of shared migration experiences with their clients. Drawing on Tilly's notion of 'trust networks' (2007) emphasising the importance of familiarity in building long-lasting relationships between van companies and their clients, I employed the term Moldo-*Vans* to show that the collaboration between van companies and their clients contributes to the perpetuity of the parcel van phenomenon in Moldovan transnational space.

Starting with the section on the general operations of a van company I followed in the field, the chapter progressed from acknowledging the link between company employees and their clients' biographies to unpacking the concept of 'journey' to analyse the temporal aspects of seasonality of sending. The chapter then addressed the interrelation of people and things by uncovering the link between important life events and the types of items sent before reflecting on the materiality of packaging as a socially significant process that becomes part of practices establishing transnational connections.

Drawing on Xiang and Lindquist's work on migration infrastructure (2014), I argued that, by collaborating with scheduled bus services and clients to address changing circumstances, Moldo-*Vans* create 'routes' that become symbolic constructs of fluid connections between Moldova and the UK. Through extensive networks and constant reimagining of the route map, supported by the 'enchantment' of infrastructure, Moldo-*Vans* allowed its users to create a web of connections acting as vehicles of familial interactions. Delivering to locations outside the determined collection points in the UK and redirecting parcels to a web of locations in Moldova using partners' vehicles, as well as transporting tools and objects used in Moldovan social life, showed that Moldo-*Vans* also act as vehicles of sociality (Altman and Hinkson 2007). Moreover, as this chapter showed, the human effort involved in parcel-sending and the parcel journeys subject to

border crossings and three-day temporalities point to the negotiation of distance that still matters (Burrell 2017) in configuring transnational connections.

Finally, the discussion moved on to uncover the social significance of wrapping and unwrapping as part of the process of anticipating the receipt of the parcel. Drawing on Gell's idea of the materiality of touch embodied in the act of wrapping (1993), I showed that putting together a parcel entails collaboration between Moldo-*Vans,* that take on a mediating role in packaging the parcel, and the senders. The wrapping materials embodying the sender's touch creates a material link between the sender and the receiver.

With Moldo-*Vans* entering the third decade of operating, the social phenomenon is continuing to unfold. As Kemper et al. (2007) note in case of Hispanic camionetas, the culture of transporting socially significant objects across borders would withstand the test of time and uncertainty to thrive as more than a business. With this important role of Moldo-*Vans* as carriers of Moldovan sociality unpacked, I will now begin to address the web of relations associated with objects sent via parcels and specific sending practices that inform these relations. The discussion of the first items emerging from Moldovan parcels and the significance of wrapping and unwrapping continues in the next chapter, focusing on the gift and the importance of special moments in ethnographic examples of new and more established migrants. Starting from the moment of the migrant's departure, I will show that migrants and those left behind establish co-presence through parcel-sending to re-stitch the tear in the web of relations.

Chapter III

The Gift of connectedness: Re-stitching the transnational relational web

When you have a material thing in front of you it means more, well, maybe not more, but you're happy and you remember home. Or when you get some things from home, you feel at home. It brings you closer, it maintains a stronger tie between home and where you are.

Ana

Moldo-*Vans'* popularity among Moldova migrants shows that transnational families aim to achieve proximity even under the conditions of physical separation. This chapter takes the discussion of material practices around parcel-sending further by addressing the process of reconnecting migrants with those left behind through gift-giving.

My intention in this chapter is to approach parcel-sending as a practice that emerges in transnational families' personal 'timescapes', or biographical perceptions of time as a manifestation of post-migration experience. Revisiting Nancy Munn's understanding of important life events as 'temporal reference points' (1992), I argue that the moment of the migrant's departure represents the starting point in re-stitching transnational connection. Furthermore, building on Alfred Gell's notion of 'time maps' (1992) and Rupert Stasch's idea of leaving the parental home as an opportunity to achieve autonomy (2009), I show that post-migration transnational connections are reconfigured based on Moldovan migrants' two concomitent objectives: to achieve individual goals informing the decision to migrate and to strengthen social ties across borders. In doing so, I argue, migrants and those left behind strive to create co-presence by engaging in shared practices of everyday life. The focus of this chapter is on the materiality of these practices facilitated by the emergence of parcel-sending.

Starting from the consideration of the transnational family as connected individuals within a network of relations, the discussion will move on to the exploration of

communication technologies and parcel-sending as important ways of staying in touch. To uncover the material underpinnings of staying connected, the analysis will focus on gifts as embodiments of this reconnection.

The first section of this chapter will look at individual migration choices that impact social relations and the expression of common goals, becoming what Marilyn Strathern calls the 'new absence' (1992:149). While migrants are both drawn towards and away from the social nexus of homeland connections in a pursuit of own aspirations, their existing social networks shape how they embed themselves in the new place. Building on Katy Gardner's notion of 'desh-bidesh' (1993), I show that the constant negotiation of the relationship with the homeland morphs into complex exchanges that parcel-sending sets into motion.

These exchanges are then discussed in the second section in the context of communication technologies. While acknowledging the importance of technologies like Skype in maintaining transnational ties, I draw on Loretta Baldassar's notion of 'co-presence by proxy' (2008) to show the crucial role of objects in creating co-presence beyond sharing images in 'real time'. I show that engaging in practices like trying on clothes sent via parcels while on a Skype call reflects the common goal of achieving a tangible sense of co-presence.

Finally, the third section considers ethnographic examples of this materiality, looking at items offered at different moments after the migrant's departure to those left behind. Building on gift scholarship and, more specifically, on the idea that gifts do not necessarily imply reciprocity, I will show that the connections formed by sending parcels are re-making the social fabric in the form of Christmas presents, items of clothing and small tokens of appreciation given to friends. Thus, I argue, such gifts encompass two dimensions of transnational interaction: the out-of-the-ordinary, related to important events in individual and familial timescapes, and the mundane, related to offerings of subsistence.

3.1 Migrant's departure as a tear in the web of relations

In previous chapters I touched upon the distinction between 'before' and 'after' time playing an important role in how transnational families map time. In this chapter my aim is to delineate the distinction between 'then' and 'now', emphasising that in following chapters the focus will be on post-departure experiences. Thus, I argue that the migrant leaving represents a referential milestone in family life (Munn 1992), which is the important moment when the departed migrant's family *becomes* transnational.

I will begin this section by explaining the temporal significance of the moment of departure in relation to the impact on existing social ties. In the moment of departure, the distance that appears between migrants and their families in Moldova is understood as relational separation, akin to Stasch's account of Korowai practices of leaving to gain autonomy by withdrawing from the nexus of kin relations within the parental home (2009). In my informants' case, leaving produces an initial shock in the shared sense of proximity among newly emigrated informants. The tear in the web of ties appears to create a dissonance sparked by the unfamiliarity of being separated. However, while informants continue to perceive time in 'before' and 'after' categories (Gell 1992), reconnection is further achieved through a continuous renegotiation of ties.

In the second part of this section, I will unpack this negotiation of relational kinship by focusing on how individual goals, seemingly clashing with the common goal of staying in touch, contribute to strengthening not only kinship ties, but also broader social connections. Instead of dispersing existing connections, distance redefines the physical and symbolic space in which dispersed connections continue to interact. This interaction is both unique and shared, depending on personal circumstances, incorporating Tremon's notion of 'flexible kinship' (2017) that applies to transnational families, where the multitude of kinship practices emerge from personal circumstances and individual experiences of space and time, as I will detail below.

3.1.1 The timescapes of post-migration experience

When transnational families are separated by distance, the common goal of staying in touch remains as important (Bryceson and Vuorela 2012). While it may seem that there is a clash between this common goal and migrants' individual goals away from home, I will show that goals co-exist in the shared desire to reconnect. Thus, transnational families create their own timescapes, based on a common understanding of temporal anchors defining their post-migration experience.

In addressing these timescapes of transnational family life, it is important to focus on three temporal aspects: the moment of departure, important events perceived by informants as defining post-migration experience and individual timelines reflecting the 'before' and 'after' time determined by separation.

The departure is clearly marked by the temporal point referenced by informants as '*când a plecat*,' or 'when [the migrant] left'. Accounts of their families' post-migration experience thus rarely employ dates and times. Instead, informants place themselves within space-time in sequences of events (Gell 1992) that relate to moments like gaining a qualification (*când şi-a terminat studiile [when she finished her studies])* or the birth of a baby *(când s-a născut cel mic [when the youngest was born])*, important moments shared with those left behind regardless of the distance. The 'before' and 'after' time in this context is marked by references such as *înainte să plece (*before leaving*)* or *când eram împreună* (when we were together, when we still lived together). Once the family becomes transnational, mobility becomes a way of existing in the 'after' time. As Marcu (2014:342) notes, this mobility ultimately involves the renegotiation of transnational ties.

> […] people who live their lives in movement make sense of their lives as movement. […] This takes physical and emotional presence. It requires spending time with those who live nearby and staying close to those who are far away.

In the 'after' time, then, this renegotiation occurs through everyday practices (Munn 1992), as shown in more detail in chapters IV, V and VI. In this chapter, understanding how separation unfolds in this web of relations explores the moment such practices emerge.

Finally, I employ individual timelines to place my informants' biographies[58] in the context of the emergence of these practices in relation to their parcel-sending. By following the sequences deemed important by informants and their families, I show how connections unfold in 'after' time to include the moment of departure and the milestones achieved in their transnational life.

3.1.2 Individual goals within the transnational nexus of ties

Understanding how migration decisions are made in relation to personal goals and how migrant networks contribute to settling in the country of destination provide an insight on the first steps towards re-stitching connections. However, instead of focusing on the types of ties, I will address how individual goals relate to the negotiation of existing ties.

Dorin is a 30-year-old fitness aficionado with a degree in International Relations who moved to London in 2015 without a well-determined plan. Moving to the UK was an adventure, an experience for the sake of it, 'to see what happens', as Dorin says. He admits that, ever since he graduated, he has not been certain of where to go and how to fulfil his potential, and, not unlike other Moldovans his age, he felt migrating would offer more opportunities than the homeland.

On the one hand, for Dorin, the act of migrating becomes a manifestation of coming of age. Just like the symbolic construction of the Korowai house after choosing the suitable

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[58] I am mostly using case study informants' timelines because of more nuanced data obtained over a longer period of observation and interaction.

tree, Dorin constructed a home in the UK after choosing the country of destination, a choice determined by two different aspects. The recent emigration of Dorin's best friend prompted a desire to reconnect and experience a new way of life. Although there was no immediate economic need, he felt drawn in by the strong connection with his childhood friend. They had always been inseparable and, when his friend wanted to go to London to give it a try, Dorin had no hesitations. As Cachia and Maya Jariego (2017) point out, the desire to settle in the country of destination plays a great role in deepening social connections, and the more mobile the individuals, the more likely transnational ties would remain essential. Over time, according to (Wilson 1998), even weaker ties may evolve and morph into stronger ties (Wilson 1998), making Dorin's decision to move closer to his friend an expression of deepening their connection.

On the other hand, the familial ties left behind needed reconfiguring despite their pre-existent strengths. He confesses that there 'wasn't much to do' in Chisinau, the city with most jobs and cultural venues in the country, but also that he left despite his strong bond with his family in Moldova, well-regarded and well-connected in Chisinau, to 'pursue a dream.' Alexandru, the father, is a university professor and respected author of several books on the history of Romanians in Europe. As an ardent patriot, he is convinced that Moldova is the right place for Dorin, even though his son does not seem to share this view. Although he has always been on the road, he does not want to leave home for too long – 'I love travelling, but I can't be away from more than a week – then I want to return.' This wish for return is now being projected onto his absent son. Cristina, the mother, has been working as an accountant at a school for most of her career and has always been a nurturing and family-oriented figure. She is soft-spoken and more vocal about the consequences of her son's departure, and the connection between the two is so evident it almost becomes tangible.

Dorin's not-so-expected move to London the previous year (Figure 3.1) left them struggling to process the idea of their youngest not being close any longer. For them, in their early sixties, Dorin's decision seemed rushed: after all, he had a place to stay and

a job, 'he could found a nice position somewhere,' as Alexandru says. They own a spacious flat in a neighbourhood close to the city centre and another flat in the historic quarters, opposite the mother's workplace. Then, there is also Dorin's sister and her two children, the remaining members of their family with whom he keeps in touch daily.
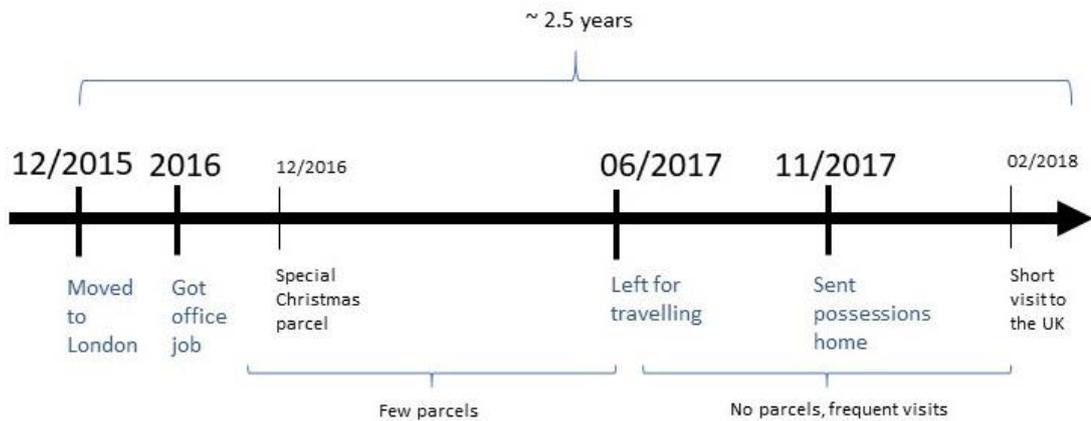
Figure 3.1 Dorin's timeline in the UK.

Dorin's personal goal of leaving the homeland produced a strong sense of loss brought on by the separation, a loss his family found difficult to fathom. In this context, Katy Gardner's insightful work on the Sylheti imagining of homeland and abroad (1993), the vision of *desh*, the home, versus *bidesh*, the foreign, is particularly relevant. Those who never migrated may perceive abroad as the only source of economic advancement, the 'promised land' of opportunity the migrant should embrace to reach a better place in life. While migration is often seen by Moldovans as the only solution to improve their chances at succeeding in life and providing for their families, as discussed in Chapter I, economic considerations are just partly responsible for Dorin's decision to leave. Instead, the homeland has become the starting point in his journey to find his own place in the world. Gardner's reflection on the role of the homeland in migrant imagination (1993:3) thus

incorporates his own perception of the decision to migrate, while focusing on the 'lack' of opportunity as the main push factor.

> Desh is the locus of society, the roots of a person, and yet it is also a place where no prosperity or advancement is perceived to be possible.

While acknowledging the essential role of the homeland, linked by my informants to the 'before' time, this understanding of migration decisions detracts from the complexity of personal goals. The *bidesh* appears as a place of fulfilled dreams even if the dreamer is not certain what the dream is. Dorin's generation of migrants is very different to the 1990's destitute, mostly middle-aged Moldovans looking to ensure their families' survival in times of transition and economic deprivation. The migrants among my informants were part of this new, younger generation who are more attracted by an autonomous lifestyle, rather than being solely forced out by poverty and job insecurity.

This autonomy, as my informants see it, is more about personal freedoms, the possibility to aspire to a life similar to those living in the country of destination, the chance to move freely and discover new cultural dimensions. At the same time, *bidesh* remains a powerful image of success. Like Gardner's subjects, young Moldovans like Dorin see Britain as a land of opportunity although, for them, is has only recently[59] become an accessible destination.

Taking into consideration the attractiveness of this new destination, Dorin's example may appear representative. However, Dorin's migration story reflects a much more complex set of beliefs and experiences unique to the individual, showing that connections are reconfigured within the transnational family's own timescapes, individual contexts in which resettlement occurs. For Dorin, London proved both exciting and challenging. He managed to secure a job he was not too happy with, but soon enough found a position as an office clerk that paid slightly better. That is when he put

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[59] As discussed in Chapter I.

more effort into finding out where the parcel collection points were and started sending parcels. Improved economic security meant that, in Dorin's mind, it was time to give back to the family who always supported him, starting the process of re-stitching. He was still flying home regularly, situating himself in the transnational field and negotiating the decision of staying close to his best friend while staying close to his family.

On the other end of transnational space, Dorin's parents have begun their own process of making sense of the separation. Cristina confesses that, despite constant verbal interaction, she feels that her son has been taken away from her, that she cannot reach him as she has always been used to. This inability to sense Dorin's physical presence described by Cristina implies a loss that has not been fully acknowledged, accepted or dealt with. Not unlike the loss of a physical body part, skilfully referred to by Sobchack as 'transparent absence' of 'lived body' (2010:60), Dorin's absence remains material, tangible, mourned and his return - longed for. The reconnection required after Dorin's departure thus asks for establishing a more tangible way of staying in touch.

3.2 Parcel-sending as emerging practice creating co-presence

In the quest for reclaiming familial integrity, migrants and those left behind turn to communication technology to reclaim co-presence. In this section I address the important role of online communication in the process of re-stitching transnational connections. Starting with the analysis of Skype as the main means of keeping in touch, I then show that, despite its ability to mediate face-to-face interactions in time-space, the absence of the departed migrant remains unfulfilled.

Building on media scholarship and on Baldassar's insight on the importance of creating material co-presence (2008), I argue that Skype does not replace material connection yet to be made after the migrant's departure. While Skype is used by informants as a tool to establish connections in real-time, I will show that such communication fails to

capture tangible moments in shared family histories. Instead, the act of sharing activities like trying clothes on involves objects sent via parcels, allowing for material co-presence to be created. Using Skype calls shows that parcel-sending informs the emergence of material practices of staying in touch.

3.2.1 The appeal and disavowal of Skype

When the physical body of the departed migrant is 'lost', keeping the integrity of the person's image becomes more challenging, particularly when loved ones and their current lives are no longer in close proximity. Deger's insight on the growing role of digital technology in the development of interpersonal relationships and creating a shared sense of happiness (2016) reminds of the strong impact of the visual, as well as the auditory (Witmore 2006) on construction of kinship ties. Although traditionally distance and the high level of social networks dispersal are thought to weaken transnational connections (Wellman 1999), the rise of accessible online connections has allowed for a virtual world of co-presence to develop, linking people through a flow of material culture immaterial in nature, creating 'measurable kinship' (Sahlins 2011).

Looking at how connections are made across physical locations, Rebecca Empson's observations on the Mongolian household chest (2011) are particularly relevant. The chest is holding objects related to people no longer physically present and keeps the materiality of the reflection in the mirror placed on top of the chest. Objects become parts of persons whose identity is created through collections of objects that evoke communication with the absent person representing a fundamental human need. Similarly, Miller and Sinanan (2014) suggest that technology, especially the use of webcam, appeals to this need, without subtracting the users' human agency.

The visual capabilities of technology allow us to look at ourselves just like we look at our interlocutors. Skype became the main communication channel for Dorin and

Cristina, who called each other daily. In an earlier study, Madianou and Miller (2012) refer to the multitude of technological means people use to communicate or keep in touch in their daily lives. It appears that polymedia determine the way interpersonal relationships are managed. However, in this sense, media channels are used more as a tool that allows utilising their potential for visual agency and for the convenience of minimal time lapse.

Relations are managed *via* technology rather than *through* technology because of the performative powers of actions unfolding beyond the screen and the material connections that exist regardless of the use of technology. Aurica, a 50-year-old homemaker whose son has been in the UK just over a year, credits Skype with forgetting the physical distance that separates them.

> We talked to him just the other day – he was lying in his bed and we were lying in our bed. Would you have ever thought that it could be easy like that? We're at such great distance and we can see each other and talk as much as we want.

This visual exchange is no longer limited by physical space and, in case of Moldovan migrants, time difference. The mirrored image of the loved one and Empson's example of the use of mirror as a reflection on our own personhood within the context of dispersed kinship frames a very material approach. The use of physical extensions of absent bodies, such as the items of the Mongolian household chest, has long been engaging the owners in a 'virtual reality' of co-presence, where the power of the visual is completed by the non-lesser power of touch.

The moving image, however, fails to capture shared moments in family histories, moments materialising the migrant's absence. Father-of-two Vitalie, an artist in his late fifties whose daughters emigrated to Romania and the UK, only uses Skype occasionally. He, however, is reluctant to use mobile phones and prefers calls on the landline when needed on top of Skype. The brand new mobile phone sent by his

daughter from London has never been used, as Vitalie considers such communication unnecessary, explaining it as 'artificial' and 'impractical'.

There is a certain impersonality to the dialogue and a perceived intrusion into his privacy, since the number would be used by anyone who has access to it. As Vitalie travels a lot, he is used to being absent himself. At the same time, he is always happy to welcome his daughters and their children – the one in London has five daughters, and the younger two have not yet visited Moldova. He feels they miss out on learning the language and they rarely visit, limiting the contact to Skype. And because he and his wife, who is now retired, know that the next visit would be a while away, he shares their own way of dealing with the children's absence.

> I took photos [of grandchildren], framed them separately. When we miss them, we just
> pass by and take a look, and it seems to lighten up the soul.

The visual contact remains accessible, becomes a point of reference that transcends time because the connection is established instantly, non-reliant on time zones and call quality. The glance at the snap of the reunited family acquires a power that, at times, may become even stronger through its ability to entrap kin relations in their status-quo. Kea (2017) refers to photograph exchange in Gambian transnational families as 'transnational visual economy', confirming that the availability of instant communication helps overcome isolation and longing for home.

Material reminders, however, are not displaced by digital images. Like Skype, photographs create co-presence to a great extent, but without the temporal constraint. In a sense, in a digital age material manifestations of personhood like Empson's collections kept in household chests not only survive, but fill a very specific and tangible part of the void created by the migrant's absence. The gaze, the eye contact caught in a moment of time that would not shift, remains a remembrance of a fragment of life that Skype calls would not be able to preserve.

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3.2.2 Online co-presence and the shared materiality of the parcel

The shared image becomes more tangible with the shared experience of an activity enjoyed together. While Skype offers real-time co-presence that allows face-to-face communication, when Skype is used to show how objects sent via parcels participate in daily activities and mark special occasions, important practices begin to take shape.

Cristina shares her cooking tips with Dorin online, using ingredients sent by her in a parcel. This interaction becomes their personal moment of mother-son bonding. For thirty-year-old Daria, a dance school instructor who has lived in London for three years, it is the intimacy of going shopping with her mother. She is well-travelled, and so is her mother, Olga, a respected doctor. The pair have been in constant touch on Skype and the parcel-sending both ways has significantly intensified after the first year, something Daria thinks is due to her adaptation to life in the UK. While initially the shopping experience could only be fulfilled during visits home, they have developed their own version of changing rooms: on Skype.

When Daria found a dress she thought her mother would like, she did not hesitate to send it to her, dressing Olga up at a distance and looking at the result on screen. She would ask about the fit, remind her of the return policies and chat about the frock like she would do if she were there in person. Then Olga would choose items for her daughter and attempt the same changing room session with her on a Skype call. As Daria notices, real time visual communication enables instant reaction, making the contact between family members less artificial.

> […] you put it on, and then you put everything else on, and then she asks how everything fits. I think the sender really wants to know if you liked it.

This everyday practice strengthened the connection and the bond between daughter and mother. The same power of sharing material connection on Skype is fully acknowledged by Ana, a lively young woman in her late twenties who has lived in

London for three months and who feels such practices bring her and her family closer together. While she managed to get a job in retail and plans on staying, the instability of her employment continued to be a source of anxiety. Previously, her father had had to leave for a job abroad and her older sister moved to the UK as well, managing to secure a more stable job. This meant more separation for the family, as her mother remained alone in their home in the North of Moldova, making Skype conversations vital to staying in touch.

While Daria and her mother share the experience of an everyday common activity, Ana recalls the special moment of sharing the New Year festive glass of champagne. Her mother sent her a bottle of champagne that she kept until the evening when she opened the bottle on Skype. To her, the highlight of the evening represented the moment of drinking the champagne regardless of the time difference and her physical absence at midnight countdown.

> **Ana:** I just tasted what mum sent me and I remembered everything – oh, and with Skype open!
>
> **Me:** Did you crack the champagne open on Skype?
>
> **Ana**: Yes, yes. Because they celebrated two hours earlier anyway.

Although reproduced in virtual space, this time-space experience remains tangible and material due to the possibility to combine online communication to the materiality of the bottle and the festive atmosphere.

Such special moments creating co-presence on Skype that become materially embedded in transnational life are shared by another family – Svetlana, in her late forties, and Svetlana's mother Eleonora, in her late seventies. Svetlana sends parcels to her daughter, who has lived in Northampton for two and a half years, and her grandchildren. As Svetlana says, she *always* makes sure to send something for the children's birthdays, while Eleonora observes them as they *îşi fac de cap* (fool around) on Skype, happy about the presents received. For Eleonora, this connection is 'all she

has,' because the children already started to forget the language, making it difficult for Eleonora to communicate. Svetlana confirms that speaking Romanian with the children is one of their goals to keep the family together 'before they forget'.

> The children, they are 6 and 4, and we talk on Skype. They say 'Grandma, when we come for a visit, we won't speak Romanian.' […] The four-year-old says 'tell Granny Eleonora to learn English.'

In Moldovan transnational families' case, the act of seeing and hearing each other on computer screens thus reinforces the ties and creates a sense of normalcy of daily life and the shared experience of special occasions, with parcels complementing the materiality of the contact. By offering a palpable connection in significant moments in which co-presence becomes essential, parcel-sending acquires the important role of mediating material connections. In the following section, I will show how gifts offered via parcels contribute to the development and re-stitching of transnational ties.

3.3 Gifts as the first embodiment of transnational connection

Since kin relations extend beyond space and time, maintaining ties through things constitute an increasingly important way of negotiating social relations. In this section I show that through occasional 'infusions' of touch – gifts intended for the extended family – migrants engage in a continuing process of negotiating these relations. I argue that gifts sent via parcels become a willing contribution that goes beyond obligation, leading to a mutually beneficial interaction in familial transnational space. Besides members of immediate family, my informants keep in touch with friends and acquaintances, 'sealing' the connection through symbolic offerings of attention and care. Like Ana and her mother who shared their champagne on a special occasion, Moldovan migrants often use special dates to send a parcel – winter holidays, birthdays, the birth of a child, the

beginning of the school season. Some send when they have saved enough money to afford the shipment.

Not only gifts shape social relations, prompting response from the receiver, but the reason behind gift-giving proves to be equally important. A different approach to gift-giving uncovers the giver-receiver relationship and the emotional charge associated with the process. According to Ruth et al. (1999), gifts represent a symbolic link between the giver and the receiver, reflecting feelings and commitment they have towards each other (Schiffman and Cohn 2009). Indeed, through their symbolic value, gifts reflect the personality of the giver, transmitting a message to the receiver and conveying certain aspects of the giver, as shown by Anton et al. (2014). As Aknin and Human (2015) point out, giver-centric gifts have a stronger impact on the receiver because they show emotional investment in the relationship. And the more 'directed' the selection of the gift is (Kaell 2012), the more thinking is invested into the selection process, the higher the emotional value of the gift to the receiver.

Although gift-giving is associated with the discussed complexity of phenomena and social relations, in Moldovan transnational families' case I am focusing on the non-reciprocal offering of an extension of migrant's self, not only a manifestation of care, but also a material way of sharing an important moment with a person considered as important. In this respect, I am further discussing the seemingly opposing characteristics of Moldovan gift-giving via parcels which result in the same idea of re-stitching the connections.

In relation to the idea of parcel-sending, we can think of objects maintaining the integrity of the social relations fabric, often taking the shape of gifts to the extended family. Unpacking parcels uncovers a complex mechanism of gift-giving not at all limited to any of the opposing sides of the debate on whether gifts require reciprocity (Mauss 1925) or can even be completely devoid of obligation (Siegel 2013, Elder-Vass 2015).

What is evident from my conversations with my informants, gift-giving facilitated by the accessibility of van services is a fluid and equivocal process. Bearing gifts is not only a manifestation of care, it is an attempt at stitching back the weaving of extended family connections and network of friends and acquaintances back home. Fresnoza-Flot's study of the Filipino balikbayan box (2009) looks at care as one of the main motives to send packages, particularly to help parent from a distance. The Filipino balikbayan box – a care package – contains gifts intended for certain holidays and household items and normally has a seasonal occurrence. The package may be perceived as an act of 'replacing' presence with gifts, just like Jamaican women in Canada who use packages as a way of 'replacing' themselves to their children and sharing with them a part of Western 'quality life' in the form of luxury items (Crawford 2003).

Such 'gifts' may be welcome, but not explicitly require reciprocation which may come as a verbal expression of gratitude. They may even exist in a brief moment of time but remain committed to the memory of a relationship through the fact of its offering. The temporariness of such a 'gift' can be uncovered, for example, in the act involving the lady of the house spraying a guest with perfume from the bottle sent from the UK. While this act might partially represent a display of status, it also reflects culturally embedded hospitality which, in turn, provides a whole set of criteria by which a *gospodină*[60] is socially determined. I will now refer to specific examples of how connection is created through gift-giving on special occasions and in daily life.

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[60] The 'perfect housewife', traditional ideal of the lady of the house.

3.3.1 Gifts as the extraordinary

Considering the diversity of objects sent via parcels, it is not always evident that a parcel contains gifts. Accompanied by verbal instructions, some objects become 'gifts' when endowed with this meaning. Wrapped gifts make them immediately identifiable - they represent the 'special' part of the parcel, the surprise element, the embodiment of the importance of the moment they are received.

In Dorin's case, the moment he decided to send gifts home is particularly telling. He only enquired about parcel services in London once a bit more established – although not at all embedded. Shared accommodation was decent, the job – stable, and he decided to send a parcel home (Figure 3.2) for the first Christmas he was not going to be with the family. Dorin knew he needed to get some toys for his nephews and the rest would be UK-made sweets, the ones 'they don't have in Moldova'. The thinking process, the selection and the wrapping of presents for the nephews all indicate his gift-giving was 'directed'. To him and his family, that first parcel represented 'everything': filial care, symbolic connection, manifestation of presence, the act of participating in Christmas celebrations as part of family life.

Figure 3.2 Dorin's Christmas parcel. *(Source: Own photograph)*

The out-of-the-ordinary connotation of the gifts are associated with the 'magic' of the moment shared by the whole family. It was important to send that parcel on time so that the family could open the presents on Christmas day. Cristina collected the parcel – a slim shoulder bag full to the brim, with the ever-present delivery number written on it with a permanent marker – in the morning rush before getting to work. When she opened it, the only visible content was cardboard, paper and plastic – as other senders helped by the parcel van office employees discussed in the previous chapter, he used a lot of recycled packaging. The personal touch, however, came from stuffing a kettle box top to bottom with bags of sweets in order to keep them intact and the careful wrapping of the nephews' presents in festive paper (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3 Cristina unpacking Dorin's Christmas parcel – the nephews' presents are wrapped in blue starred paper. *(Source: Own photograph)*

With special gifts, the act of wrapping, as material as the object itself, is adding value to the object, even if only temporarily.

> One of the most important things wrapping does is personalise anonymous commodities and help convert them into gift by ritually hiding the object and so setting it off from the same object as a simple commodity.
>
> Carrier (1990:30)

For Dorin, sending his Christmas parcel was an important statement on his position in the transnational field: he may not know what the future holds, but his present will always include his family, regardless of the distance. The ritualistic connotation of a special gift offered on a family-centred occasion like Christmas or New Year is reflected in our young Londoner Ana's account of her first parcel received from her mother. The Christmas decoration, a single item not part of a set wrapped separately, was the centrepiece of that significant first parcel.

> [The decoration is] like a boot reminding me of New Year, it's nothing really, but when I remembered, you know… It's made of sponge, but when I saw it, I had tears in my eyes. Look, it's my first New Year away from home, away from parents.

As much as wrapping 'undoes' the commercial nature of objects, it also bears the touch of the giver, adding to the 'specialness' of the gift. After all, more packaging means heavier parcels incurring additional costs, but packing well is another sign of care, as discussed in Chapter II. During the act of unwrapping, an equally important social process of uncovering the 'awe', the 'extraordinary' (Douny and Harris 2014), the decoration takes on the symbolic agency of a tool meant to protect the fabric of connection. As Ana notes, the decoration is thus embedded in her family tradition, regardless of its mass-produced origin.

I don't know, I think it's bought. It's mum – she says you have to have one new toy on the Christmas tree each year. So, I guess she renewed hers and sent one to me and my sister.

Like the gift from Ana's mother, Dorin's parcels reflect the connection with the extended family – his nephews – whose welfare is as important to him as his parents'. The symbolic value of gifts intended for nephews does not allow the connection to break, while the intimate quality of such gift-giving exceeds the gift's commodity value (Jaffe 1999). Based on their migration experiences, the parcel service offers migrants with a lower level of embeddedness the possibility to keep the fabric of their kinship connections intact, giving an important insight on how gift-giving becomes an important contribution and investment in transnational life.

3.3.2 Gifts as the mundane

While it may be easier to observe the 'specialness' of gifts sent for important occasions, the less 'special' objects may be taken for granted. The choice of objects to send is not random: such gifts do not normally require reciprocity or contain items meant to 'reattach' the migrant to the country of origin. Instead, the 'specialness' of the object lies in the exclusivity of the receiver to the sender, even if it is not sent for Christmas or birthday. Dumitru, a farmer in his early fifties, has spent a lot of time working abroad. His wife has been working in Italy for over a decade and only returns home for short visits, while both his son and daughter have moved to the UK. He and his children tend to send parcels more rationally, when there is a need for an item of a perceived 'higher quality' or standard that is worth the investment.

Last autumn they sent some bikes to the nieces, aged 3 and 2. They sent them as they were, packed in boxes. According to necessity.

This leitmotif is reflected in the choice of objects very different to special occasion gifts, at least due to their low utilitarian value. However, sending utilitarian gifts can often be considered 'directed' gift-giving because 'the value of gifts is measured in relation to the potential benefits for the receiver' (Daniels 2009:400). A similar reinforcement of existing connections is explored by McKenzie and Menjivar (2011) in their study of gifts sent home by Honduran husbands to their wives left behind for whom gifts had more emotional meaning than money because they expressed their husbands' love.

This investment in daily life may be as out-of-the-ordinary if perceived as such by the receiver. Vadim is a hard-working man in his fifties, dedicated to his disabled wife, who keeps his well-maintained farmhouse in an accessible village 30km South of Chisinau running. Soft-spoken and timid, he is somewhat surprised that the content of the few parcels sent by his thirty-year-old son who left for London four months earlier would be of interest to anybody. Like rare senders, he almost never sends parcels because his son 'does not need anything'. Instead, he received some 'essentials' that, in his son's opinion, he and his wife had to have, not even knowing what the parcel would contain in advance. The only items received from his son show that, although these may not be seen as gifts because of their functionality and lack of that 'special' aura, they may appear as such to Vadim who is not used to receiving new clothes. The added element of surprise confers a gift 'specialness' to the rare parcels he receives.

> […] a blouse for my wife, some trousers for me, so I have something to wear. They [son and daughter-in-law] say it's a surprise, and I tell them it's okay [to send].

The specialness of these offerings reflects Vadim's modesty and regard for his son's welfare. He never asks for anything from the UK and is happy to provide something in return, as long as it is accepted by his son. Moreover, in Vadim's case the notion of 'gift' extends beyond the objects that make up the parcels. A while ago, Vadim's son started building a house on his father's land and planned to move in with his wife and daughter, who followed him to London. This strong kinship tie sealed by land ownership shows

that the weaving of the relations fabric has much deeper implications in the way their connection is negotiated.

This making sense of the transitional seems to be worth the sacrifice. Vadim is touched by the care manifested by his son when the investment in their transnational life is topped by a gift of subsistence, sharing that 'when he gets his wages, when he saves a little, he sends. The little they have, they still help us.' Thus, the non-regular nature of this kind of support and the perceived exclusivity of the offering in Vadim's mind makes it less of an obligation. Instead, the sharing of resources acquired through hard work strengthens their connection by refocusing on the act of giving: a gift that represents an offering strengthening family bonds.

Conclusion

The physical distancing of a loved one puts an additional strain on emotional resources, demanding a constant negotiation of time and space. Since the migrant's leaving impacts the way ties are maintained across borders, looking at the transnational family as connected selves including significant persons who may not be related by blood, helps address the way common values are shared and how the connection is enforced.

This chapter addressed gift-giving as an important material contribution to re-stitching connections, informing the emergence of everyday practices in transnational life. Starting from the definition of temporal distinction between 'then' and 'now', the chapter moved on to the discussion of the relationship between common and individual goals and the role of co-presence in maintaining ties. Addressing the contribution of communication technologies to mediating co-presence, the chapter proceeded to show the importance of materiality of communication based on examples of gifts informing the development of shared familial practices.

In the opening section of this chapter I argued that the moment of the migrant's departure splits informants' understanding of time into sequences of 'before' and 'after' time (Gell 1992), marking a tear in the web of existing ties and the beginning of transnational life. From that moment onwards, I showed that migrants begin the process of reconnecting while pursuing individual goals that inform their migration decisions. Although migrants are being caught up by push and pull factors that threaten the stability and strength of social networks, individual concepts and understanding of the migration experience define the negotiation of distance. Referring to the 'after' time as post-migration experience, I showed that transnational families continue to share the common goal of staying in touch, prompting the reconfiguration and strengthening of existing ties.

Moreover, drawing on Baldassar's notion of 'co-presence by proxy' (2008), I then argued that communication technologies offer more than face-to-face interaction by facilitating material exchanges of items sent via parcels. When making sense of the separation, migrants and those left behind create co-presence in time-space, triggering material responses to the need of communication. I showed that the use of technology thus allows the power of image and sound to relate on a new level of material proximity. Sharing practices like cooking and shopping on Skype video calls, using sent items, showed that family life continues in transnational space.

Finally, building on gift scholarship and using ethnographic examples of gift-giving in the case of new migrants in particular, I argued that post-migration gifts become the first embodiments of transnational connection. Special occasions like holidays or significant moments in family histories configure the extraordinary in parcel-sent gifts, while gifted objects normally considered as 'mundane' may have the same degree of importance to the receiver as the special gifts in terms of reconfiguring and strengthening ties.

The next chapter builds on this emergence of practices associated with parcel-sending to uncover the significance of foodstuffs, the most common items found in Moldovan parcels. Following the journey of food from production to consumption in the context of transnational life, I will further unpack the materiality of co-presence by looking into commensality informing changing palates and creating connections through gustatory exchange.

Chapter IV

Tracing edible connections: The social life of transnational food exchange

People sending stuff to England, they don't do it for food's sake, it's all about the memories in your brain when you eat that food. You remember home. For a short time, it replaces home, replaces you being home.

Oxana

The previous chapter emphasised the role of parcels in establishing and strengthening social ties, while offering an important insight on migrants' everyday practices through gift-giving. This chapter will continue 'unpacking' parcels to uncover the role of the main items in transnational life, focusing on gustatory and social aspects of food consumption through sharing foodstuffs sent via parcels. This is because foodstuffs are the ever-present items in parcels sent and received by Moldovan transnational migrants, revealing the role of food and practices surrounding commensality in articulating shared expectations and associations that remain intractably connected to the idea of family and home.

This chapter begins with an exploration of food as an agent of gustatory perception contributing to emerging and evolving palate, both in the country of origin and the country of destination. Building on Nyamnjoh's work on food as an embodiment of connections across borders (2018), I will show that, beyond taste, foodstuffs follow migrants through space and time, leaving 'traces' of practices related to cooking and consumption that forge a mind map of migrant networks. With place no longer strictly defined by a geographical space, in the context of transnational life, the taste for Moldovan food is remembered, cherished or acquired, just as Moldovans begin to acquire a taste for foreign produce. At the same time, I argue that being in a new place

with different culinary traditions negotiates the sensory relationship with newly learnt tastes in connection to personal migration experiences.

The chapter will then move on to the analysis of the reasons behind the selection of foodstuffs to be sent and the way senders reconfigure preference for foodstuffs and their perceived 'better quality' or 'good taste'. Analysed comparatively, I show how this preference indicates that taste alone does not fully inform sending decisions. Rather, more complex transnational practices of maintaining connectedness come into focus.

Finally, this chapter will uncover how such practices reflect the strong connection between migrant experience and the social relations associated with food production, transmission and consumption. Building on Stasch's observation that commensality represents an essential practice for sociality (2009), I will show that food creates strong connections through embodied memories and taste. Considering that foreign foods acquire familiarity through consumption (Stoilova 2015), I argue that, through food parcels, those left behind make sense of the separation by engaging with the food of Others, or foodstuffs sent from the UK. While these foodstuffs acquire familiar taste through repeated consumption, universal gustatory qualities of sweetness allow candy sent via parcels to 'enchant' the consumer, becoming 'common' culinary ground linking Moldova and the UK.

4.1 Food on the move: Changing lives, changing palates

Migration and the expansion of foodscapes are interrelated, with food acting as a medium of cultural transmission. As the discussion of parcel vans in Chapter II shows, the movement of material culture accompanying the movement of people is a fluid process that is constantly evolving. Every parcel transported by Moldo-*Vans* contains foodstuffs indicative of an important role food plays in transnational life. As Mata-Codesal and Abranches note (2017), these foodstuffs represent the embodiment of

transnational experience with associated social relations and practices. By carrying foodstuffs, the vans participate in the creation of 'global imaginaries' (Phillips 2006:45) of food cultures, in which different categories of people on the move, including migrants, contribute to the 'expansion of ideas about food and food systems' (idem). As I will show below, tracing the movement of foodstuffs and flavours in relation to migrants' trajectories puts food on the map.

Sharing Moldovan food with non-Moldovan partners and friends, as well as sharing British foodstuffs with those left behind creates a sensory cultural exchange. As Holtzman (2006:366) notes, food should be approached as a 'cultural construct', however, I will show that foodstuffs found in Moldo-Van parcels are not solely a reflection of coming from Moldova or Britain.

In order to understand the agency of food to transform individuals and locales in the context of migration and in relation to developments in the anthropology of food, I will first address what food 'brings to the table', showing that food's sensory power to accompany people in a moving world constitutes more than taste alone.

4.1.1 Towards a gustatory anthropology of migration

Food has long fascinated anthropologists, with a vast body of literature focusing on nutritional and health aspects of food consumption (Cizza and Rother 2011, Phillips 2006, Kolodinsky et al. 2017), food anxiety and poverty (Jackson 2010) or questions of surplus (Hayden and Villeneuve 2011)[61]. In an increasingly mobile world, as people move across borders, foods follow suit (Tam 2001), putting senses and palates in contact with new flavours. Moreover, it has been recognised that such movement

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[61] In this thesis, the themes emerging within this body of literature have not resonated strongly enough in my informants' accounts of their food-related practices. Therefore, while I acknowledge the important contribution of these studies to the anthropology of food, I will not be engaging with these further.

determines migrants to become 'agents of dietary change' (Mintz and Du Bois 2002:105).

The mobility of foodstuffs facilitated by Moldo-*Van* journeys is bound by the limitation of three-day duration, at the limit of the length of time food can be kept non-refrigerated. Everyday practices related to food have translated in transnational space through sensory understanding of the surrounding world that also encompasses making sense of individual changes in daily life (Farquhar 2002). As migrants' individual circumstances change, this sensory connection through food also changes. As Sutton notes (2010:220), engaging with this connection anthropologically involves looking at food in the context of everyday life in which it becomes 'invested with meaning, emotion, memory, and value.' This approach reflects the connections between taste, symbolic value of food and the social relations associated with food production and consumption.

As will be discussed further, food taste is changing both on individual and collective levels. On the one hand, personal taste preferences and embodied memories attribute a certain attachment and value (Sutton 2010). On the other hand, shared gustatory experiences and the act of consuming food as a group activity bringing people together may accept unknown flavours as new markers of transnational daily life.

Moving beyond the notion of taste as the sensory construct shaping migrant identity, I am thus focusing on the experience of translating taste into everyday life as inherent part of transnational practices that emerge through parcel-sending. The dynamics of sending patterns and the types of foodstuffs can change or adjust over time, reflecting changes and embeddedness in senders' personal histories. For example, new arrivals might yearn for the familiar taste of homemade pies, while well-established migrants might only receive certain foods occasionally or not at all. Migrants with access to van services may be prompted to send more often, developing preferences for certain foodstuffs or requiring only festive foods around important holidays. The differences in sending decisions and parcel contents represent the complexity of migrant experiences.

And then, new products make their way into the parcels flowing back and forth. Besides shared familiarity, sharing new experiences through food becomes a tool shaping transnational connections and even local marketplaces. Thus, in relation to questions of taste and changing palates, I will further unpack how following food and its consumption practices can put places and people 'on the map'.

4.1.2 Edible trails: Mapping time and space through food

Parcel foodstuffs are temporally limited to a three-day 'expiry' interval that limits the choice and taste of produce that can make up parcels. In this context of food mobility, Monica Janowski's observation of the food's incredible power to manipulate time and human behaviour (2012) is particularly striking. When physical distance only becomes defined by this temporality, freshness and availability of food provide another level of transnational communication and, ultimately, the unfolding of family histories across borders. Thus, 'food provides a sensuous and a social space for drawing on the past to construct the present and imagine the future' (Janowski 2012:183).

This bridge between the taste of home to combat nostalgia (Pigliasco 2005) and subsequent ability of familiar foodstuffs to acquire new meaning in relation to the migrant experience show a constant process of negotiating the migrant's life in the country of destination (Coakley 2012). And though some migrants only send for special occasions, the exchange keeps flowing even through a punctual symbolic gift of the 'taste of home' which can act as an infusion in the strength of transnational connection. Moreover, the seasonality of sending discussed in Chapter II and sending food related to special occasions like wine for baptism or birthday cakes reflect important moments in receivers' lives.

The Central market in Chisinau – one of the biggest in Moldova and closer to several parcel collection points – is an interesting example. The place also incorporates the farmers' market and is popular with both locals and visitors. Tills loaded with familiar foods attract attention, sellers and buyers engage in conversations that often reflect narratives of migrant life. In this sense, the farmers' markets act as places of remembrance, filled with associative images, smells and sounds that trigger a mnemonic reaction by engaging the senses.

None of my informants whom I visited in the UK have access to a Moldovan farmers' market, with Eastern European ethnic stores taking its place. In her article on migrant marketplaces, Elizabeth Zanoni argues that the connections established by transnational migrants cause 'global integration' when links to 'homeland foods and customs influence commodity and migration networks, as well as the global foods these networks produce in migrant marketplaces' (Zanoni 2018:12). When I scoured the locations where my informants lived in the UK, I noticed the availability of such ethnic stores in areas with higher concentration of Moldovan migrants. The opposite was also evident: there were much fewer or no ethnic food stores in remote areas. Not only the availability of ethnic food locates migrants within a geographical place (Marte 2007)[62], it also becomes possible, to a great extent, to trace migrant networks through both commercial spaces selling foodstuffs from the homeland and Moldo-*Van* collection points.

While residents of London and Northampton[63] have better access to ethnic stores that stock certain products, like sweets, salami or ingredients for traditional dishes such as stuffed vine leaves, others may only be able to get Moldovan products if someone sends a parcel. At the same time, even ethnic stores might not be able to offer the same selection and freshness and the trip to the ethnic store (which is never specifically

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[62] Marte discusses the idea of creating 'food maps' to trace migrant networks.
[63] Areas with higher concentrations of Moldovan migrants.

Moldovan) does not offer the same nostalgic experience that involves remembering home (Munoz 2017). Rita, a rural homemaker in her early seventies, saw her daughter off to Northampton two years ago, while her son has been living in London for almost a decade. Despite the availability of ethnic food in both UK cities, her daughter and grandchildren prefer food prepared from homegrown ingredients that cannot be sourced in ethnic stores.

> Last time when my girl was sealing [in the UK] the roast pepper jars (*zakrutci* [slang for preserves]), ever since she's been nagging me to send. 'Mum, send me those peppers, because I fancy having some.' So, what did I do? I got one of those two-kilogram jars, stuffed them as much as they could take, and froze them. […] we send *ghiveci* [traditional Romanian vegetable ratatouille]. […] Homemade, all homemade.

Asked why Rita's daughter is not interested in using her recipe to buy local vegetables and prepare the same type of *ghiveci,* Rita immediately points to the differences in the varieties found in UK shops. Moreover, her grandchildren became used to the taste through return visits to the Moldovan countryside where Rita grows the vegetables.

> No, they want the local ones. The granddaughter told me: 'Grandma, the way you make that tomato fried *pătlăgică* [regionalism for tomato] in the cast iron pan…' […] It's good - countryside good.

While some foodstuffs like roast suckling pig are impossible to source in the UK, other traditional foods are still sent, despite not being grown and prepared at home.

> I send them […] pickled cabbage, and then they eat like here, at home. Yes, they can buy it there as well, but I better buy it here, because I know it's tastier. […] She tried pickling the cabbage in the UK, she says the appearance is nice and round, but the taste is not the same as the one at home.

From my own migration experience, I remember how I asked my father to send me a piece of *brânză,* traditional sheep cheese that is only preserved in brine at constant temperature and sometimes struggles to survive the three-day trip. He went to the

farmers' market where he found a seller who 'knew exactly how to pack it, since she had been sending the cheese to her children abroad' and I received the cheese in brine, encapsulated in several layers of cling film. Building rapport with permanent customers and the culture of letting customers sample the produce is part of sensory exchange that leads to 'shared food values' (Karrebaek et al. 2018:24).

In similar accounts, market sellers Florentina, in her forties, and Lucica, in her fifties, procure local produce to provide to their loved ones. They both have their daughters in the UK who sometimes ask for local wafers and chocolates which are, according to their daughters, further shared as the 'taste of Moldova'. The embeddedness of the migrant experience in such a local space where familiar flavours can be procured shows that the market has become part of the transnational migrant network. While foodstuffs like *brânză* and chocolates may represent a gastronomic symbol of Moldovanness, it is important to understand how the preparation of food and sharing it across borders enforces the transnational connection. As a recent study on Mexican migrants' experience of shopping for food at the ethnic La Pulga market in California shows, 'the search for a sense of place and a strong longing for the food prepared in Mexico contribute to La Pulga's consideration as a transnational space that allows the Mexican migrants to be part of the collectivisation of their self-identification as Mexicans around food' (Vazquez-Medina and Medina 2015:138). Thus, the Central market becomes both a physical and symbolic space in which practices around foodstuffs identified as *Moldovan* can be traced, from sourcing ingredients to optimising packing techniques to extend shelf life. The food's journey from the market or the private kitchen to the receiver's plate across borders thus denotes the constitution of a symbolic locale in the country of destination in which consumption takes place.

4.1.3 From plate to place: Food infrastructures and changing palates

The foodstuffs transported by Moldo-*Van* parcels seem to emphasise the importance of understanding the flow of consumable material culture between countries, as discussed by Cook and Crang (1996). Reflecting their idea of London as foodscape, the knowledge that forms around food - choosing ingredients, cooking and sharing food with others – creates place in the country of destination. While food parcels become embodiments of transnational connection, restaurants and ethnic shops also participate in enforcing this connection.

Seemingly uninvolved in 'travelling' foodstuffs' journeys, ethnic restaurants prove to be as intertwined in migrant infrastructures as the parcel vans. Personal kitchens and 'public' kitchens still require ingredients that need to be sourced across borders. In this respect, the Moldo-*Van* phenomenon shows strong similarities to Nyamnjoh's account of the representative case of Lucy, owner of a Cameroonian restaurant in Cape Town, catering to a community that has no or limited access to traditional food in that area of South Africa. The insight on how Lucy initially sourced traditional ingredients for her kitchen confirms that markets and parcel vans act as important constituents of migrant infrastructure. While Lucy arranged for ingredients like *egusi* or *eru*[64] to be sent via scheduled buses from a supplier in Johannesburg to be picked up at the terminal, Moldovans arranged for foodstuffs like *brânză, mălai* or *murături*[65] to be delivered by parcel vans to collection points. In the past decade Lucy switched to new suppliers who appeared in Cape Town due to discovered similarities to Nigerian cuisine which led to the emergence of mixed ethnic shops and an increased number of non-Cameroonians dining at her restaurant. As Nyamnjoh notes, while 'food may be a marker of identity and "otherness", it also bridges communities' (2018:29), just like Moldovans who would use Eastern European ethnic shops to buy ingredients. At the same time, in case of

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[64] A type of gourd or spinach meal.
[65] Sheep cheese, maize flour or pickles.

Moldovan migrants, the process of acquiring traditional foodstuffs from homeland continues to be facilitated by the expansion of parcel van routes.

Traditional foodstuffs are, therefore, involved in a continuous cycle of acquisition and consumption that seems to be interconnected with external gustatory influences, creating the 'bridge' described by Nyamnjoh. *Brânza,* the Moldovan product that embodies the taste of home, continues to play an important role in Moldovan food imaginaries. The use of dairy becomes the connecting element in adopting new products like mozzarella, for instance. Not only the recipe uses a common ingredient, its adoption also reflects historical migration trends in the past decade. Italy is one of the countries of choice for Moldovan migrants (IOM 2013) who have been moving there for work partly because Italian is so similar to Romanian. Ten years ago, it was next to impossible to find mozzarella in Moldova; today, at least three local factories make several varieties of this dairy delicacy. It was difficult to transport considering its short shelf life, but local entrepreneurs with expertise acquired in Italy spotted the opportunity to fill the gap and now mozzarella is now widely available for an Italian dinner on the balcony overlooking the yard of the average tower block. In Corr's study of the role of food in Andean social life (2002), she argues that food informs social relationships, taking into account the appropriation of Catholic gustatory symbolism. In Moldovan context, mozzarella does not only represent a novel introduction to the local gastronomic scene or a new business opportunity. It reflects the evolution of local palates, transfer of knowledge and the development of culinary tradition.

As seen above, foodstuffs, like transnational migrants themselves, are subject to journeys and transformations. Food exists in its own temporal dimension, from production to transportation, storage, consumption and the remembrance of the act of consumption which, ultimately, continues to create a sense of commensality in transnational space. These aspects will be discussed further in relation to the choices of what goes into the parcels and how senders negotiate the volume and price constraints to pack foodstuffs in their parcels. I will now look at how time, place,

embodied memory and changing palates translate into transnational foodscapes by engaging with ethnographic examples and analysing processes underlying the choice of edible parcel items.

I will further address the distinctions in taste and gustatory preferences that give an insight on the diversity and choice of foodstuffs to send and the perceptions of taste in relation to quality as a symbolic construct incorporating the notion of Western lifestyle.

4.2 Choosing the ingredients of a 'successful' food parcel

I showed that food is linking people and places as imaginaries, embodied memories and shared experiences. What I will unpack next is what makes a 'successful' parcel from a sensory and anthropological point of view. In this section, I will look at why certain ingredients and foodstuffs are selected to be sent, what makes them significant to the sender and the receiver rather than 'traditional', and how the 'quality' of food is informed by the shared memory of taste and associated consumption.

When space and weight are limited by price and transportation time, choosing what to send may become challenging. If we think about the history of food, selecting certain foods lies in a long anthropological tradition related to human activity, association, social relations and perceived benefits of foods. The anthropological exploration of hunter-gatherers has notably offered a better understanding of what food is and how it becomes associated with human activity. The acknowledgement that sharing food is fundamental to human societies (Fried 1967) led to the uncovering of suitable ingredients and sharing foraging roles within groups (Hill et al. 1984). This social aspect of procuring foodstuffs, in turn, focused attention on the process of transforming raw material into food as a complex notion associated with social practices. In fact, food becomes indispensable to human sociality, with the process of cooking an inherent part of being 'human' (Wrangham 2009).

The decision to send or not to send, to wrap up a foodstuff or decide against it lies in a complexity of practices around where ingredients come from and how they are going to be used. I will further unpack these practices by looking at what represents a 'good' taste, what makes a foodstuff 'special', the importance of timing, migrant visits and sharing food in person, the desired and the forbidden foods, as well as the mechanisms of perceiving and attributing a level of quality to foodstuffs.

4.2.1 To eat or not to eat

As already discussed, sending or not sending food is a choice informed by aspects like availability of van collection points, cost, weight and journey duration. However, considering service accessibility, I am approaching the question of whether to send food or not from the perspective of taste value as perceived by senders and receivers. Originating in the primordial selection of edible versus inedible foods, making the 'right' choice could be fundamental to survival. In transnational space, making the 'right' choice can become similarly important. In fact, the 'edible' can also become a symbolic construct, culturally and socially informed. As Falk notes (1994:69), this distinction is 'closely related to analytically constructed and more abstract binary oppositions such as us versus them, same versus other, inside versus outside, good versus bad and culture versus nature.'

When discussing foodstuffs, my Moldovan informants repeatedly addressed the 'right' foods as *bun*, or 'good'. In an ethnographic sense of Moldovanness, the word '*bun/bună*'[66] encompasses a plethora of understandings related to the material and sensory qualities of an object or the qualities of a person. It can indicate that the food is tasty, that something or someone is positive, kind-hearted or just 'right'.

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[66] Bun (m), bună (f), buni (m. plural), bune (f. plural) – literally, 'good'.

With food, attributing 'goodness' to taste alone does not explain why individual and collective perceptions of the same food may appear different in different contexts. Lucy's clients in Nyamnjoh's food ethnography (2018) have developed their own perception of what 'good food' means. The association of ethnic food with 'realness' and 'health', of somebody skilled preparing this food in a 'proper' way as opposed to 'bad' or 'rubbish' food reflects this distinction between what taste is supposed to be and what can be consumed outside the symbolic space in which the knowledge of cooking traditional foods is applied.

For some Moldovans, especially in rural areas, 'good' food is associated with being responsible for the production of ingredients and cooking from scratch. Veaceslav, a 50-year old school housekeeper, owns a large property and land in one of the biggest and entrepreneurial villages close to Chisinau. He is content with owning farming equipment, as he enjoys working the land that allows him to produce almost everything his household needs in terms of food. A tractor is parked on a concrete platform next to his driveway. 'It's running!' he tells me proudly, and it helps him manage the workload of taking care of his crops from ploughing to harvesting. As a result, his cellar is full of homemade wine and jars of meat and pickled vegetables. Although he and his wife are happy with their possessions – besides their main residence and the land, they own a car and a summer house with a terrace – their children decided there were not enough opportunities in Moldova and emigrated. His daughter has lived in Italy for a decade where she settled down with her Italian partner and their daughter. His son recently moved to London and, as Veaceslav thinks, is not yet convinced whether he would stay.

When Veaceslav talks about his children, his understanding of their migration decision translates into material, tangible imaginary of 'here' and 'there', a sensory experience of being in a different place. The distance and separation in his case are bridged by his children's imminent returns to visit and the produce he occasionally sends.

> When I sacrifice the pig, I send [some] to them, to help them out. Let the kids come. Maybe they have more advanced things in the UK. The *'cele mai bune'* (the best) groceries are in Moldova. I rear my own poultry on grain I grow myself, I have so much land, I don't buy tomatoes in the spring. I like to have my own.

For Veaceslav, 'good' equals to self-produced, the knowledge of the whole production cycle, all stages of which are performed by him with the use of his beloved farm equipment. The effort and investment in the land also produced taste associations that Veaceslav does not seem to share with someone who has not gone through the same process. He emphasises that when he tried food abroad, he found that the taste of organic produce from home much better. On the contrary, his daughter's Italian partner who visited several times and stayed at the family's farmhouse found the fruits and vegetables grown by Veaceslav and his wife very different to Veaceslav's notion of 'good'. The flavour praised by Veaceslav did not appeal to his guest. The same applied to wine, grown and produced on the land.

> I tried apples there [Italy], they don't taste the same. It has no worms, but no taste, either. Or maybe we're used to it! I noticed, [daughter's partner] tries the apple, but he does not give in to the taste. I have red wine, white wine, sweet wine I made myself, it's '*tare bun'* (really good). But they [foreigners] are looking for something else.

Wine plays an important role in Moldovan life – the seasonal aspect of its production, the Christian uses in religious rituals, the importance of greeting guests with a glass of wine all represent the bond between people sharing the symbolic drink. Wine is indispensable during festive meals such as baptisms, birthdays and religious holidays, therefore it is not surprising that every Moldovan parcel contains some wine. In this case, wine becomes what Mata-Codesal and Abranches (2017) call 'marker foods' that play an essential role in community life on special occasions demanding different food offerings to daily cooking.

At the same time, the seasonality of alternating mundane and special occasions in relation to parcel-sending has generated the emergence of food sourcing and production practices that allow us to understand how transnational daily life unfolds on household level. Preserving the meat of sacrificed animals – especially the pig – is tightly related to seasonality and Christian holidays. Another couple whose son has moved to Northampton a couple of years ago - Anastasia and her husband Petru - are retired, having lived their whole lives in a big village not far from Chisinau. In their neighbourhood, they are part of a large network of villagers whose children also emigrated and discovered van companies. Sending parcels has become so habitual that these families developed sending patterns associated with seasonal produce and special occasions like Christmas or birthdays. Depending on circumstance, Anastasia and Petru are always ready to source any foodstuffs requested by their son, and their experience is not unique.

> **Anastasia**: There are neighbours sending. [Neighbour] used to send a lot, yes, she has been sending for 10 years. We don't send that often, but we send when we sacrifice the pig. […] They initially bought things from there, *mă rog*[67], got used to those products. We used to send poultry a lot. We send it still. In winter, we put poultry in jars and make home preserves. We also buy *brânză*, we buy it in bulk and it's cheaper, and we send. *Pe scurt*[68], we send whatever they want us to send. From home, they say it's *'mai bun'* (better). They ask: 'What have you got?' And we tell them, if we have it, we have it, if not – we know what…

> **Petru**: What to keep for them! [laughs].

Not only have they learnt what their children preferred after having tried similar produce in the UK, they negotiated their nurturing role as parents and sourcing agents familiar with the 'good' taste. Anything not produced by their land is sourced from known suppliers and added to the parcel. As with poultry, certain foodstuffs are transformed

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[67] Common expression, equals to 'I mean'.
[68] In short (slang).

according to best availability and freshness to frozen or cooked. This way, their children's kitchens always have a good supply flow of ingredients which, in turn, ensures the smoothness of daily operations in their children's households.

4.2.2 Quality control of taste across borders

The 'good' taste can also be seen as 'desirable' and needed, particularly when having a familiar and appreciated flavour for a special occasion. When distinctions between flavours and tastes arise, exchanging foodstuffs offers the opportunity to reconcile the differences through consumption choices and the way food is tried and consumed. Locally produced foodstuffs are eaten alongside global products and, while for some ethnic groups recreating tradition through food is a means to navigate modernity (Searles 2002)[69], what remains important is the process of engaging with food itself.

In this process of attributing value to foreign foods, the same ingredient or produce may be attributed 'bad' value, like apples in Veaceslav's Italian son-in-law's case, or 'good' value, when foreign foods are seen as either luxury or perceived as being of higher quality. For example, chocolate, coffee and condiments from Germany, Dutch cheese and Spanish olives are some of the foreign products generally considered to be of better quality among Moldovans, based on previous imports and gifts of food from Moldovans working in those areas.

If food is a cultural and social construct, the perception of its quality cannot be solely related to taste or gustatory preferences. Receiving British products gives those left behind the opportunity to sample something already assessed as 'good' by their loved ones abroad that has the added value of being packaged and paid for to be transported. Not only does the sender share the perceived 'good' taste of the product, the quality of

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[69] On Inuit communities in Canada.

food becomes associated with the perceived higher quality of life in the UK. Anatolie, a sixty-year-old food safety inspector who works in a government agency based 10 km away from Chisinau, does not hesitate in acknowledging the difference between local products and their counterparts found in Britain. Both his daughter and his son have left for London about two years ago and have established their lives there. They do not send often, but they have already learnt the types of foodstuffs Anatolie would appreciate.

> They send [UK] products, sweets, coffee… that country has way better food safety standards and the coffee you get from there has a completely different taste to the one you get here.

Even to a professional's eye, although coffee is not grown in the UK and is exported from non-EU countries, EU import regulations are perceived to be strictly enforced as opposed to Moldovan food safety standards. As I will discuss further in relation to food sharing practices, parcels facilitate this exchange of 'high quality' items that, in turn, are often shared with others in Moldova, contributing to the receiver's status as a 'benefactor'.

While the differences in taste and perceptions of quality contribute to understanding how we engage with familiar food and foreign food, it is important to emphasise that a dichotomic vision is not the focus on my understanding of transnational food practices. Rather, looking at these differences helps map the social relations and processes associated with food consumption. These differences need to be explored further in order to understand the significance of foodstuffs in parcels and why people continue to send these hard to preserve items.

4.3 Commensality and the social life of food

As discussed above, food is not unchanging and inconsequential. Rather, food effects change in people's interactions with their social environment and acts as a tool in managing these interactions (Fajans 1988). Not only food plays an important role in the process of making sense of the world around them, migrants and their families, it influences daily life in ways that show embeddedness in 'broader inter-household relationships that encompass a broad array of social interactions and culturally mediated roles' (Koster and Leckie 2014:108). These interactions take place in relation to food's discussed mapping of time and space where the act of sharing is as important as the complexity of meanings and value attributed to it.

Food is central to our sense of individual and group identity through the act of consuming it as part of being together. Commensality thus becomes an indissoluble part of transnational life, with parcels supporting the material exchange of foodstuffs. As Dusselier (2002) notes in her account of Japanese Americans' negotiation of a sense of place in WWII concentration camps, food creates a non-physical space which helps preserve a sense of cultural identity through using past memories and envisioning the future. At the same time, her subjects construct 'portable senses of place' through sharing food (Dusselier 2002:157) – circumstances comparable to Moldovan transnational families' challenge of negotiating non-physical space. The simple act of eating carefully selected foodstuffs partially replaces traditional mealtimes, while 'shared tastes contribute to a shared identity' (Walker 2012:207), creating transnational connections through embodied memories and newly discovered flavours.

While global movement impacts taste, it is important to consider how changes in taste develop on an individual level and how these changes are shared, adopted or rejected within smaller groups of connected people. I will show that a general preference for a food can start from one food parcel and influence a whole neighbourhood. In fact,

change can start in migrant kitchens and spread through sharing food. As Harbottle (1997) discovered about her Iranian informants in Britain, even learning to cook with British ingredients can lead to increasing dislike of familiar recipes and tastes, while 'traditional' ingredients would have to be received directly from Iran, not acquired in an ethnic store.

Even more interestingly, commensality facilitated by parcel-sending contributes much more to transnational life than just spending some time together. As Stasch notes in relation to the Korowai (2009), interrupting commensality represents 'real' death – it is only when those connected to the departed stop eating together with them that they are considered deceased. In Moldo-Vans' case, food sent via parcels act as another material communication channel bridging physical distance, with similar perceptions of loss. The trauma of not cooking together, of not eating together – that is another sensory way of feeling the loss of the migrant and togetherness.

This togetherness may be under threat in times of uncertainty brought on by the migration experience. In this case, food may remain the comforting familiar, a 'cultural umbilical cord' (Vilar Rosales 2012:253) that preserves the sense of belonging, the constant element of Moldovanness which may be difficult to define in the context of modernity. In her work on Turkish migrants in Vienna, Savas (2014) indicates that objects are strong signifiers of belonging to a place and the loss of these objects is perceived by the migrant as the loss of their identity in the country of destination. Sometimes the recovery of something familiar makes up for the loss – such as over-the-counter medicine requested from home by Czech Roma emigres to Canada (Janku 2007) or traditional food shared by Greek students in Italy (Pelliccia 2013), showing attachment to the country of origin. However, as I will show, the main distinction between familiar – 'our' – food and the food of the Other remains evident, allowing a better understanding of how sociality and practices associated with transnational commensality are configured.

4.3.1 'Our' food: Sharing the common platter

Familiar foods - or 'our foods', as I will refer to them - are usually found in parcels sent from Moldova to the UK. The familiar may be comforting, especially for new migrants, but since transnational life is fluid, tastes change, identity shifts and the future is built on the complexity of social, sensory and mental experiences of place and belonging. The attachment and the recovery of things that represent such roots, like a tea glass for Turkish migrants in Germany, become a way of recreating 'home' in the country of destination, according to Bilecen et al. (2015). Since it is not possible for the transnational family to be physically present at the dinner table, commensality often shifts into digital realm, with foods consumed during Skype calls.

The presence of the extended family in this food exchange reminds us of traditional family dinners, the domestic realm of food consumption at the table which involves proximity and sharing. Non-physical co-presence in transnational space allows family members to share food, although face-to-face interactions at the dinner table, the intimacy of the moment (Duruz 2008) and the creation of memories while consuming food (Duruz 2010) cannot be fully reproduced. In this context, *talking* about food and describing its taste, combined with the materiality of parcels create another level of co-presence. As Karrebaek et al. (2018) note, the 'symbolism of the mouth' produces interrelated practices involving language and commensality.

Talking about familiar foods also engages mnemonic mechanisms and connects senses. In Chapter II we looked at Dorin's migration experience – the young man from an academic family, passionate about fitness, who is a recent arrival to London. His parents Cristina and Alexandru found it difficult to deal with Dorin's absence and Skype calls became a regular practice, often around dinner times, when Dorin would recall the taste of his mother's recipes. Food one is used to, childhood food '*ca la mama acasă*

(like at my mum's)', as any Moldovan would say, is the comforting familiar that some find it hard to let go.

At the same time, making familiar foods expresses existent bonds by engaging in cooking practices as if the absent migrant were still there. Ever since Dorin left, daily life has not been the same – Cristina sometimes still finds herself cooking something Dorin likes, although he is not there in person to share the meal with the family. The familiarity of taste preferences is also embedded in this bond. The weekend before receiving a parcel from London, Cristina and Alexandru prepare a parcel of their own to send back, shopping for products that their son wants or they *think* their son needs – buckwheat, honey, red table wine packed in a plastic bottle, apples, sheep cheese. Reminiscing about Dorin's departure, Cristina pictures sending her son off with a load of frozen homemade crepes filled with cheese and meat. When she found out they have been confiscated at customs, it filled her with sadness: 'it's a shame, because it would have been so easy to pop them into the frying pan and have them fresh and ready moments later.' By imagining Dorin engaging in similar cooking practices without the same skill set and knowledge as her, she symbolically transfers her connection to Dorin through cooked food. Taking it away affects the sensory materiality of this bond.

Cristina is not alone in her attempt to comfort her longing by offering the nourishment she perceives her son does not receive. The same care is reflected in 30-year old editor Lilia's exchanges with her husband who left for construction work in London. He sends her and their two children regular parcels full of 'everything they ask for', while she prepares and packs homemade food for him to take to the UK when he comes for a visit. Sending parcels makes no sense to Lilia, who thinks the journey is too long to keep the food tasty and fresh – the fundamentals of a homecooked meal. Instead, she packs her husband's suitcases with all the foodstuffs she would have sent if the journey duration were shorter. On her husband's return journeys to London, carrying her cooking becomes a 'reverse remittance of food, cooking practices and culinary knowledge' that

'underscore the invisible care that the migrants receive from families in the country of origin' (Bailey 2017:59).

> **Lilia:** [If I had the chance] Maybe [I would send] something related to food. It makes no sense to send it, as it's expensive and it's cheaper for him to make it. And you have to pay and pack it well for it to keep fresh after three days, especially in the summer, it's not very handy. I even thought of making some *plăcinte* (traditional pastries), something he likes, but they drive for three days and what state will those pastries be in? You have to eat them straight away and I won't send 2-3 of them. If you send, you send. So we agreed that he'd stuff himself with them when he comes home and he'd take some with him. I give him *plăcinte* and *chiftele* (meatballs) when he leaves. Everything he likes. I make it and freeze it. And he takes them with him and sorts them into smaller bags and puts them in the freezer. It's easier. Also, *brânză de vaci* (cottage cheese), I know that I couldn't find any when I went over there. So, he froze that as well and then ate it with pasta or jam. It's good, it's got calcium. And that's that, mostly food. That's what he lacks as a man. He says when he needs to cook, he dreads it, so I tell him 'die of hunger then!' [laughs]. He comes home tired and when he has food in the freezer, he takes it little by little and it lasts him for quite a long time. The jam, for example, he likes sweet cherry jam and I put it in plastic bottles.

> **Me:** Do you make it yourself?

> **Lilia:** Yes, well, it's actually grandma who made it. In the countryside. We put it in plastic bags or bottles with a wider top, it's easier to use and lightweight. So he could remember Moldova and something from home.

Although the food is prepared by a traditional female figure back home, both Dorin and Lilia's husband engage in similar cooking practices in their London kitchens by transforming the food from frozen ingredient into the taste of 'home'. By preparing food for her husband, Lilia feels that she managed to reach him, keep him happy and close to home. The distance tearing the family apart disappears for a mealtime moment when

the familiarity of the food made by Lilia's experienced hands diminishes the anxieties of working in a foreign environment and coming back to an empty home after work.

These two examples of a mother and a wife's care for their loved ones are, perhaps, the most evocative of traditional gender roles among Moldovans. Although women only slightly outnumbered men in case of my informants, it is obvious that women tend to have a stronger connection to the making of food, while both men and women share similar experiences of consuming food, particularly the strong sensory elements associated with food that generate the feeling of nostalgia. Oxana, a vibrant independent young woman in her twenties, is very vocal about this. She has been in the UK for two years and mostly receives parcels from her mother who would only send something Oxana tells her she wants. Her friends send parcels too, and several of them send weekly. She tends to move a lot, new flat every six months, and the only time she sends anything home is when her surplus homewares cannot be stored anywhere. Oxana is a frequent visitor, but when she is not in Moldova, she asks her mother to send her painting supplies for her art activities and some products she cannot find in the UK.

> [Mum] will also get pickles and cod liver, we can't do without it – even now I've got three cans in my fridge. To be honest, I think that all this situation with the parents, people sending stuff to England, they don't do it for food's sake, it's all about the memories in your brain when you eat that food. You remember home. For a short time, it replaces home, replaces you *being* home.

The familiarity of the food that Oxana mentions does not involve the act of cooking as much as the act of consuming 'remembering' the homeland through food, influenced the migration experience. The consumption of a strongly flavoured foodstuff triggers a sensory reaction related not only to eating familiar foods, but also being in a familiar place.

> What are these parcels about? What Moldovans usually want from home: pickles, sheep cheese, smoked pork belly, the other day I got a pickled watermelon, pickled tomatoes.

It's just I had this fit of nostalgia for these pickles, and I only eat this much here. It just reminds me of home and makes me feel better, because recently I found a job and couldn't go home that often.

The taste, the shape, the flavour are just the starting points for a much deeper understanding of how food creates emotional attachment that, in turn, produces associations with life at home that contain shared collective memories that link the past, the present and the future (Choo 2007). Away from the homeland and from a source of such triggers, nostalgia may set in, even for longer periods. Thus, in case of my informants, receiving a parcel with familiar foodstuffs (Figure 4.1) temporarily alleviates the longing for a comforting sensory experience.

Figure 4.1 Honey and apples produced by the sender and maize puffs as parcel filler sent from Moldova to the UK. *(Source: Own photograph)*

This act of consumption produces associated rituals of preparing and sharing foodstuffs by making the foodstuffs 'our own', 'good' and 'right' (Falk 1994:70, 81). Food practices and rituals also become 'tools for the production of transnational migrant identities' (Chapman and Beagan 2013:383) in the sense of food's influence on migrant

personhood. The comfort of eating food from home, though incapable of replacing the homeland, makes the migration experience easier for some migrants, while making other reject familiar flavours. The way food is consumed – how, when, with whom – is dependent on social relations associated with food sharing via parcels. As Bailey (2017:59) notes, there is much more to food and associated practices that shapes a migrant's world.

> Thus, the travel of food, food practices, commensality aid in creating four senses for the migrants and their families. These four senses: sense of self (food and belonging), the sense of home (cooking and food practices), the sense of community (commensality with co-ethnics) and the sense of 'co-presence' (food and care) reflect the flows of norms, practices, identities and social capital between transnational households.

All these dimensions remind us that the sensory exchange is not universal, with same transnational connections being on the sending and the receiving end of familiar and unfamiliar foods. Being able to send homemade food and sample foreign produce made 55-year old Iulia engage actively in transnational food exchange. She has been alone for over two years since her sons and daughter Irina left for the UK. Widowed for quite a long time, she retired from her nursing job and lives in a two-storey house on a well-maintained plot in her village close to Chisinau. Although her health has not been good, she likes to socialise and is well-connected within the community, often sharing food received from the UK with her friends and family in the village.

The van service is available in her village and collects the parcels from her home. The parcels are then delivered directly to a Northampton collection point, so convenient for Irina who lives in the city. They started sending soon after she left and have not stopped since: in colder months, they send weekly or bi-weekly, while in the summer soaring temperatures prevent them from sending any food. Irina prefers meat from home, pickles and even meals like stewed green beans prepared by Iulia. The fast pace of sending has determined Iulia to become very versed in the art of packing and also creative – she remembers packing fresh eggs in plastic buckets with lids that reached

the UK without too much damage. 'Only two eggs cracked, can you imagine!' Iulia tells me, explaining that the taste of the eggs laid by the chickens she reared is impossible to find in the UK. Irina also thinks that the free-range varieties on British supermarket shelves have a very different taste. 'I know what an egg tastes like,' she tells me, laughing, 'the taste of childhood.' Iulia packs seasonal produce like sweet cherries, peaches and plums, also vegetables and frozen meat. The meat is usually rabbit or poultry, reared by Iulia herself, stored in the freezer after being slaughtered.

This practice of sharing familiar foodstuffs has thus allowed Irina to develop her own preferences that Iulia has learnt about and, in turn, Irina introduced Iulia to a new taste that has already become familiar to Irina. On this familial level, a new process of engaging with the food of Others has started to develop.

4.3.2 The Other's food: The transnational tasting buffet

As opposed to familiar food, the food of 'Others' refers to previously unfamiliar taste of foreign foodstuffs that gradually becomes part of the receiver's adapted palate. Such foods are usually sent from the UK to Moldova. The wealth of feelings related to new food consumption experienced by my informants is tangent to how tourists negotiate being in a foreign place, with time and intent being the major differences in how these willingly displaced people engage with their culinary environment. In her study on food as a tourist attraction, Boniface (2003) speaks of several types of motivations behind food consumption. Seeing food as comfort in uncertainty or as a familiar taste relieving anxiety in a globalised world and feeling curious about new culinary experiences that generate sensory pleasure make our exploration of taste in the context of migration even more complex.

Embracing the food of Others (Figure 4.2) as the beginning of the process of gustatory change begins, in case of my informants, with one representative foodstuff. Its familiarity is defined by the positive perception of it by the sender.

Figure 4.2 Examples of UK products sent to Moldova. *(Source: Own photograph)*

Intrinsically, the receiver accepts this perception based on the shared values around food discussed in the previous section. While Irina usually sends British chocolates and biscuits, Iulia has come to appreciate Philadelphia cheese the most. At first, she did not know what the soft cheese variety 'was about', but soon asked Irina to send some of it every time.

> I like this Philadelphia cheese. [..] I quickly learnt what was good when my daughter started sending.

The preference for the spread developed into a social act of sharing the 'taste' with the whole neighbourhood, where several families began to ask their relatives settled in the UK to send them the same type of Philadelphia cheese. Starting from one first parcel, from the uncertainty of foreign taste, Philadelphia cheese has become a staple food in local homes, displayed and offered to visitors and reflecting the migration link with the UK.

As with familiar foods, rituals of consumption develop around these 'new' foods, making their way into transnational daily life. On her part, Irina is happy to share her experience of a product she likes a lot. Although the product may be available in some stores in Chisinau, it is expensive and more difficult to get. The convenience of almost door-to-door delivery makes financial sense and takes less time to put a parcel together. 'It's like a part of life,' says Iulia, 'I get ready on the weekend and we send on Tuesday. So, Irina knows by Sunday or Monday at the latest to tell me what she wants.'

The taste of foodstuffs originating from the homeland evolves alongside the migrant – new recipes emerge, the local market becomes more open to foreign produce. As in case of Bulgarian yoghurt, analysed by Stoilova, a foreign product can be accepted by the locals if it manages 'to transform a taste that was foreign into something familiar and part of home' (Stoilova 2015:32).

Even the patriotic farmer Veaceslav who prefers Moldovan produce over any foreign ones appears more flexible in experiencing new tastes than his Italian son-in-law. When his son sent him the first parcel, he admitted to finding some of the flavours appealing.

> Yes, there are some products they have [UK] that are good. Sweets, I like them. I think Moldova is better for fruits and vegetables, more original.

With informants referring to 'good' versus 'bad', familiar versus foreign foods, these distinctions imply the existence of a tension between what foodstuffs can be considered as acceptable. However, the experience of trying and acquiring taste for the food of the Other shows that there is no dividing line on transnational dining tables. Moreover,

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Veaceslav's experience with British sweets shows that certain flavours may be more easily accepted by a more 'conservative' palate. Next, we will see that the power of sweetness to enchant the consumer is another bargaining coin in establishing transnational gustatory connections.

4.3.3 The enchantment of candy

With foodstuffs central in transnational life, creating practices associated with commensality, ritual and consuming the sacrificial animal around special occasions, the sweetness of candy becomes a 'universal' gustatory exchange value when it comes to sharing familiar and foreign tastes. Not surprisingly, sweets are the most common foodstuff sent both ways. With a long shelf life, individual wrapping and a universally familiar taste, candy becomes an easy exchange chip between cultures. It is easily stocked, transported and shared, and even used in daily life as a consumable reminder of the tradition of welcoming strangers. Candy is part of an almost ritualised act of giving it away to people who visit the Moldovan home, or, in our context, the foreigner experiencing Moldovan culture through taste. Since the combination of senses determine an individual's perception of the social world (Howes and Lalonde 1991), this form of olfactory connection is not surprising. This connection is strongly related to the positive experiences associated with consuming sweets – even the widely recognisable name of the Moldovan factory is *Bucuria*, the *Joy*.

This rituality takes on a new form in the shape of a horde of candy, stocked up in a London flat. American-raised Moldovan Laura, in her twenties, has only recently attempted to reconnect with the homeland through her frequent sending practices ever since she moved to London and discovered the nearest van collection point. Her grandparents who live in the south of Moldova send her parcels every week. *Bucuria* sweets are in each parcel, against Laura's plea to cut down on the flow of sugary

delights. At first, they sent 'a little bit of everything', including the ones they considered the best. Mitică, Laura's grandfather, wishes his granddaughter weren't that far and Felicia, Laura's grandmother, is happy that the opportunity to send parcels exists. Sweets represent Moldova, they think, and Laura should have 'enough' of it for everything she needs. Between the three of them, sweets have become the embodiment of communication and connectedness that had not been previously possible when Laura was in the US. The lack of parcel vans and international shipping regulations meant that even long-lasting produce was unlikely to reach the receiver.

At the same time, a cultural connection through gustatory experience of Moldovan sweets has been made between a Moldovan and the Other. After having tried all varieties and decided on taste preferences, Laura's British boyfriend acquired a taste for Moldovan candy. So did quite a few of their friends – there is now little surprise when Moldova and its products are mentioned in a conversation. But the flow of parcels is not running low and they never manage to consume all the candy they receive. 'It's a shrine!' laughs Laura, describing the shelf unit to house the sweets they installed in their kitchen in London. They eat very little of it – most goes to family and friends, and friends of friends, anyone who is curious to try. A quick look at the supplies allows them to assess how much of it is left. 'We will never run out!' says Laura's boyfriend, who was surprised at first. The 'shrine' to Moldovan candy occupies a dedicated space, an enchanted reminder of Laura's roots and fast-developing connection to motherland. The act of sharing candy represents an introduction to Moldovan culture, it triggers small talk that tells the receiver of the sweets more about the country, builds a connection based on one of the strongest recognised sensations: sweet taste associated with pleasure. In this case, sharing candy almost becomes an initiation ritual for the 'non-Moldovans'. Martinez de Albeniz (2015:92) makes an interesting observation on candy consumption that, in my informants' case, reflects on the role of foodstuffs in modernity:

It is true that there is a symbiotic relationship between candy and ritual: ritual can do a lot for the consumption of candy by re-enchanting it; candy, for its part, given its social and imaginary appeal, is the perfect foundation for a return to rituality in societies that are fast losing it.

For Laura, in the context of her transnational experience, giving candy away is not about indulging in the nostalgic taste of childhood, but about the symbolism associated with its consumption. Her grandparents do not send the candy to allow her to experience a familiar taste, but to keep the connection going, to offer her something from the homeland that would be useful to her and her social life.

The delicate power of candy lies in its long shelf-life, its universal sweet taste easily perceived by people from different cultural backgrounds and the simplicity of sharing. Varieties give the opportunity to expand intercultural dialogue and, for some, the wrapper may also act as a 'souvenir' of the act of consumption. Oxana, the young woman who was so nostalgic about pickles, has also regularly shared candy with her work colleagues until they got to know the varieties and decided on a preference. I have myself shared Moldovan candy with colleagues and friends, with one particular person holding on to the wrappers to remind himself of the flavours he liked most.

The wider network of connected people benefitting from this gastro-cultural exchange goes beyond immediate kin relations and indicates that the scale of the food sharing phenomenon facilitated by parcel vans transcends the confines of private kitchens. With the selection of British candy (Figure 4.3), the accomplished cook Lilia's husband does not only send nourishment, he sends to his children in Moldova the taste of the UK.

Lilia: Sweets, that's a given. That's out of discussion, the kids are waiting for parcels full of chocolates, all sorts of candies of theirs [UK].

Me: Ones you can't find here?

Lilia: I haven't seen them. They're like bubble gum, or brown, in different flavours and colours, different fillings. I know once he sent a big parcel and the girl took some to school

and she shared them with her classmates. And the kids went: 'Where did you get them from? I've never tried anything like this before.' Where from…from far away!

Thus, the sweets are shared far beyond the immediate network of the family. As with other foreign foods, the next time a parcel is sent, the children would ask for more candy like that, until they get used to the taste, to the perceived 'high quality'. After a while, the newness of products from the UK becomes familiar, while familiar foods may be rediscovered after a period of oblivion. Even the 'special' can be comprised of familiar items and, at the same time, the familiar can become 'special' if requested at a moment when its significance to the receiver is particularly high.

Figure 4.3 Examples of UK sweets sent home by Moldovan migrants. *(Source: Own photograph)*

While sheep cheese might be too much to chew for the foreign palate, candy often sparks curiosity and conversation. And reversed exchange is strikingly similar, making candy an almost universal 'currency', not only for transnational migrants and their families, but also for establishing local connections in the receiving country.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at food as embodiment of social interaction accompanying people on the move across borders. Subject to limited and repeated journeys, foodstuffs leave tangible traces of their movement and presence within transnational space, allowing to map time and place according to emerging practices surrounding its sourcing and consumption. While taste alone fails to explain the complexities of these practices, observing the taste of otherness that determines people's perception of food helps uncover the reasons behind the choice of foodstuffs to send.

Starting with the analysis of distinctions between 'good' and 'bad', familiar and foreign foods informing how palates are developed, I have shown that such distinctions are not definitive and evolve when the food of Others becomes familiar. I then showed how the choice and consumption of foodstuffs sent via parcels is indicative of social processes associated with migration that take place on a micro-level[70] . Such processes may be overlooked in favour of larger migration trends that inform policy regarding services like parcel vans, overlooking the significance of individual choices of what goes into parcels. Thus, I showed that change is effected in personal histories of migrants and those left behind, as mirrored by their food preferences that can show embeddedness and represent an olfactory learning process for evolving palates.

In this learning process, I argued, a common taste – sweetness – becomes a universal marker of cultural and gustatory communication contributing to transforming the food of Others into a familiar and accepted taste. With its power and ability to produce symbolic meanings associated with food and culture, from luxury to daily staple (Mintz 1985), sugar becomes embedded in daily life and transnational migrants' palates.

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[70] In this context, individual or familial.

Like the processes of food production, sharing and consumption that take place in people's kitchens, behind closed doors and in shared professional spaces, people relate to built environment through material culture. And, just like foodstuffs and other items share space within the parcel, it is important to understand how these material extensions of selves and the body make sense of the distance and surrounding world. In the next chapter, I take this conversation further by unpacking how objects sent via parcels participate in construction of transnational home. I will show that everyday practices informing homemaking as symbolic constructs develop further to the point of relocating entire homes, using Moldo-*Vans* as transnational removal services and vehicles facilitating furnishing the empty homes left behind in Moldova.

Chapter V

Rehoming transnational connection: The materiality of post-departure construction of place

*When I know we're all set [for relocation to the UK], I will send **all** my house stuff over.*

Alina

Unpacking Moldovan parcels has so far shown that items sent via Moldo-*Vans* reconfigure the material connection with the departed migrant and create a sensory bridge across borders. While in Chapter IV I showed that the consumption of foodstuffs allows for commensality to become an important part of forging connections, the role of non-perishable household items in transnational material practices is yet to be uncovered. This chapter will look at parcel-sending as a material practice of constructing transnational home. Starting from the moment of the migrant's departure from shared domestic space, the chapter will explore what 'home' represents to those left behind. The discussion will then move to the role of objects in reconfiguring domestic space to achieve this sense of 'home' and proximity to the absent migrant, before looking at Moldo-*Vans* as mediators of moving homes. I base the first half of this chapter on the most representative ethnographic example of a case-study participant whose practices of reconfiguring domestic space make tracing connections evident. More ethnographic examples are then introduced in the second half of the chapter to address the diversity of practices associated with constructing home across borders.

There are three aspects that I want to emphasise in this chapter. Bringing together the discussion of interlinked biographies of people and things presented in Chapter II and the emergence of shared practices discussed in chapters III and IV, I will first consider how placing and replacing objects reflects the negotiation of separation in relation to

personal migration experiences. Drawing on material culture of the home scholarship, including Garvey (2001), Daniels (2010) and Danny Miller's anthropological contributions, I argue that changes in material practices related to decorating rooms reflect the transnational family's migration experience, embodied in objects sent via parcels. As Turan (2010:54) notes, 'the meaning of an object relies on how much a person is capable of incorporating the object into his or her life,' engaging with object histories as much as the owners' biographies. I thus argue that shopping for second-hand items in charity shops attributes a new significance to objects, linking objects and people through shared domestic use.

I will then reflect on object placement within the home, indicative of connections that may be hidden or on display, embodying familial bonds. On the one hand, visible connections become embodied in images and displays exhibiting the migrant's link to the inhabitant of the space, such as ornament assemblages or family photographs. On the other hand, the invisible network of relations exists in a more subtle and less noticeable selection of items. While clothing acts as the migrant's 'second skin', other items like books, educational toys or plants point to processes related to coming of age or nurturing familial bonds.

Finally, revisiting the idea of Moldo-*Vans* as active actors in migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) discussed in Chapter II, I argue that Moldo-*Vans* continue to mediate Moldovan sociality by acting as removal vans to relocate homes. Thus, I will show that the transnational home is not strictly defined by physical or symbolic boundaries and can be reconstructed in a different locale.

5.1 Flying the nest: Reconfiguring home after the migrant's departure

The migrant's departure triggers a response in those left behind, materialised as practices and behaviours associated with placing and replacing objects within the home. Thinking of Korowai houses (Stasch 2009), the construction of home represents an essential marker guiding sociality and defining territory. The Korowai build their houses on trees above ground, allowing them to negotiate both horizontal, or territorial space, and vertical, or private space. This physical separation is the main way to acknowledge the presence of the Other, while the house building technique creates tangible and recognisable embodiments of distance as making sense of the surrounding world.

In Moldovan migrants' case, the separation from face-to-face contact the Korowai tree houses afford translates into their migration experiences. When a Korowai moves out of the home shared with connected Others, the building of the new home represents both the distancing from Others and the establishing of own household within the social nexus of the Korowai society. For Moldovan migrants, leaving in search of new opportunities and settling in the UK represents the achievement of autonomy through distancing from the familiarity of the homeland.

The departure of the migrant thus represents a symbolic detachment from the 'nest' of familial life, generating a sense of disconnection and ulterior reconfiguration of existent social relations. When a disruption to family life takes place, practices of re-establishing familial bonds become instrumental in navigating separation (Parker and Mayock 2019). As Bloch and Parry (1982) note on physical separation, this moment of departure does not only represent the loss of previous relations, but the beginning of regeneration, of the reinvention of social relations associated with objects.

From the perspective of the materiality of the home, understanding how personal histories inform the development of practices around objects within the home translate in the way things received via parcels are handled and placed. By sending household

items, migrants continue to maintain the connection through material contributions to this reconfiguration of their former shared space.

In the following sections I will look at how object biographies, as signifiers of associated relations, unfold alongside people's biographies. In turn, the relationship with these objects develops within the process of emerging practices, meant to re-stitch the connection with the departed migrant. I will show that co-presence continues to be achieved through the use of objects in daily life and practices of re-establishing shared experiences within domestic space. I am further exploring the role of received items in such shared experience by looking at how ceramic bowls, just like the food they hold, achieve commensality, before addressing the biographical aspects of second-hand items that acquire a 'second' life, shared with the new owner.

5.1.1 The house in order: Placing objects, placing lives

The migration experience has an important impact on what migrants choose to send. For some, material connections through foodstuffs and occasional gifts may be the only indications of processes taking place in transnational space. For others, sending household and home décor items allows to establish a more direct link to the idea of 'home'. In her late twenties, Elena is freelancing and teaching art, consulting a start-up and dividing her time between events in East Anglia and London. Like other migrants whom we met in the previous chapters, she uses Skype and sends quite a few food items home, but the main part of her parcels is reserved for objects intended for her childhood home in Chisinau.

Unpacking Elena's relationship with her family home involves two interlinked histories, materialised in Elena's sending practices: her own history of migration to the UK and the history of her purpose-built family flat. There is a strong connection between members of her family, who all experienced migration from different perspectives. Her mother,

Margareta, has just retired with a basic pension, having trained as an accountant and, after difficulties with finding stable work in Chisinau, has been doing seasonal care work in Italy every year for several months. Elena's father, Ion, is a mechanical engineer who runs an electronics repair shop from home. He is not keen on travelling and has only recently applied for a passport to visit Elena in the UK – in his words, Moldova is his 'only home'.

Elena's older brother, Marin, lives in a bungalow in a suburb of Chisinau with his wife and child. He also experienced life abroad, having worked in the US and the UK. He speaks of enjoying his experience working in London for one year a couple of years before Elena decided to move. Although Marin considered joining Elena in the UK because of his fondness of London, he acknowledges the fact that there are few opportunities for him, considering his background in law. His university degree would not be accepted in Britain and he would not want to start all over again in a low-paid assistant position. These difficulties determined him to abandon the plan to move to the UK, though 'things in Moldova are not getting better and young specialists are not well motivated to work.' At the same time, Marin was the most supportive of Elena's migration choice, as he seemed convinced that all the opportunities for Elena's career development were there.

The emotional support from her brother and financial support from her parents determined Elena's decision to move. She had always dreamt of moving to the UK, ever since she was a child. When thinking about her new country of residence, she recounts images of cosy cottages sunken in greenery, an abundance of blooms and countryside charm. These images of England inspired her greatly as she studied hard to become an artist, and, after having done her Master's in Cambridge, she found success in the country of her dreams (Figure 5.1). There is no doubt for her that she will be staying: her career, many friends and partner are all in Cambridge, she is well-connected, active in the local community and has just applied for her permanent residence. Still, despite

this level of embeddedness, she has not yet been able to secure a home of her own, having moved three times since coming to the UK.
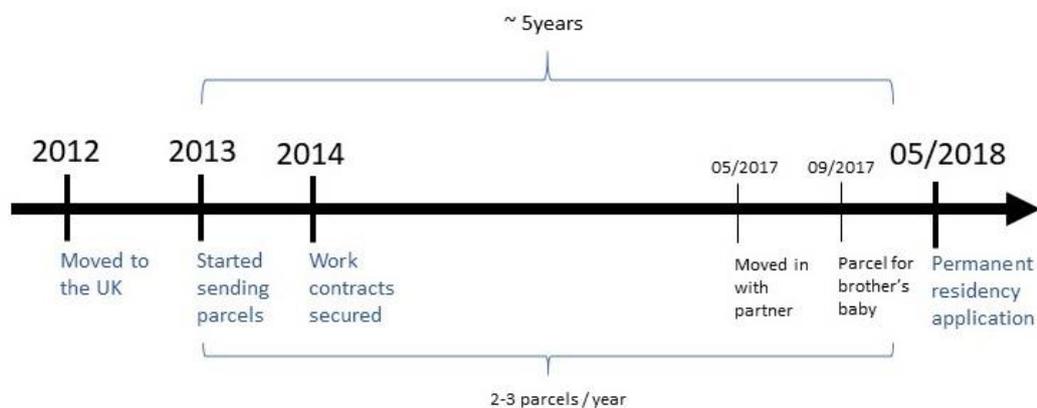
Figure 5.1 Elena's timeline in the UK.

Despite this perceived high level of embeddedness, the uprooting is still affecting Elena's understanding of 'home'. The succession of flat rentals in the UK has forced her to reassess her 'being at home' in the new location. Living in rented accommodation is a common occurrence among Moldovan migrants in the UK and very few of informants are homeowners in the UK. Like Elena and Dorin, the fitness enthusiast whom we met in Chapter III and who shares a flat with his friend, most informants speak of their living arrangements in terms of 'shared' and 'common' space, rather than personal, lived-in space.

Therefore, in this chapter I am not focusing on the question of home ownership as a legal construct, but on symbolic construction of place that defines being 'at home'. In Elena's case, the objects she sends find their special placement in Margareta and Ion's flat in Chisinau. Thinking of Bourdieu's Kabyle house (1970), there are obvious distinctions between the areas within the flat that are used or taken care of by Elena's parents. While Margareta actively participates in the unpacking and placement of items sent by Elena, Ion's role is reduced to delivering the parcel from the collection point to

the flat. Inside the rooms, Ion's working space containing equipment for the repairs business is small and contained. Reminders of the children's milestones are placed in all rooms, with Elena's room preserved as she left it and the living room and kitchen both transformed by Margareta with Elena's guidance and parcel items.

For the mother and daughter, the familial home surpasses the notion of physical place, defined by family members' experience, life events and biographies. The flat itself becomes a place where memories have been created, a place to return to. Elena's childhood bedroom and Margareta's living room thus become domestic pilgrimage sites (Kruse 2005). In a similar way, Laura, the American-Moldovan we met in Chapter IV, has a place of pilgrimage in a space that she cannot entirely call her own. She lives in her partner's flat decorated by his mother, with few possessions to call her own. At the same time, her kitchen stand harbouring the stash of *Bucuria* candy becomes her material anchor of her connection to the homeland. The placement of the stand which she calls her 'shrine to Moldovan sweets' is strategic and thoughtful. Given the weekly replenishments of supplies from her grandparents' parcels, the stand becomes a permanent fixture and a place of daily visits for a guilty treat. As Laura puts it, the stand represents her piece of home in the UK.

Elena also sends items to be placed as material pointers of her presence in her childhood home. Margareta then continues to furnish the home in which she brought up her children, thus navigating the flat according to the family's own time maps (Gell 1992), related to important stages in their lives (Robinson 2005). While inhabited space gives an incredible insight into its dwellers' social life (Bowlby 2011), it is not only the space itself that pieces together the connections informing family life, but also the objects that define place as much as their owners' life histories. Even more importantly, the change of objects' location within the home and refurbishments reflect the connection to the family history, a process particularly evident in teenagers' bedrooms (Lincoln 2014). Elena's childhood bedroom has been redecorated after she graduated from school, fuelled by her dream of the UK. The changes remained in the family's shared space, as

the flat preserves these memories through objects (Morton 2007). As Attfield (1997) notes in her study of the coffee table as the interior item representative of modernity, objects allow dwellers to interact with their environment and reconfigure it in ways that reflect changes in their life histories. Elena's bedroom thus continues to be her 'assigned' space within the flat, although she is no longer present there.

The flat has a history of its own. Assigned to Elena's family during Soviet rule, it is purpose-built with two-bedrooms, located on the seventh floor of a thirteen-floor tower block. While I will be briefly returning to the discussion of post-socialist architecture in relation to placement of furniture later in this section, my intention here is to relate the dwelling's connection to the family. The centrepiece of the living room is a mock British fireplace, built from plain bricks and painted over, with a mantelpiece full of ornaments sent by Elena. There are photographs on the walls, hung in frames also sent by Elena. The artworks in the hall are either created or sent by Elena. A large oak dresser occupies the wall near the fireplace.

The significance attached to these objects is representative of the connection to Elena who worked hard to reconstruct social relations affected by her departure through migration. The object placement creates the atmosphere of the living room, a strong cultural and emotional connection to Elena and her imaginary of life in the UK. This atmosphere, Birkebaek Olesen (2010:38) notes, is less about the aesthetic arrangement of the display and more about the feeling of 'being lived in' and Elena's personal contribution to being present in the flat. Things, as much as dwellings, 'are endowed with forms of personhood' (Baxstrom 2017:443) as a way of making sense of being in the world, particularly in urban contexts.

Thus, while physically away, migrants continue to configure space in their relatives' dwelling through restructuring and repositioning, adding and replacing objects as signifiers of self in transnational space. This idea of (re)making self is used by Miller (2001) to determine how people change the interiors of their home, also discussed in

Daniels' study of the Japanese home (2010), which is seen as 'tidy' by the West, while real Japanese homes are perceived as 'messy' and different from this ideal image. The importance of personal relations associated with object placement within transnational homes shows that there can be no 'right' order or shared ideal image of a transnational home.

Therefore, the repositioning of objects embodying the absent migrant is not about attaining order, but more about engaging with objects as if the migrant were still present in the flat. In other words, individual experiences and interactions reflected in placing and rearranging items sent via parcels create a strong indication of the ongoing connections. Next, I will look at processes that emerge around interactions between the objects and the receivers and how these interactions translate into the development of material practices after the migrant's departure.

5.1.2 The material practices of domestic space

While displaying and engaging with objects sent by migrants may indicate the presence of the departed migrant, the materiality of connection through household objects is yet to be analysed in relation to practices that develop around these interactions. With the migrant often living in shared, transitional space, the construction of 'home' partially remains within the physical space of the familial dwelling.

Although migrants' visits refuel live interaction, to those left behind repeated departures reiterate the moment of separation and transition from physical proximity to transnational life. From the material culture perspective, with the migrant's departure this physical proximity can be temporarily lost when objects reminding about the migrant's presence are no longer in use. Making sense of a loved one's departure also involves reconfiguring the relations between their material world and those left behind. Objects

belonging to the migrant thus go through a 'transitional process' (Hertz 1960 [1907]:86) of dispossession, representing embodiments of the lost relationship (Lohmann 2010) and mental representations of how that relationship unfolded.

However, I will further show that this relationship is reimagined through material practices of sharing transnational home. By analysing a pair of plain ceramic bowls sent by Elena and an item of furniture acquired by Margareta from abroad, I will show that the practices developed around the use of these items are much more evocative of the continuing connection between the sender and the receiver than the receiver's 'replacement' of the departed's self. With the migrant's back-and-forth movement between the 'homes' in transnational space, the new materialities that inform the changing landscape of material order within the home prompt responses related to how these new materialities are perceived by those left behind. Changes in object placement may therefore indicate or determine changes in practices.

When asked about the items that specifically remind her of Elena, Margareta shows what may be considered mundane and insignificant – a pair of square bowls Elena sent in one of the parcels. Margareta considers them 'beautiful' and able to 'make food taste better'. To her, the value may be emotional, but the use of these bowls has made her appreciate 'the good things', a process of investment in its social meaning to the owner (Skuse 2005). The mundane sharing of a meal is no longer possible for Margareta, for whom commensality with her loved one is only achieved occasionally. While Elena does not seem to attribute any special meaning to the use of these bowls, Margareta only takes them out on special occasions when dressing the festive table for visitors. The bowls thus facilitate sharing a special moment with Elena, even though she is not physically present at the table.

The rest of the time, the bowls are stored in the oak dresser next to the fireplace (Figure 5.2). The food served in these bowls never leaves the house, interlinked with the space Margareta still considers to be shared with Elena. Margareta's practices around the use

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of the bowls are reminiscent of secondary Solomon Islands funerary food bowls (Revolon 2007) placed on the table as a material embodiment of the absent family member. These bowls are only used during ceremonies of remembrance, when the loved ones symbolically participate in the family meal. When commensality is no longer desired, the bowls are passed on. Similarly, Elena is remembered as if present every time food is shared in bowls at the festive table.

Figure 5.2 Margareta's bowls and the German oak dresser. *(Source: Own photographs)*

However, Margareta is adamant to keep the bowls indefinitely, indicating the continuity of connection making sense of Elena's absence. While the connection to Elena remains strong, Margareta attributes perpetuality to a transitional and fragile object. In contrast to the fragility of the ceramic bowls, the oak dresser that the bowls are kept in is a solid piece of furniture whose perceived superior quality guided Eastern-European shoppers for generations. In communist times, the best items of furniture were imported from Eastern Germany and were very hard to get. Other products from the West were also perceived to have better quality, particularly in the '90s when many Moldovans were forced to look for work abroad. Wood has long been the preferred material for furniture, mainly for what Baudrillard (1968) considers 'atmosphere' created through texture and colour, while second-hand furniture, according to Hakala et al. (2015), leaves an impression of durability superseded by the added value of attached sentiment and the effects of the passage of time.

However, for Margareta, getting the dresser was mainly associated with her ability to provide for the family, as the dresser also reflects her web of familial relations and the connection to home when she was working in Italy. She bought it used and paid for it to be brought to Moldova by a van driver. By storing Elena's bowls in the dresser, sourced in a similar way, the two items become the most telling embodiment of their own transnational connection, reaffirming the link between personal and object histories.

5.1.3 The second life of things

Much like the ephemeral and the perpetual objects, second-hand items represent the disposable and the reused, something to be kept. In his work on rubbish and how items are reassigned value, Thompson (1979) discusses the process of transformation from the 'transient' to the 'durable' by virtue of context and ownership generating value. While transient objects' value decreases over time, durable objects' value increases – the in-between 'limbo' is what can be considered rubbish, which remains worthless until new ownership reassigns it new value. In Moldovan migrants' case, charity shops become loci of material reattachment, in which assigned economic value – second-hand items' price – is not synonymous to the value assigned to them by the buyer.

While the use of bowls creates commensality, the acquisition of items like these bowls in charity shops allows for the shared experience of shopping and furnishing domestic space. Elena is a keen charity shop shopper, considering the range of items available 'interesting and very British', with pre-owned items' previous history adding to their 'uniqueness'. Second-hand goods thus assume a distinct social value as they are purchased for their associations with places and times that appear desirable.

Elena enjoys the process of shopping as much as the things she buys because the thought of her mother appreciating the items ascends to mental co-presence. In other words, Elena shops with 'her mother in mind'. Thus, charity shops also become places

where family memories are acquired and later shared through objects bought by Elena for Margareta, what Hallman and Benbow (2007) call 'emotional geographies of buying'. As Williams et al. (2001) point out, it is important to understand shopper behaviour and preferences in the light of all the factors determining their shopping patterns, which, in Elena's case, represents a selection of items meant to create a source of shared enjoyment with her loved ones.

Storing the precious embodiments of Elena's presence inside the most durable piece of furniture also indicates the importance of protecting these fragile reminders of her presence. The dresser, placed in a visible and accessible area of Margareta's living room, occupies an equally important place in transnational space, being assigned this position because of its relation to Margareta and, implicitly, the members of her family.

The reasons for such a placement reflect how the object's material life relates to the owner's personal relationship with the object. Although objects are often taken for granted (Miller 2009), the mundane may prove more significant in terms of its impact on the furniture owner's identity, as Garvey points out in relation to furniture rearrangement in Norwegian homes (2001). The dresser's physical qualities, like the woodgrain, may be perceived as a reflection of identity and status, like Drazin's association of wooden furniture with Romanianness (2001).

However, while acquiring the dresser can be considered a gesture of care for the loved ones, it does not become part of Margareta's identity or sense of Moldovanness. Owning such a piece of wooden furniture is not an act of showing off her possessions or status – in fact, she only talks about the unit when asked.

> Before, we used to live like everyone in the Soviet times – wallpaper all over, old dark plywood living room unit covering a whole wall, now that I earned some money while working in Italy, I managed to refurbish the flat and make it more modern, like this. I love the oak unit, so much work went into it – look at the detail, look at the quality! We don't get **this** sort of quality here. Some people can afford those ridiculously expensive

Romanian oak units, but have you seen the price? I'd rather go for real German quality, it is second-hand, but it's excellent. Everything we have here is very low quality – even the food.

In Margareta's narrative of this experience, the dresser is likened to desired pieces of furniture she has not been yet able to get. Moreover, Margareta never liked flats. While she is unable to afford the 'perfect home', the objects inside the flat – including the dresser and the items sent by Elena – take on the value associated with a perfect image of a house. In this sense, both Margareta and Elena reuse second-hand furniture and other items in the context of both women's experience abroad.

I am dreaming of having a proper house. But good ones are very expensive, and the cheaper ones require complete renovation, and I just can't deal with all this construction, and rats, and all…

The second-hand dresser thus becomes a material marker of the construction of transnational home. In Reid's study of post-communist Russian flats' everyday aesthetics (2012), she acknowledges the importance of decoration and furnishing practices in home interiors as contexts in which personal histories and social relations unfold. In her Russian informants' experience, furniture represented no connection to the past[71], described by Margareta as 'dark' and 'old', while the act of furnishing reflected an attempt to compensate for the standardised architecture. If Reid's informants regard furniture as 'fashionable', associated with cosiness, Margareta associates the dresser with a new, modern lifestyle. Thus, Margareta's dresser does not represent the continuity of the past, it becomes part of the of her family's transnational relations.

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[71] And related to Soviet era furnishing choices.

5.2 Domestic materialities of the visible and the invisible

The previous section showed that objects and their placement reflect social relations within the transnational family. I will now turn to the discussion of the practices of display informing these relations. In order to uncover the complexity of connections objects make within the home, it is important to understand how these practices are created behind closed doors, in the private space of the transnational home. Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) emphasise that houses are taken for granted outside publicly observed contexts such as conflict and displacement. In the context of migration, the connectedness unfolding through the materialisation of Margareta and Elena's migration experience takes place behind closed doors, invisible to outsiders.

Based on this sensory and symbolic differentiation of objects, it can be argued that homes are often invisible in transnational space because of the perceived distinction between the physical locales. The 'here' and 'there' separation of physical space in which both the migrant and those left behind construct home may imply that, once the migrant leaves, the social processes that take place within the parental home automatically stop. However, I will show that this is not the case, since migrants continue to negotiate lived space across borders through items delivered by parcels. Like the Korowai houses that represent nuclei of social organisation based on distance and relational separation (Stasch 2009), Carib-speaking tribes of South America described by Rivière (1995:202) show similar structure, with dwellings representing social connection.

> Settlements are spatial and temporal discontinuities in a visible world, that is, in a sense, contingent on an invisible reality. Settlements are the visible but ephemeral evidence of an invisible continuity.

Both houses as physical structures and objects that define lived-in space are material conduits of this continuity of connection. In fact, objects play a mediating role between the viewer and the world of the unseen, creating an exchange of the invisible and its visual representation (Pomian 1994). As Hertz observes (1960 [1907]:46), once transcending the visible realm, vanished objects are 'reconstructed in the beyond, transformed to a greater or lesser degree'. I am therefore looking into the interplay of the visible and the invisible by analysing the most common types of items sent via parcels. The displays of artwork, photographs and ornaments occupy prominent, 'public' places within the home, indicating a direct link to the absent migrant. Other important items – textiles, books, toys and plants – imply relations with the absent migrant that go through stages of nurturing and growth. I look at how these links are materialised in the following section.

5.2.1   Connections on display

The connections between the visible and the invisible worlds are embodied in objects on display that relate to the migrant's presence. Placing and replacing objects in public spaces within the domestic space into a desired assemblage of ongoing connections shows a process of renegotiating transnational home. In the visible realm, these objects are represented by photographs, artworks and ornaments.

Photographs and artwork

A common presence in most homes, photographs are, perhaps, the easiest to observe in terms of familial connections. As Edwards (1999:340) notes, the snapshots of time represented by photographs reflect a 'double link as image and material' that create a connection between the past and the future.

The visual power of the image and the recognisable features may also point to the visible familial link. Margareta's living room wall displays an arrangement of family photographs (Figure 5.3). While the original selection started with a family album, faded photographs in plain frames or tucked in display cabinets, the living room started to change after Elena left for the UK. Elena replaced old-fashioned frames with a selection of elegant frames in contemporary colours - duck egg and grey -, completed by more ornate frames in keeping with the over mantel mirror.

The wall is filled with images of young Margareta and Ion, Marin and Elena as children. By providing frames for family photographs, Elena materialised memories, emotional value and the image of a perfect home, visualised her family's biography, inhabited it with a physical replica of herself. Edwards (2012) argues that when photographs are placed in assemblages that reflect relations, they operate as active biographies, bringing dispersed family members together (Empson 2007). While frames give photographs an integrated and aesthetic look, blending them into the living space, other parts of the flat are also infused with Elena's presence: the prints and canvasses she produced before moving out have been preserved and rehung after refurbishment.

Figure 5.3 Family photographs in frames sent by Elena. *(Source: Own photograph)*

While extracting photographs from storage in order to display familial connections in shared space 'saved' them for oblivion and given a 'special treatment', placing Elena's own artwork on the walls of several rooms is as significant. Those close to the family know that Elena is a professional artist, while those visiting for the first time learn that the household is related to an artist at a glance.

Then, there is artwork sent from Britain and displayed in the hallway. The framed batik piece by a Cambridgeshire artist is a strong reminder of the family's connection to the particular place in the UK, placing the familial connections in a tangible and well-defined geographic locale.

Ornaments

While photographs are pictorial in their representation of family links and personal in their attachment to snapshots from family histories, ornaments may seem less evocative of displayed connections. On the one hand, by occupying a central and visible space within the home these objects are easily seen, indicating that they come from abroad – sent by the migrant. Such displays evoke the transnational connection, especially to visitors. On the other hand, the objects' connection to the sender and the receiver puts the objects' journeys in relation to the family's history of migration.

The first indication of the display's British influence is that there is no tradition of fireplaces or mantels in post-communist living spaces. The heating systems of tower blocks was originally supplied by the city, although now more and more people are opting for self-sufficient boiler alternatives. In this sense, the existence of a mantel in Margareta's flat is a striking exception. Before the renovations, the flat used to look like a typical flat of the communist era, with dark wood and glass display cabinets, popular for storing glassware, ornaments and souvenirs. After the 1980s travel restrictions were

relaxed and it became habitual for travellers to bring home reminders of their trips which would often end up displayed behind glass. Instead of ornaments as souvenirs, reflecting a sense of the experienced emotion of travelling abroad and a sensory experience of the present (Zhang and Crang 2016), ornaments on Margareta's mantelpiece reflect the image of her daughter's experience of her new country of residence. The ceramic figurines are the only displays removed from glass cabinets that were recombined into the assemblage of ornaments Elena sent from the UK. One of the ornaments, shaped as a British house, is also the embodiment of Margareta's dream of owning one in Moldova (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 Margareta's mantel decorated with ornaments sent by Elena: note the stylistic differences between 'British' elements and Soviet style figurines. *(Source: Own photographs)*

The assemblage has been put together by Margareta, while the selection was completed by Elena as a reflection of her individual experience: a migrant and an artist. Elena's selection of mantel ornaments expresses no interest for the traditional English mantel clocks, for example. The house-shaped and oriental garden lanterns are both made of the same enamel-covered tin metal and balance out the light and the projected pattern, once lit. They are completed by a pair of matching copper candleholders, with copper being a material used in the latest trends in interior design. The modest teal aromatic oil burner remains in the background to perform its relaxation-producing function. The flower basket and the topiary tree ornament are reminiscent of traditional

English gardens, reflecting Margareta's dream of having outdoor space and Elena's love of cottage greenery. The ornate mirror completes the look, bringing it closer to fireplace decoration in English homes and making the space look fresh and modern at the same time.

Elena's journey as an emigrated artist is reflected in the ornaments' journey from the UK to Moldova. In relation to the earlier discussion of value, these objects' transformation from charity shop finds that were unwanted at some point in their material journey into treasured possessions on display becomes obvious. Objects gain agency through the owner's attributed significance, thus defining the place they occupy. In a sense, objects are placed on the mantel to be exposed, because of what they represent to the homeowner (Hurdley 2006). At the same time, the objects themselves not only carry their own histories and memories (Balthazar 2016), but also have a 'personality', different to new mass-produced items.

Thinking about the notion of 'aura' that objects acquire (Benjamin 1935), what attracts new owners to them may also turn them into treasured possessions within the home. Displaying them in such a visible location has its own significance – as Peters (2011) notes, the more visible, the more precious the object is to the homeowner. Whether it matched Margareta's image of a perfect home or not, like the often-present discrepancy between the real home and the ideal image of the home in the owner's mind (Clarke 2001), Elena made her parents' flat look like one of the picture postcard places in the UK.

In the privacy of Elena's bedroom, the objects on display still bear the same significance, with the restricted circle of family members acting as the 'audience'. When Elena revisits home, she reasserts the ownership of the space she grew up in by leaving material marks of her presence. Following a period of living in a British countryside home, she repainted her chest of drawers and added stylish knobs, fairy lights and oriental figurines to her bedroom (Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5 Elena's chest of drawers and the oriental figurines with the fairy lights in her room.
(Source: Own photographs)

While she no longer physically inhabits the bedroom, the décor created by her remains on display as a material reminder of her presence (Chevalier 2012). Without spending the past several years together, through their material displays, Margareta and Elena thus created a reconfigured sense of transnational place, as 'space comes into being through practice' (vom Bruck 1997:166). I will now refer to other material, albeit less visible ways to maintain these processes in a discussion of how social relations become associated with items of clothing, books, toys and garden plants sent via parcels.

5.2.2 The unseen nexus of familial relations

In post-socialist dwellings, items of furniture like Margareta's dresser contributed to the creation of the division between the visible and the invisible in private space (Buchli 1999). As Buchli notes, keeping some things out of sight and others on display have been part of the negotiation of space by members of the same household. Therefore, the question whether the invisible, the immaterial and the ephemeral are consciously

denied their substance (Buchli 2016) also poses the question of what this unseen substance points to in terms of transnational connection.

In comparison, but not in opposition to visible displays, I will now look at other categories of objects sent via parcels and how they are used or kept in the home, indexical in their relational significance.

Textiles and clothes

Fabric is as versatile as it is symbolic. Highly personable, yet reusable and transformable, it can take on many forms – such as clothing, elements of home décor, bedding. Through handling, mending, stitching and regifting textiles participate in exchanges accompanying human interaction. The connection of textiles to the body and the environment is unfolding on material and symbolic levels. Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) consider the house endowed with the capacity to foster both the visible and the invisible. The interconnection of the body and the house is expressed in the cognitive and material experience of the surrounding world in which the house acts as 'second skin' or 'layer of clothes' (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:2-3). At the same time, clothing appears as a material shell for the skin, acting as a boundary between the individual and the Other, between self and society (Turner 1980), as a symbolic embodiment of liminality.

When she worked in Italy, Margareta used to send home Italian products, including one parcel weighing 80 kg filled with clothes and blankets. Coming from a large family of six siblings and numerous cousins, she witnessed the difficulties of providing for the basic needs. The clothing and the blankets were all given to her by the family she worked for and she decided to give those away to her relatives in the countryside who 'are almost destitute, it meant a lot to them to have a proper blanket, it's a completely different story

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to have a blanket like that – it fit their needs perfectly.' Through her effort of packing the parcel, supporting the costs and taking on the responsibility to act as an agent of connecting opportunity and need, symbolically extending the 'blanket of care' to her less fortunate relatives. This selfless act is, therefore, indicative of strong links to family members outside her household with whom she feels connected.

Looking back at prolific sender Moldo-American Laura presented in Chapter IV, the Londoner who receives sweets from her grandparents to share with her UK friends and partner, the unseen connections are also revealed through her sending practices. Since her reconnection to her family in Moldova is only recent, one item in her parcels is particularly interesting. When Laura bought a winter coat in the UK and wore it once to discover that the zipper has been broken, her grandfather offered to fix it. To Laura, the offer meant she could continue to wear the coat she liked, while to her grandfather, the opportunity to mend the damaged item also represented the opportunity to mend the relationship he was aching to improve. To a stranger not invested in the family history and current stage of familial interaction, however, such an exchange may not seem as significant.

Thus, the mended coat represented Laura's 'social skin' (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995) - the totality of associated relations with her family in Moldova. The coat's round trip from London to the south of Moldova became a symbolic visit, a shared everyday experience of care that takes place within the home. This aspect of care through 'dressing' the loved one is also echoed by Alexandrina, a warehouse employee in her early thirties living in Northampton.

> A spring jacket for mum. Why? Because mum does not leave the house, and if I buy it, it's fine, but she does not go by herself. So, I buy for her, be it a cardigan, be it a jacket. I bought summer shorts for dad, some shirts. He gets mad that we send so much, but we send so that they have enough. They don't go out to buy for themselves, so we take care of them.

While Alexandrina has the opportunity and the means to shop for her parents' clothes, her mother's precarious state of health means that, without parcels, she would have been unable acquire the needed clothes. Thus, for both Laura and Alexandrina, these practices of 'dressing' and shopping for clothes has moved into the domestic sphere, behind closed doors.

Books and educational toys

Another exchange facilitated by parcel vans refers to the development and learning capacity of items used as tools in the family's investment in their future together. The young professional couple Alina and Șerban have built their shared home entirely in transnational space. Alina is a graphic designer in her early thirties living in Chisinau, who has a son from a previous relationship and has been seeing Șerban for three years. Their common goal is to move in together in the suburb of Birmingham where Șerban found work in the construction industry, a goal accomplished by the end of our fieldwork time together (Figure 5.6). Such a progression of their family history allowed me to observe the process of migration unfolding, with all its material underpinning. Șerban hails from Romania and has been in the UK for seven years. After he met Alina, he started travelling to Chisinau every three months and sending parcels with everything Alina and her son needed every week. Such an overwhelming expression of care and sacrifice for the family is not so common, since travelling and sending parcels can put a strain on the financial situation of the migrant. However, travelling and the parcels have always been considered an investment in their future together and a temporary inconvenience that would pay off in the UK.
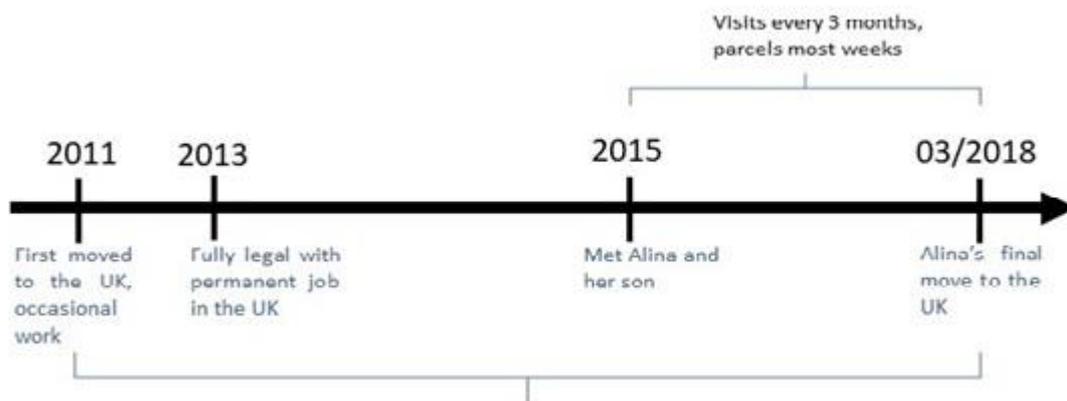
Figure 5.6 Șerban's timeline in the UK.

Both Șerban's and Alina's living arrangements are perceived as temporary, therefore the kitchen and the living room are of a lesser interest; to them, preparation for Alina and her son's life abroad takes priority. Like with other informants, their parcel-sending reflects important life stages. Specifically, the items they send show the development of a new relationship, the engagement, the de facto adoption of Alina's son by Șerban, and the boy's transition from toddler to preschooler. In this context, books and educational toys, sourced and sent by Șerban, are associated with important milestones and the fulfilment of the transnational family's plan to reunite in the UK.

> He sends everything [son] needs – yes, we got books, I teach him nursery rhymes, he
> can count to ten and he knows some animals, fruits and vegetables. But he's not too
> keen on learning, he just wants to play. I'm really worried about how he's going to
> integrate, how he's going to play with other children.

By selecting the books and co-parenting the child via Skype and during frequent visits, Șerban recognises the importance of investing in the child's knowledge of the language and his integration skills, since he would need to start school once in the UK. In Alina's rented flat in Chisinau, the presence of English books for children might indicate that the dweller of the flat has a young child learning English or just using the books for pictures. The unseen aspects of the books' use are the investment in future act of migration, the

establishing of a stronger relation with the child's stepfather and potential future schoolmates. This not yet existent, non-materialised connection is embodied in every page of the books sent by Șerban.

Bulbs and garden plants

Finally, Moldovan parcels also contain living items taking on similar indexical aspects of nurturing the invisible web of relations between the migrant and those left behind. As a future-oriented activity with 'deep biographical significance' for those taking care of the plants (Tilley 2009:188), gardening is the epitome of such nurtured relations. As Tilley notes, gardeners remember the provenance of each plant as social connection or social context in which the plant was acquired. This makes the garden a temporal locus in which the process of taking care of the plants equates the nurturing of the social connection associated with each plant.

Living items both sent and received by Moldovan migrants include spring flower bulbs, vegetable and flower seeds, raspberry canes or fruit trees, reflecting the 'journey' (Küchler and Eimke 2009) into both Moldovan and foreign life. The opportunity to send parcels allowed Elena to supply plants, bulbs and seeds she refers to as 'cute stuff' to her brother Marin. With Britain being a country traditionally fond of gardening, Elena discovered a great variety of plant and bulbs she had the opportunity to see planted in various gardens she visited during her travels across Britain. This determined her to send him flower bulbs and real living shrubs 'every garden in England has'.

At the same time, since Margareta does not have access to outdoor space in her block of flats, the garden owned by Marin has become the idealised plot for family gardening. Although Elena's father Ion acquired his own plot of land with a couple of fruit trees some 10 miles away from Chisinau, tending to it has proven to be a hard task. Underdeveloped infrastructure, difficult access and lack of time have determined Ion and Margareta to

abandon the idea of growing a flourishing rural retreat. Instead, the whole family participates in tending to the garden and Elena's British plants in an intricate connection of care and sociality. Thus, transnational 'home' is also imagined and created through human-plant relations (Shillington 2008), with gardens becoming part of this space (Chevalier 1998).

Displayed or hidden, the material culture of transnational home is strongly related to the people negotiating this transnational space. Non-mutually exclusive, the seen and the unseen combined offer an important outlook on the web of relations created within this space. As discussed above, the construction of transnational home is informed by migrants and those left behind, whose material practices endow objects with meanings and roles. Whether intimate or visible to strangers, these practices continue to contribute to object biographies and sharing familial activities in transnational space.

5.3 Suspended homes: The uprooting and reimagining of transnational home

So far, I have explored the materiality of the processes of relational attachment that take place within the private domestic sphere. I will now turn to the final role Moldo-*Vans* play in mediating the construction of transnational home. First, I will look at Moldo-*Vans* as removal vans, facilitating migrants' relocation to the UK. Then I will address the issue of dwellings left behind or built by migrants in Moldova, that remain uninhabited, but continue to be furnished across borders.

5.3.1 Relocating by Moldo-*Vans*

Throughout the chapters it has become evident that Moldo-*Vans* play an active role in mediating Moldovan transnational families' sociality. While Moldovan parcels contain a variety of items used in shared practices, some informants reassert Moldo-*Vans'* contribution as migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) by packing up and sending all their possessions before moving abroad. Speaking of her plan to move to the UK, Alina incorporates her possessions in the future domestic space that will be refurnished for the reunited family.

> Just before Christmas I will start sending my stuff. My wardrobe is bursting at the seams – I don't know what I'm going to do with all the things! […] But I will take everything. When I know we're all set, I will send **all** my stuff over.

Essentially, Moldo-*Vans* serve as removal vans to follow migrants on their journey to the UK. Two days before the move to Corby, Alina uses the parcel vans one last time, repacking the items from her rented Moldovan flat, most of which already went through the van journey. Planning to fly to the UK and arrive earlier than the van to receive all her packages herself, Alina starts a new stage of her life within the material familiarity of her possessions. In this context of not leaving any belongings behind, transported things become an emotional investment that preserves a sense of belonging (Motasim and Heynen 2011), allowing Alina to set up home wherever her things are.

Alina's parcels thus contain objects that already created connections in transnational space. The racks of clothes belonging to both Alina and her son, all his toys and educational materials, household items sent over the years by Șerban are all objects that offer an intimate insight on the family's life. Alina's final parcels almost recreate the rooms in her rented flat in Chisinau: the bedroom and the hallway with the garments, shoes and overcoats; the playroom with remote controlled helicopters and trucks, English books and puzzles; the kitchen with gadgets and utensils. Minimising the

traumatic experience of displacement and uprooting, Alina packs up every room of her rented flat – the clothes from the bedroom wardrobe, the books and toys from the living room, the Crock Pot from the kitchen, the bike from the balcony. Associated with her partner's care and investment in the family, these objects are already engaged in the process of reconstituing home abroad through the significance of the attached relations. Discussing the process of her move to the UK, Alina imagines how all these things will be rearranged in a new house with Șerban, finding them place in rooms they will have, as she says, 'all to themselves'. By choosing to pack most things Șerban sent, Alina acknowledges that her imagining of a perfect home cannot be constituted without these objects' contribution to their familial connection, showing that the process of rebuilding 'home' in the UK starts with the process of packing (Woodward 2001:133).

> The aspirations people have for their home, and their ideal ways of presenting and talking about their home and the objects inside it, are just as important as how they might actually live in their home.

Thus, the reconstitution of home away from Moldova is fulfilled through the same shared journey of people and things, facilitated by Moldo-*Vans,* with Alina's parcels embodying the moment of familial reunification.

5.3.2 Furnishing emptiness

Moving abroad for Moldovan migrants often involves leaving their empty properties behind. In this final section, my interest lies in determining what this emptiness represents in terms of associated relations and how appliances, both meant to *be used* or meant *not to be used* in daily life create relations. In approaching this question, I must once again refer to Levitt's notion of 'social remittances' (1998) to unpack the phenomenon of investing in homes that are not lived in. I argue that the seemingly paradoxical process of furnishing empty space incorporates individual and common goals, related to staying in touch and the migrant's possible return. In essence, building

empty houses represents tangible connections that help make sense of physical separation (Dalakoglou 2009). While some acquire or build new properties like Dalakoglou's Albanian informants, the Moldovan dwellings left behind remain uninhabited and looked after by relatives.

In the first instance, financial contributions to building empty houses sent via parcels alongside other items can be seen as purely economic remittances. Vadim, whom we met in Chapter III, the villager whose son creates an 'extraordinary' connection through the mundane gifts he sends home, also receives small sums of money for building work on his Moldovan house. However, he sees the money received at the same time as other items, in a parcel, as a contribution to shared project of reuniting their transnational family in the completed house. According to Vadim, this money 'is not a payment, it is an investment' in his son's possible return. Although his son has not yet made up his mind on whether he wanted to stay – 'he will see how it goes, he only wanted to make some money, to come here and finish up this house' – the return has not yet materialised. Moreover, in this state of uncertainty about individual goals of staying or returning, the building of the house becomes the embodiment of a shared family goal and the materialisation of stability. As Dalakoglou (2010:772) notes on Albanian migrants' house-building practices, 'migrants build in a transitional and transnational migratory cosmos where they already dwell; the making of these houses - and the manners and conditions which dominate such making - comprise a way of making sense of transnational and transitional world.'

In the second instance, Moldovan migrants not intending to return send appliances to contribute to the shared space used on return visits. These contributions are not perceived as remittances either. In fact, some households can afford to acquire the appliances in Moldova, without the 'need' to receive them via parcels. Angela and Alexei are an active couple in their late forties who live in a well-built house in a big village not far from Chisinau. The family is 'well-off enough', according to Alexei. Alexei works in

the village as a successful agricultural mechanic, while his wife commutes to Chisinau for work. Their two sons live in Northampton and work in construction, while their daughter Victoria is also successful in her job at the village clothes alterations shop. The two sons relocated to the UK two years earlier, together with their spouses. Before their UK experience, they used to work in Italy, where the accessibility of collection points allowed them to send more parcels. While current parcel sending reduces to food and clothes, it was the parcels from Italy that furnished the whole kitchen area.

> **Angela**: When they went to Italy, they used to send more often. They sent us a lot from Italy – food processor, grinder, things like that…
>
> **Alexei**: The fridge, the washing machine…
>
> **Angela**: Yes, now, what can they send us? Now, we kind of, practically…
>
> **Alexei**: Don't need it.

When the furnishing of shared area of the familial home finished with the replacement of old appliances, the process of furnishing was explained by Angela and Alexei as their sons' contribution to creating an adequate common space 'we can use when they visit, despite them not being there.'

Finally, even when return is not defined by migrants as an individual goal, furnishing emptiness may still continue. Anatolie, the food inspector we met in Chapter IV, whose son and daughter live in London, talks about their experiences of inhabiting space while still preserving ownership through the placement of appliances within their Moldovan dwellings. Anatolie's daughter has used parcel vans to furnish her entire Moldovan flat, although she has no intention of returning and living there. And, given the opportunity, her brother does the same.

> My daughter sent all the equipment from her [UK] flat – microwave, dishwasher, washing machine, she got it all sent over here. Because the quality over there is much better and cheaper, too. If it costs exactly as much as in Moldova, they would still get it in the UK, they know the quality over there is better. My daughter sent everything. The

boy is just starting out. He needs to pay his mortgage, but if he comes across something, he sends.

Although neither sibling lives in Moldova and the appliances are not used by Anatolie, furnishing unoccupied space gives both Anatolie and his children a sense of security and control over their separation. Buchli (2016) notes that acts like the preservation of empty rooms ensures the continuity of intergenerational relations. Similarly, Anatolie's involvement in the preservation of his daughter's empty flat implies a connection forged through this act of care, allowing the flat to become part of transnational space without being lived in.

As for Alina, the transnational experience is not over. She is eager to stay connected to her parents in the North-West of Moldova, where they also have a van service, and to continue sending parcels. Convinced that the 'parcel sending will just intensify', she feels she 'will be using the parcel service forever', opening a new chapter in the history of her family life across borders.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at how Moldovan migrants and their families construct and reconstruct transnational home through objects sent via parcel vans. Starting with the reiteration of the biographical link between people and things, placed in the context of domestic space, the discussion moved to the specificities of placing and replacing objects to create a sense of 'home'. The discussion then progressed to the identification of displayed and hidden materialities, before turning to practices of moving, reconstituting and furnishing 'home'.

I discussed that 'home' represents the socially constructed private sphere in which intimate connections within domestic space develop. I then showed that the practices around objects on display or hidden from public view point to the same interlinking of objects' and their owners' life trajectories. Considering the migrant's absence as the starting point for reconnection, I showed how those left behind engage in material practices of reconfiguring the space, previously shared with the migrant.

Building on material culture of the home scholarship, I argued that, through their placement and replacement within the familial home, household objects contribute to the reconstitution of shared practices like commensality with the absent migrant or the use of second-hand furniture and other items to create imaginaries of the desired home, opposed to the standard architecture of the Soviet era. Photographs narrate family histories, while handmade artwork acts as a reminder of its creator's presence. Ornaments occupy a central place in the living room, creating strong associations with the sender through their appearance and indexical Britishness.

While such displays reflect the visible world, I argued that more covert, unseen connections develop around items that reflect a deeper connection to the migrant. With clothing acting as a 'second skin', it allows for individual connections to be made between family members who express their care through acts like mending the damaged

textile. At the same time, books, toys and plants are reflecting a learning or nurturing process, indicative of a common family goal.

Finally, I showed that Moldo-*Vans* act as removal vans alongside the migrant's relocation to the UK, reiterating their active role in Moldovan transnational life as part of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Re-employing Levitt's notion of 'social remittances' (1998), I argued that Moldovan migrants' financial and material contributions to building and furnishing houses in Moldova, in which they do not live, must be considered an embodiment of a shared familial goal, as well as the continuity of transnational connections.

In the next and final chapter, I will revisit the idea of emptiness and disconnection from the materiality of the shared experience to show that, when the migrant's departure is accompanied by the loss or reduction of sending opportunities, material practices are redefined during return visits. Connecting the insights on gift-giving, commensality and homemaking practices discussed in the previous chapters, the materiality of absence will emerge as a final manifestation of connectedness in transnational life.

Chapter VI

Materialities of absence: Return visits re-tracing presence in transnational space

*If you **need** anything, you take the money and you go and get it.*

Radu

This chapter will focus on the role of return visits in maintaining transnational connections when parcel-sending becomes unavailable. Starting with reasserting the role of distance in the development of parcel-sending practices, the discussion will move on to include the perception of *need,* as seen by rare senders. The importance of material connections will then be analysed in relation to the denial of a sent object's agency.

The main intention of this chapter is to address how objects, previously brought in luggage or sent in a parcel, are used in shared practices on return visits. While the notion of 'absence' may invoke missing objects, the representation of absence still materialises as presence (Ginzburg 2001). Based on ethnographic accounts of why people *don't* send versus what they *would* send, I argue that the choice not to send is referenced by informants as a lack of *need,* as opposed to the *desire* to engage with objects. This materialisation of absence means that, even if only a few objects reach those left behind in suitcases or private cars, talking about objects and referring to material pointers to define connection become as important in making sense of the distance between the migrant and the homeland.

Drawing on Buchli's observation that immateriality must be addressed in material terms (2010) and Meyer's understanding of absence as relational concept (2012), this chapter

argues that objects are as important in their absence, as they are in creating connections through parcel-sending. Thus, objects become visual, factual, articulated and imagined, they are given shape and form by the mere conversation featuring them.

Finally, this chapter will analyse the biography of an object sent by the migrant and depleted of its social significance. Drawing on ethnographic examples of different parcel-sending practices by two members of the same family, the concluding section will show that 'abandoned' objects create different connections to frequent material interactions facilitated by parcel-sending.

6.1 Return visits refuelling material connections

When parcel vans are not available, following the migrant's door-to-door journey on visits home uncovers material traces of transnational connectedness. It has been argued that, while the existence of infrastructures may drive passengers to travel, their intentionalities are not reduced to availability of routes (Adey et al. 2012). If in the 1990s travelling was challenging for Moldovans because of few connections and legal difficulties, more recently journeys home have become shorter and more affordable, while holding EU passports eliminated legal restrictions, as discussed in Chapter II.

In the past decade, the rise of low-cost flying has contributed even more to the fluidity of travel opportunities. Moldovan migrants started to swap longer bus journeys for much shorter flights. Low-cost airlines thus became part of the migration experience and migrants' biographies (Burrell 2011), making return visits an easier way of staying in touch. The necessity to travel for emergencies and major life events has been replaced with the ability to travel more often to see those left behind.

In this section, I address return visits as an important way of staying in touch for Moldovan migrants who do not have access to parcel van services. Specifically, I will

begin by reiterating the role of physical distance in creating proximity with those left behind to show that return visits inform the only material exchanges that take place in rare senders' transnational life. The discussion will then move on to detail these material exchanges to unpack how objects brought on return visits or sent in occasional parcels are used in shared practices. By focusing on tools, clothes, foodstuffs and other objects that contributed to a complexity of practices detailed in chapters III, IV and V, I will show how proximity is achieved via few material interactions.

6.1.1 Reassessing proximity

While the availability of van routes fuels material exchange, some Moldovan migrants living in well-connected areas like London choose not to use these services. Others with little access to van services still send despite associated difficulties, showing that both individual and shared familial goals play an important role in sending practices. In this section, my focus is on rare senders for whom return visits home represent the main way to maintain material connections with those left behind. I argue that, although distance presents as an opportunity and achievement of autonomy through separating from the familial home (Stasch 2009), it also becomes a tangible obstacle in developing material connections through parcel-sending. Thus, as this chapter shows, in case of rare senders, distance matters even more because the complexity of practices associated with the materiality of everyday life does not develop in the same way as in case of frequent parcel exchanges.

For some Moldovan migrants whose residence in the UK is located away from main airports and parcel van collection points, even the fluidity of travel remains restricted and the opportunity to bring things from the UK is very limited. Sending becomes even more complicated when the collection points are tens and sometimes hundreds of kilometres away or when new migrants struggle to get information on collection times and locations. Knowing does not necessarily empower them to send, although most try at least once.

Maricica, a designer and lecturer in education studies in her forties, left Moldova ten years ago to experience 'a different country'. After she moved to the UK, she worked hard to adapt to British life, found a partner and settled in Wales. Initially, finding a job proved difficult and she was the only Moldovan in the area. As there were no parcel van services at all when she moved to the UK, she never considered sending at the time. Later, she discovered that there were some services with collection points closer to where she lived, but even the nearest one would require her to drive for nearly three hours.

She tried to send once or twice, but decided that she 'did not need to,' because she could 'go home, and meet up with everybody there.' Another reason for not seeking parcel van services, she told me, was the lack of 'any Moldovans in the area'. To her, the lack of contact with compatriots does not necessarily represent an obstacle. While she still misses the homeland, she also grew to appreciate Wales for its remote areas, beautiful nature and relaxed life. In time, she arranged from her most treasured possessions from the Moldovan flat to be transferred to the Welsh residence and has not sent or received a parcel since.

By separating themselves from the homeland, migrants thus use distance as an opportunity in their decision to move abroad. As Maricica came to realise, 'sometimes life presents new opportunities that you have to take.' Even though migrating is never an easy process, remaining and not taking the opportunity is often seen as 'failure', even if imaginaries of a better life in the country of destination might not be fulfilled either (Tuckett 2016). Radu, in his early thirties, first left for the UK on a seasonal work placement in Hereford in his third year at the Agricultural University. He was not alone: a friend went with him and they both settled in their permanent jobs some two years later. Like in Maricica's case, there are few Moldovans in that part of the country, but there are plenty of Eastern Europeans - Poles, Romanians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Bulgarians -, and no parcel van companies.

Before leaving, Radu did not think of moving abroad as an opportunity until he was offered a seasonal contract in his field of work. Initially, accepting the offer meant spending six months per year in the UK, with no definite promise of relocation. In time, the contract became permanent and the experience of working in the UK determined Radu to decide on permanent relocation. He met his Bulgarian wife on the farm where she arrived with her twin sister and he says there are quite a few mixed marriages. They both started working on a farm on the Welsh border, where he has become a supervisor about three years ago, although the arrival of their two children meant his wife had to leave work. When they finally managed to put down the deposit for a cosy two-bedroom end of terrace in the suburbs of the city, their future in the UK became better-defined and structured around Radu's workplace and the eldest child's school (Figure 6.1).
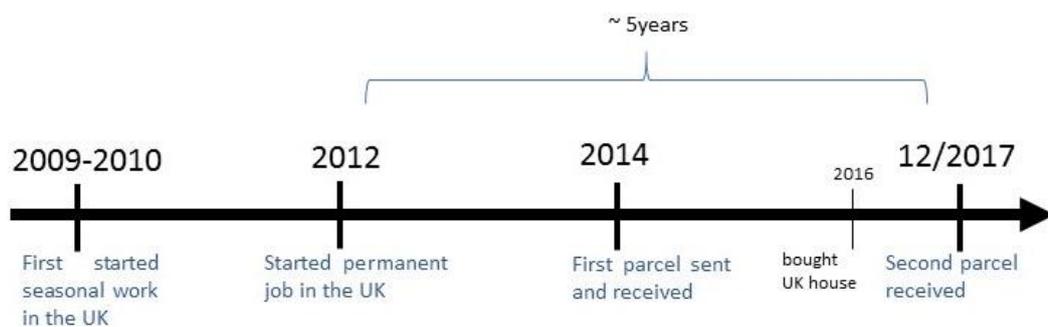
Figure 6.1 Radu's timeline in the UK.

His parents remain in Moldova. Ina, the mother, is half-retired and works part-time in their village 30km North-East of Chisinau. George, the father, works shifts as a security officer at a block of studios in the capital. Radu's sister has also left home and runs a café in Spain, while Radu and his wife settled down at 'the edge of the world', in George's words. At the same time, Radu's wife's parents live even farther in a small Bulgarian town.

For this extended transnational family, negotiating distance becomes even more important, making return visits the only way to manage splitting time between two

families. Going twice a year to visit both countries becomes a lesser effort than attempting to send parcels. The closest collection point for Radu is in London, and, although there is another one in Birmingham, it is too out of the way. In London, there are people he knows who could help if needed, but it is too complicated to arrange for a shipment. Although Radu managed to send one parcel and receive two in his entire time in the UK, the absence of sending practices determined other ways to establish connections.

Therefore, on his annual return visits, he brings the occasional gifts and small supply of British products like tea and sweets in his luggage[72]. These items, as I will discuss in more detail, are then used in shared practices to reconfigure presence and recreate proximity.

6.1.2 Reclaiming presence through objects

The continuity of connection becomes embedded in physical places through material anchors such as a wooden shed built with the tools brought on a visit home by the migrant. Like architectural structures, these anchors create landscapes in which absence is materialised. The idea of 'geographies of absence' sees revisiting spaces of loss to develop a personal relationship with the sense of absence (Dragojlovic 2014). In the context of transnational life, the home previously shared by the family and now only occupied by those left behind becomes such a space of loss – the migrant's act of emigrating.

Radu's return visits create two material anchors of his presence in transnational space. First, bringing objects in his luggage creates material traces similar to gift-giving

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[72] I am not engaging with scholarship on migrant suitcases in more detail here, as the focus in this chapter is not on the journey or the way objects are transported, but on how relations are further negotiated through objects in the absence of developing parcel-sending practices.

discussed in Londoner Dorin's case in Chapter III. The gifts of tools, small electronics, items of clothing, chocolate and tea leave sensory, mnemonic and visual imprints of the visit. Second, multiple processes related to object histories, their placement within the house and the materiality of touch, emerging on short visits home, continue to underpin transnational connectedness.

In relation to the discussion of empty homes in Chapter V, where building houses and furnishing homes represents a shared common goal that keeps the transnational family together, tools brought on return visits are particularly important items. Radu's familial home in Moldova has a lot of square footage to fill. The house, a two-storey well-maintained dwelling in their village on the well-connected main route to Chisinau. It sits on a big plot of land packed with everything a family needs in the countryside: a garage, a summerhouse, two greenhouses, animals' yard, a deep well with an electric pump, vegetable patches and a small orchard. Inside, there are three bedrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, and, just off the living room, a utility room with a new boiler and washing machine.

When Radu was still at home, he and George spent a lot of time together working on different projects around their property. After Radu left, the work has been harder for George and he has been reminiscing about his short and precious moments together with his son on his visits. The extent of his feeling of disconnection can be seen when he explains how much work and emotional attachment father and son invested in their Moldovan home. The work on the house is a continuous process that runs through the whole conversation with George, similar to what Degnen (2005) calls 'memory talk' that occurs in a place after the departure of a household member.

What George wants is for Radu to remember how to use all the power tools he has stored at home and to have the opportunity to work together on their projects, which is rarely possible because Radu spends so little time at home.

[…] it's not that I rely on him, but it's all the things I know, I could pass them on, to show how to do things; he knows, I'm not saying he doesn't, or if the nail goes more to the left or to the right, it's just life experience. I keep saying "Hey, I'm 60!", and he says "Oh come on, dad, it's not like that." I say that, if I used to say something after 50, then I'm not saying it after 60. It's enough life experience. Seriously, I want to pass it on to someone, you know […].

Despite George's strong feelings, Radu worked hard on the house as an investment in a possible return. A couple of years earlier, when Radu bought a car and drove all the way home, George received the few items for his workshop, like the chainsaw used to construct the wooden shed. This chainsaw has then been used on Radu's every visit to do more building work. When Radu is absent, George keeps bringing up various jobs on the house that they started together that are now waiting for Radu's temporary return, however, there are many jobs that George had to finish on his own with regrets of Radu's lack of involvement, of not being 'gospodari'[73] together.

In the countryside, part of being *gospodar* means taking care of tools and improving farming methods. Not unlike migrants who create materiality through describing objects desired to be sent, Radu refers to the strong connection he and his father have to the land. The same year, it also happened that Radu's employer disposed of some blackcurrant canes while replacing the plant rows at the farm, and these canes were brought to Moldova for a new lease of life. The plants were of a particular variety that gave a commercially viable yield. Although George was not interested in selling the berries, his keen passion for farming and trying out new crops meant that Radu collected and transported the canes with his father's passion in mind. The land was cleared and prepared in advance for planting and, years on, George continues to take care of the plants on his own.

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[73] *Gospodar* (pl. gospodari) is a commonly used term (particularly in the countryside) to denote a good housekeeper and owner of land who takes good care of his assets. If someone is not looking after their house or does not work the field properly, others would say about him that he is not a 'gospodar'.

Radu's absence at his father's side when he tends to the blackcurrant plants becomes a material interaction. Even though the canes have been transported to Moldova by Radu and planted together with George, their physical shells are not as important as the act of gardening itself that brings absence into material form (Ginn 2014). In this way, similarly to the nurturing of bulbs discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship is maintained through the act of handling the blackcurrant plants. According to Harris (1998), reviving relationships through objects helps maintain ties through the seasonality of human activity, particularly relevant for rural residents reliant on produce from their land.

While tools, plants and bulbs inform the connection to the house and the land, inside the home, aspects of the migrant's presence continue to be experienced, talked about, engaged with and displayed. Thus, within the familial home, visible displays of objects that remind of family connections are the most tangible. While there are some photographs pinned in the IT corner, the computer given by Radu's sister is mostly used by Ina and George to watch their grandchildren grow, whose photographs and videos are regularly sent by Radu via Skype. Just like material signifiers of people no longer able to return, such images evoke their presence in the home (Parrott 2010), as they manifest the intriguing duality of being both material and imagined (Meyer 2011), physical or perpetuated (Kantorowicz 1957). These images remain shared by the family online even after Radu's return visits end. In these photographs' case, the material and the immaterial are thus interconnected. As Buchli (2010:185) notes, the immaterial must continue to be understood 'in material terms', as visual or physical co-presence can also be achieved through practices that become 'absent presence'.

Yet there are also objects that stay hidden and these are even more powerfully charged with memory than those on display. When Radu asked his father what to bring him on his next visit, George struggled to think of anything he could ask for, considering the

distance, the limited space and the journey duration affecting Radu's ability to bring objects home.

> I told him to bring me socks, he brought me socks. That's it.

What George means is that there is no special value attached to mundane items like this because the connectivity they espouse is not derived from actions that can be observed. What is so important about Radu fulfilling his father's request, is the same mundane aspect of gift-giving discussed in Chapter III, meant to establish connectedness. Similarly, Ina holds on to a selection of kitchen towels which she uses one by one as needed, and winter socks and gloves that represent no aesthetic or emotional value. These items (Figure 6.2) stored away from view, are, however, imbued with Radu's presence. The main difference to gift-giving as the mundane, contributing to the emergence of sending practices, is that, in the case of migrants like Radu, return visits are the only chance to reconnect.

Figure 6.2 George's socks and Ina's towels and gloves. *(Source: Own photographs)*

In his first parcel sent home, Radu sent Ina a Celebrations box which she kept for storage purposes (Figure 6.3). The chocolates were eaten on the first week, when there was a short exchange on Skype about the sweetness and their diversity.

Figure 6.3 Ina's box of Celebrations used for storing small items. *(Source: Own photograph)*

Soon afterwards, the exchange was forgotten. Knowing that parcel-sending represents too great an effort for Radu, the sharing of chocolates became a one-off manifestation of commensality that never developed beyond visits home. What remained in use was the utilitarian function of the box, adapted for Ina's storage needs.

> I barely remember the taste, but I know he brought it. It's a useful box.

While sending food involves practices of selecting the products based on gustatory attributes and symbolic attachments, when the opportunity to send is lost or denied, the continuity of material connection also becomes reconfigured.

Finally, there are objects 'on loan', only used when Radu is visiting. Books and toys for his children are not displayed or interacted with at any time, not even on Skype. When Radu is about to visit, Ina collects some children's books and toys from her part-time workplace at a kindergarten so that Radu does not have to use his suitcase space to

bring entertainment for his children. Thus, return visits become loci of social exchange in transnational space, in which familial connections unfold. Moreover, as discussed further, the absence of the opportunity to send is perceived by rare senders as *necessary*, whereas objects become unwanted through this lack of *need.*

6.2 From the absence of need to the absence of opportunity to have

Informants who have restricted access to parcel van services speak in very distinctive ways to those who engage in regular parcel-sending. While food senders we met in Chapter IV are particularly vocal about their sending practices and explain the sensory aspects of homemade foods in a wealth of detail, rare senders refer to material exchanges as unimportant in comparison to return visits. Asked about things they *need,* informants do not seem to find anything they require to be sent. At the same time, they insist that they *nu duc lipsă de nimic* (do not *lack* anything). The word *lipsă* can be used in different context to denote separation, absence, lack of something perceived as necessary. However, when asked about things they would like, but *do not need* to have sent via a hypothetical parcel, some informants use *n-ar lipsi* (would *not lack*, would not mind having) to talk about objects that cannot be sent in their circumstances.

Thus, the absence of such objects must not be understood as a rigid construct. As Meyer (2012:108) shows, even absence cannot be devoid of relations and interactions.

> In other words, absence *does* things, it is performative. […] Yet absence is not only something that *does*. Absence is also something we engage *with*, something we do something *to.*

In the following sections I will discuss the two main ways in which informants engage with the concept of *lipsă*, building on ethnographic examples of *unsent* items: the 'lack of need' and the 'lack of opportunity' to acquire the object.

6.2.1 No *need* for things

The spread of connections sometimes expands even further away where sending parcels is not an option at all. At the same time, frequent visits home create material connections more often, reasserting the migrant's presence. Mihaela is a young professional in her late twenties living in Portsmouth who has moved to the UK about two years ago. Her family is even more spread-out than Radu's: her sister lives in the US, her brother lives in the Ukraine and her mother remained in Moldova. Mihaela's transnational family has a shared experience of materialising absence.

There are no collection points anywhere close to where she lives and she has not been actively looking, but she says she would need to discover if there are any van services going to Ukraine. She replaces regular parcel service with travelling back and forth herself and taking anything she perceives as *necessary* with her, or asking relatives to bring her the items she wants.

> My mum came here twice, and I went home twice or thrice, I think. So, it's something like once in half a year. We have seen each other much more lately, actually, quite a lot, in the spring on a holiday in Rome, then in September at my sister's, then Christmas, so quite often. That's why I didn't feel the *need*.

With the opportunity of frequent visits, for Moldovan migrants like her, the act of coming home is detached from the need to pack up things for their family. The travels undertaken together with her mother leave a material trail of presence in their transnational space, strengthening the connection. Despite frequent visits, Mihaela acknowledges that her mother does not share her understanding of *need.*

> But I don't even know what [she could send me], I don't think there is anything I could send to mum [either], because if we had a van service, she'd probably be the one to send me parcels.

The possibility of exploring parcel-sending with her brother in Ukraine shows that, despite the lack of interest in a material communication channel with her mother, whom she sees more often, in case of her brother the desire to reach out arises where the frequency of visits is reduced.

If, for Mihaela, the lack of need to send or receive is determined by face-to-face interactions deemed enough to reconnect with her mother, Aurica and her husband Ghenadie, both in their late fifties, who live not too far from Ina and George, recount one time their son came to Moldova. On his return visit, he did not bring anything for them and left them some money instead. Even though Aurica suggested something she would not mind trying, Ghenadie supported his son in the decision not to 'waste money'.

> **Ghenadie:** No, we *nu ducem lipsă de nimic* (do not need anything, plural). […] There is no logic to bring anything from there.

> **Aurica** [nodding]: I told him once, you know that Ceylon, English tea, bring me a pack of it once, so I could see what it's all about. He said: 'You know what, I'll come and bring you money, and you'll go and buy the most expensive tea, and it will be cheaper than me dragging things from [the UK].'

Aurica never acquired the tea despite her son's financial contribution. In a similar account, thirty-year-old Valentin, a Hereford resident hailing from a village 30km away from Chisinau, says he is unable and unwilling to send any parcels. His wife and little daughter are still living in Moldova, where he is hoping to return within two years. To him, a law graduate with no 'proper' connections in Chisinau, who discovered that finding a job in the justice system was next to impossible, spending money earned through hard labour on a farm is almost 'a crime'. Like Ghenadie, he hints at the fact that he is 'not like others,' dissociating himself from the 'unreasonable' ones. While he associates parcel-sending with a derogatory understanding of Moldovanness, financial aspects of caring for his family take precedence over the desire to receive a familiar or desired item.

It's the Moldovan way, to pay £1.5 per kilo and get buckwheat and *seledka*[74], leave me alone, you can find everything here. It can all be found in England, it's just you know, one of those things – send me a bottle of vodka, and for me to drink it, you have to buy it and then pay extra, no, no. I don't *need* anything.

The intangibility of these desired, but non-materialised objects becomes part of the post-departure experience. However, if the opportunity to send arises, for some informants the lack of need becomes the lack of opportunity to receive.

6.2.2 Unsent materialities

This chapter will now turn to the question of unsent things informing the practices of creating connections, materialised in descriptions and imaginings of parcel-sending. While distance is still considered an opportunity by migrants, the inability to share some objects evokes the feeling of loss and uncertainty. Materiality is not always palpable - like the act of commemoration without the object of commemoration (Küchler 1999), existing without the object's physical presence. The impossibility of material transfer is thus experienced in the same tangible way, as if dispossession has already taken place. This section will show that material exchanges continue when the absence of physical connections prevent material transfers. Moreover, as with 'memory talk' discussed earlier, absent objects become material through interlocutors' expression of the desire to have them.

The paradox here is the fact that informants, who convincingly detailed the reasons behind not sending more parcels, discuss the objects they would like to send, if they were given the opportunity to do so, in much more detail. Instead of the *lack of need* for the item, informants refer to other, more tangible reasons for not sending: high sending

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[74] Russian term for salted herring, a popular dish in Moldova

costs and weight restrictions. The examples are numerous. Looking back at Mihaela, the Portsmouth resident whom we met earlier, it was clear that she was adamant about sending or receiving parcels from her mother, the only person still residing in Moldova. As she visits often, she is cautious about spending on anything non-essential, considering parcel sending an unnecessary luxury. However, if given the opportunity, she would welcome the possibility to share two iconic foodstuffs from the homeland.

> If I could, I'd ask to be sent wine, because here wine is expensive and not as good, and *brânză* (sheep cheese).

If for Mihaela, like other migrants discussed in Chapter IV, the taste of 'home' represents an embodiment of transnational connection, for others furnishing the home becomes as important. Ilona and Anton, a retired couple in their sixties, live in a large countryside house near Chisinau. Their two sons have been in Northampton for over ten years, settled with their own families and children, but only send occasionally. When Anton visited Britain in 2015, he was impressed with the range of furniture available in shops and seen in people's houses. Although he says he does not *need* the furniture, he confesses that he *would not mind* receiving it from the UK to furnish the first floor of the house. His sons never fulfilled this desire because of high sending costs.

> **Ilona**: If there are things that *n-ar lipsi* (we would not mind having) from over there, it's mostly that furniture. Nice, good quality furniture, but if it's more expensive, it's better to get it here. [In the UK] they don't throw it away because it's broken.
>
> **Anton**: They've got money.
>
> **Ilona**: Yes, they want to buy something new. And they throw everything away, furniture, washing machines.
>
> **Anton**: They just put them outside.
>
> **Ilona**: Yes, and the kids told me: 'Mum, if I only had the chance to send you, I'd send you everything.' Even in shops, when it's been on display for too long, they get discounted.

Their accounts of the opportunity to furnish the home with 'nicer' furniture is echoed by Gicu, a health and safety professional in his mid-thirties who has been living in London for more than a year. While he does not usually send, when asked whether he would consider sending something desirable, he recalls an opportunity he had to pass on because of delivery costs.

> I was crossing the road one day and there was this bed frame, white leather, really beautiful. It had a small split in one corner. It must have been put outside 5 minutes earlier by our neighbours, we have some rich ones who have the means, so they dumped it. And we took it, took a close look and you could see it didn't belong to some *râsuri*[75], excuse my language, that white leather, all very beautiful, and it didn't belong to some people who did I don't know what. So, we took it inside, wiped it, and the woman [next door] saw that and said: "Would you like another one? I have one here, but I need someone to help me get it out." No problem! I checked: similar beds, very similar ones sell for £500-600 on Ebay and carboot.com, if you count it, two beds would cost us £800 minimum. That's minimum, plus delivery, let's say £1000. We got them for free. So, wouldn't you pay 50 euros to send such furniture home to your family?

Moreover, Gicu acknowledges the fact that other migrants already engage in sending furniture, and, given the opportunity to reduce costs, he would do the same.

> There are lots of people at home, here, I know some people in the UK who bought a house and they ordered all furniture and double glazing from Romania. They had to pay £7500 in the UK for the double glazing, not the highest quality, and in Romania, they got the highest quality with a long warranty and it cost them, if I'm right, around 2000 euros. Meaning, 1/3 of the price. And the furniture, it was all dismantled, packed, on pallets – 50 euros per pallet, can you imagine? Furniture is heavy, you can't send it by vans, it would cost you the world. That's why I'm saying that if we had something like that, maybe I would consider it.

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[75] Literally, 'big laughs', yobs.

Another confirmation of the willingness to send comes from Ana, the Londoner we met in Chapter III. Unlike her 'sentimental sister' who also lives in London and sends a lot, Ana considers herself a 'rational' person. She feels she took separation from home and parents much easier because she got used to it while she studied and worked away from home. To her, 'only' price is important in her decision not to send. When asked whether price would make a difference, Ana agrees that even for her, there are some things she would like to have.

> Just clothes. It's the quantity, there's a lot. Other than that, I don't know, maybe people send chairs or furniture, it's cheap and easy to find here, but I think it's expensive to send by van. I'd probably send with someone or take it by car.

Even Radu, who continues to consider return visits as the main option of staying in touch, uncovers an important aspect of the absence of the desired object. For George, his father, working towards a common familial goal is essential in maintaining their father-son bond. Acknowledging this bond, Radu says he would send items that can be further used in a shared activity with his father.

> Tools. Starting with spanners, all sorts of tools. I think the quality is better there. Drill bits, a set of spanners, I'd send them, but they're metal and heavy, and it costs more to bring them here. [..] I'd consider a thing you cannot find in Moldova important. *Something you actually need.* Then yes, I could make the effort.

The same idea of improving productivity by using suitable equipment reappears when Ghenadie recalls seeing some agricultural machinery on the visit to France. Then, he says, he noticed how easy it seemed to work with and how the farmer told him about high productivity levels.

> No, if it's machinery, why not? A tractor… […] A mini-tractor, a modern one I could use to plough my vineyard. […] You know, I don't care, I'm interested in having my own. To hop on, ride down the vineyard, not plough it all by hand. That's the thing – they have such equipment.

Finally, Valentin, the Hereford resident who convinced himself not to send because of the lack of van links, considers it 'pleasant to receive some parcels.'

> Oh yes, of course! If somebody came here, it would have been perfect. If we had a van service here, I would send 100 kilograms home every day. It's easy here, car boots.

Thus, talking about objects that are not there gives them a role in transnational life and the ability to forge relations between the migrant and the family left behind. This chapter has so far shown that the absence of things becomes material by engaging the physical world, helping to negotiate relationships (Colloredo-Mansfield 2003) and becoming a 'special category of things' (Fowles 2010:39). Therefore, objects that are not being sent have as much importance as the ones that are. The detachment and rationalisations employed in this case may divert our attention from agency (Gell 1998) these objects lose in the process of being dismissed as *not needed*. While, throughout the chapters, the focus of this exploration of connectedness through parcel-sending was on human actors involved in parcel exchange, the last section will look at how objects lose their agency in the process of detaching from their relational value.

6.3 Dematerialising things: A case study of detachment

In a final effort to elucidate the materiality of absence, the chapter will now turn to migrants' conscious decision to disengage with parcel-sending as a material link to those left behind. In this case, to send or not to send becomes a question of whether materiality, like foodstuffs discussed in Chapter IV, can be considered as 'good' and 'bad' in terms of effort. When material connection is not employed, objects begin to lose their significance like the second-hand goods that, 'unloved', become rubbish (Thompson 1979).

As Korowai sociality (Stasch 2009) and Melanesian forms of kinship (Strathern 2015) show, the idea of material detachment does not represent a dissolution of social life. In

all respects, absence is experienced (Frers 2013) in various ways, establishing a lasting connection between people and things. Losing possession of things when the physical transfer between the sender and the receiver is not possible, creates this state of detachment, particularly in case of a treasured possession. Such dispossession, as Ryan-Saha (2015) notes in relation to Bosnian refugees in Britain, supposes retaking possession after life stabilises.

For some Moldovan transnational families, this repossession does not occur on purpose. In order to further understand this aversion towards material culture, as a final ethnographic example this section proposes to focus on the representative, physical and visual object that Radu managed to send home: his parents' TV set. According to Radu, the difficulties associated with sending the item triggered a response that led to the material demise of the object's significance to both the sender and the receiver. The one time Radu sent a parcel was when he bought a flat screen TV (Figure 6.4) on a Black Friday sale and, because it was too large for his small rented room in shared accommodation, he decided to go through the 'trouble' of sending it home.

Figure 6.4 Radu's TV. *(Source: Own photograph)*

He made enquiries about courier prices to get the parcel to London, packed it well and send it off in the hope that nothing would happen to it on the way – after all, he paid enough money for it to make an impact on the family budget. He contacted an acquaintance in London who arranged for the parcel to be put on the van, and after three days George and Ina were collecting the TV in Chisinau, fitting it into their car and driving home to unpack. They put in in the living room, next to the computer donated by their daughter to talk to their children. Big, nice, colour flat screen with good sound instead of two small sets they had had for ages, which now went into storage, – there was absolutely nothing wrong with them. For three days Radu 'prayed' that the non-standard box would stand the chance to reach its destination. And he began to hate the idea of it, associating it with a chore, an action no one would benefit from, and detrimental to his wellbeing.

> When you count the finances, bank transfer or cash, I can buy it here without any hassle, that's the thing. You have to make sure to pack it well, worry about it, you know, it's this worry, it kills you psychologically. That's my personal opinion. I think the less worry, the healthier. If I have too many problems, they destroy me. I try to minimise any additional worries I don't need, that's the perception I've had lately. If it's not important, I try to put it at the back of my mind.

Radu detached himself from the problem and, although the wish to provide his parents with an upgrade was still there, the notion of *need* became redundant. Miller and Parrott (2009:513) note in relation to the material culture of loss that 'relationships are not limited to persons,' but, in the circumstances of infrastructure scarcity where it becomes impossible to allow objects to engage in exchanges between sender and receiver, these relationships do not get the same chance to develop. The unwillingness to associate himself with the act of sending, the effort involved is never worth it because of a multitude of factors, which Radu does not hesitate to elaborate on.

> If you need anything, you take the money and you go and get it. You don't need to travel across Europe to get a TV. I don't know, I think it's…until you realise. Maybe for others

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who live in London with van services 'under their bottoms', if it takes them 10 mins to get there, it's convenient. He makes up the box and drops it in the van and there is no extra cost. And me, I need to spend on diesel to go to London, that's if I go by myself, I don't remember how much I paid then for postage, I think I used UPS and they charged £28-30, plus about the same to Moldova because it' fragile and so on, plus what I spent on it, I could have bought a good one here. I mean, you understand.

When asked if his parents would buy the TV by themselves or if he gave them money for it, he agrees that they would still be using the old pair of screens now in storage. Still, physical distance and time taken to deliver a parcel become the most important factors to take into account, confirming the positive impact of proximity on material exchanges and flows of people (Artal-Tur et al. 2015).

The TV alienated the sender, thus condemning the development of sending practices because of the effort involved. This premature 'death' of objects before they were even allowed to develop an existence in the transnational field and given their own voice makes absence more important than the object itself. Meyer (2012:105) considers that 'absence gives importance to objects', but then, 'absence turned into matter is necessarily uncertain, unstable matter.' This matter has no material value any longer, but becomes a physical reminder of the event, of the physical absence. Absence of sending patterns can only tell more about what could have been than about actual processes of maintaining ties. As Neumark (2017) notes, observing the impact of giving on maintaining relationships, refusing to give is, at the same time, a form of detachment and care.

In this context, the absence of their children dealt with by George and Ina can be, maybe paradoxically, likened to the consequences of a natural disaster taking away physical and human life possessions. But if in a natural disaster, like a tsunami, survivors cling on to the memory of objects or damaged unusable objects that came to represent memory and the feeling of loss (Hastrup 2010), for George and Ina the memory of time

spent together on Radu's visits are more material than any tsunami-damaged mementoes.

At the same time, Radu's TV does not reflect their familial bond, unlike the objects sent by their daughter. As opposed to Radu, she is a prolific sender, having access to parcel van routes close to her home in Spain. When objects sent by her end up not being used – like the coat sent in the wrong size or the espresso machine, put away because no members of the household prefer strong coffee – they are carefully covered, wrapped up and placed in storage. (Figure 6.5).

Figure 6.5 Ina's unused items. *(Source: Own photographs)*

Ina and George's daughter once brought in a sofa on a visit home, explaining this decision by her desire to have a comfortable sleeping place. The sofa was placed in the summerhouse – a solid structure built by George and Radu on several of his visits home, furnished in their absence by George and maintained and cleaned by Ina. The summerhouse was specifically intended for Radu's use and a place to stay for his sister's husband on return visits, in the hope that 'feeling at home' would determine them to return to Moldova. As opposed to the TV, the sofa continued to be nurtured, as the bond between Ina and her daughter also continued to grow.

If Radu's TV were to furnish emptiness, the same connection as with Ina and George's daughter could be made, when the discarded object would become desirable through memory and representation (Guruianu and Andrievskikh 2018). It is thus safe to say that, in the case of material detachment of non-sending Moldovan migrants, the transnational connection is not lost, but becomes reconfigured in other forms of materiality. By condemning objects to a similar form of invisibility and illegality as undocumented migrants (Sigvardsdotter 2012), the associated relations dissipate into a nexus of absence-presence (Parr et al. 2015) that make transnational connectedness an even more intricate web of material-immaterial relations.

Conclusion

This final chapter addressed return visits as the main way of staying in touch for migrants who have restricted access to parcel van services. Showing that distance continues to play an important role in how migrants stay in touch, the chapter uncovered the shared practices around the use of objects like tools, aimed to strengthen the familial bond during brief visits home.

The analysis of rare senders' understanding of absence as the opposition of *need* and *opportunity* to create material connections showed that the absence of parcel-sending practices is not always a choice, but also a manifestation of cost and labour involved in re-establishing proximity. Drawing on ethnographic examples of rare senders who manifest the desire to engage in parcel-sending once such costs are eliminated, the chapter showed that the lack of *need* to send is reconfigured when the opportunity to send arises.

This shows that Moldo-*Vans* continue to represent an essential service in maintaining transnational connectedness. While migrants and their families who choose not to send take agency away from objects, materiality is maintained through desiring the objects,

imagining the objects or their shared use during return visits. As van Eck (2015) points out, when objects come alive through people's experiences[76], even then materiality is, sometimes, denied.

As it became evident in this chapter, informants who previously denied the *need* to send or receive parcels, acknowledge that parcel-sending as a practice informs important aspects of developing connections across borders. Seemingly immaterial, absence thus creates scope for the development of a different kind of connection between people and things, a relationship based on interaction, be it virtual or sporadic, meant to refuel the materiality of staying in touch.

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[76] Eck's notion of objects' 'living presence'.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the material connections Moldovan transnational families forge through parcel-sending practices. Addressing the continuing debates around the legalisation of parcel van companies, that provide a service perceived by users as an indispensable part of daily life, this ethnography, based on 12 case studies and 39 additional semi-structured interviews, has shown that parcel-sending must not be treated as a mere transportation of goods.

Starting with a detailed ethnography of Moldo-*Vans* that placed parcel-sending within the general context of migrant mobilities, this thesis showed that parcel vans play an active role in reconfiguring the Moldovan transnational social field. The discussion moved from cultural aspects of seasonality and sending trends to the specificities of parcel-sending as a material practice to consider how personal experiences inform the connections between people and things sent via parcels. Keeping the emphasis on the content of parcels, the analysis gradually moved from general characteristics of gift-giving as an embodiment of post-migration reconnection to the development of specific practices based on the interrelation of family histories and object biographies. The final discussion then placed these practices into the context of return visits and absence of necessary migration infrastructure to contrast the material implications of staying in touch across borders.

This thesis thus sought to extend existing work on transnationalism and social remittances. Rather than suggesting an entirely new interpretation of the materiality that accompanies migrant mobilities, my aim has been to push the analysis further to address the lack of attention to the importance of parcel van services in transnational life. By adding ethnographic nuance from the material culture perspective, this research

thus contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between sociality, material practices and migrant experiences. Instead of focusing on the summary of ethnographic accounts presented in the chapters, I will now turn to some concluding points to provide a brief commentary of the findings in relation to material culture and migration literature. Based on these findings and the emerging themes, I will then suggest further avenues of how this research can be used to inform policy.

My intention to reiterate the main argument is threefold: to acknowledge the role of the actors participating in transnational material exchange, to uncover the shared journey of people and things they send, and to show how everyday practices emerging from parcel-sending inform connectedness. In addressing the perpetuity of the parcel-sending phenomenon, I argued that the popularity of the service stems from parcel van companies' important active role in facilitating transnational connectedness as part of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Drawing on Levitt's notion of 'social remittances' (1998) incorporating transfers of experiences and practices that transcend economic considerations of remittance-sending, I argued that both van company employees and their clients build a relationship based on familiarity and trust, indispensable for such transfers (idem).

To reflect this participative role, I referred to parcel van companies as Moldo-*Vans*, or vehicles of sociality that provide the material link between Moldovan migrants and those left behind by participating in the process of parcel-sending, from wrapping the parcel at the company office to handing it over at collection points. Moreover, I showed that, by collaborating with Moldovan scheduled bus services, Moldo-*Vans* developed an informal system of incorporating more routes to reach more clients which, in turn, produced what Dalakoglou and Harvey (2012) call the 'enchantment' of the road, or the promise to maintain a stable and fast link between dispersed family members. In providing this link, I argued, Moldo-*Vans* become mediators of their clients' negotiation of social relations by connecting distant locations within weekly three-day trips that migrants and those left behind rely on to send parcels. Moreover, as my ethnography of the van company

operations showed, around different holiday times and throughout the year, parcels contain items that reflect clients' life events, including the moment of the migrant's departure. Thus, while Moldo-*Vans* become what Altman and Hinkson (2007) consider mobile embodiments of livelihood and sociality for their clients, I argued that the practice of parcel-sending is strongly related to clients' personal histories and should be understood in relation to their transnational families' migration experiences.

This led me to consider the role of individual and shared perceptions of time in developing material connections via parcel-sending. As it emerged from my analysis of items sent via first parcels and subsequent sending choices and patterns, Moldovan migrants and those left behind make sense of the separation by relating to important moments in their family histories. Drawing on the notion of 'temporal references' (Munn 1992), I showed that Moldovan transnational families understand post-migration experience in terms of milestones, important holidays and significant events in their families' timelines, which are then translated into their sending practices. The most significant of these temporal references, I argued, is the moment of the migrant's departure which marks the distinction between life together and life apart. I showed that, in this moment of separation, it becomes clear that an initial tear in the web of relations occurs. The moment of the migrant's departure becomes the point of reference, specifically referred to by informants as '*când*' – the moment *when* their family *became* transnational.

Throughout the chapters, the significance of the moment of departure is reiterated in several contexts to show how informants' perception of 'before' and 'after' informs their sending practices. This distinction is not, however, employed by informants to emphasise contrasting aspects of their experiences at home and abroad, but to make sense of how these experiences are reconfigured and translated into transnational life. As I showed in Chapter III, the act of leaving the homeland prompts a negotiation of 'here' and 'there', a distinction which Gardner (1993) considers to be a source of continuing tensions in how images of the homeland and abroad are constructed.

However, I argued that migrants and their families resolve these tensions by negotiating distance in a continuous process of interacting in transnational space. Moreover, this distance becomes an opportunity, in Stasch's vision of separation from the parental home as a way of preserving autonomy, while maintaining connections (2009). While migrants build their own fortune by leaving the home shared with their families, physical distance continues to inform the different ways transnational families use to create a sense of proximity (Burrell 2017).

In Chapter IV, I showed how this proximity is achieved through sharing food, where the moment of departure marks the distinction between the 'taste of home' (Pigliasco 2005) and the acquired taste of 'foreign' foods (Stoilova 2015). I showed that 'new' foods become familiar over time as a result of sharing post-migration gustatory experiences, ultimately leading to changes in palates and the types of foodstuffs sent via parcels. Similar post-migration changes occur in the domestic sphere, when both migrants and those left behind begin to reconfigure the home shared before the moment of departure, as argued in Chapter V.

Thus, it becomes clear that the moment of departure represents a turning point that determines other events to be related to a perception of time interlinked with family histories. Drawing on Gell's notion of time-maps (1992), I argued that transnational families experience life events that occur after the moment of departure as part of the common goal of staying in touch. In Chapter III, this goal is fulfilled by creating co-presence with the use of communication technologies like Skype (Madianou and Miller 2012), which I showed to be an important, but not exclusive way to configure connections. Instead, in Chapter IV and, briefly, in Chapter V, I argued that co-presence is more fully achieved through the combined use of Skype and the materiality of objects (Baldassar 2008) – foodstuffs, clothes and household items sent via parcels. In Chapter V, I showed that co-presence is also achieved through a shared 'journey of people and things' (Mahler 2013), connecting family histories and object biographies in displays of photographs, artwork and decorations.

This idea of achieving proximity through co-presence and sharing objects that went on a journey led me to address how connections are negotiated through specific material practices arising from parcel-sending. Drawing on the notion of objects as 'tangible anchors' (Munn 1992) that create connections through everyday practices, I argued that parcel-sending provides the link between people and things that allows such practices to continue after the moment of departure. Moreover, as my ethnography revealed, the more migrants and those left behind engage with parcel-sending, the higher the opportunity for these practices to develop.

Considering gift-giving as a contribution to re-establishing post-migration material connections, I argued that, instead of requiring reciprocity, sending gifts via parcels represents an important aspect of staying in touch, particularly in relation to extended family (Werbner 1990) and networks left behind. As I showed in Chapter III, while gifts may take on a 'mundane' or 'extraordinary' connotation, the act of giving embodies the shared experience of the sender and the receiver, creating proximity.

Finally, transnational connections become tangible through practices like commensality, cooking, shopping, homemaking or leisure and learning. Drawing on the sensory qualities of food in establishing gustatory connections (Nyamnjoh 2018), I showed that commensality enabled by parcel-sending allows those left behind to experience unfamiliar foods based on the migrant's experience abroad, while providing the comfort of familiar taste by sending back homemade meals. Moreover, commensality is also achieved by using non-perishable items sent via parcels, like ceramic bowls. Such items, along with furniture and home décor are used in everyday practices within domestic space that may be taken for granted (Miller 2001) in transnational space. While expectations of what a home 'should be' (Daniels 2010) are embodied in displays of photographs reflecting familial relations or presented as placements of furniture (Drazin 2001), objects hidden out of sight or not displaying an implicit link to the departed migrant uncover a more complex web of associated relations and practices. As discussed in Chapter V, the use of English books to prepare for the move to the UK or growing bulbs

and plants sent by the migrant indicate developments in family histories and the continuing nurturing of the transnational connection.

The complexity of everyday practices associated with the use of items sent via parcels reiterates the pivotal role of Moldo-*Vans* in creating connections between Moldovan migrants and those left behind. As the materiality of keeping in touch, supported by parcel-sending, becomes an indispensable part of transnational life, my final point in these concluding remarks must focus on how this complexity of practices relates to changes in migration infrastructure and disruption to the journey of people and things. In Chapter VI I argued that, while limited opportunities to send reduce material co-presence to gifts and items used in shared activities during return visits, the migrant's intermittent absence-presence allows for some material connections to be made. Ultimately, in stark contrast to return visits and conventional post, the parcel van service becomes as desired as the proximity it helps create.

Throughout this thesis it became evident that parcel van services offer more than the transportation of goods. Starting from general practices of staying in touch through occasional parcels containing gifts, the discussion moved to more specific practices concerning everyday life, that constitute the embodiment of proximity. While Skype provided virtual and temporal co-presence, parcel-sending offered a very tangible embodiment of daily practices of commensality and homemaking that involved negotiating distance and the absence of the migrant in transnational social field, in which parcel vans become intermediaries of sociality.

I started this thesis with a highlight of the legislative debates surrounding parcel van services, indicative of the important role parcel-sending plays in Moldovan transnational life. Uncovering the importance of a material culture outlook on transnational connectedness, this research balances out the already rich explorations of social remittances, communication technology and transnationalism to provide the link between migration experiences and everyday practices. The exploration of this link

shows that my research thus contributes to scholarship in the areas of kinship, material culture and migration studies. Moreover, another important contribution of my research concerns policy makers and practitioners working in the field of return and circular migration, such as diaspora organisations, governmental bodies and non-governmental agencies, for whom my research provides a starting point in rethinking the importance of parcel van services for their clients' wellbeing.

In the light of the discussed findings that showed the role of parcel van services in creating transnational connectedness, and the continuing academic interest in social remittances, migrant infrastructures and the materiality of everyday life, this thesis can be considered a call for further investigation of the material practices of migration that keep transnational connections alive.

Appendix A

Parcel van companies' business cards

Examples of additional delivery locations in Moldova facilitated by scheduled bus routes

MIERCURI
068 519 555 C NR 444

CRASNOARMEISCOE	11.00	
FONTAN		
BOGNICIENI		SUNĂM
PERVOMAISCOE	11.10	ȘCOALA
ONEȘTI	11.20	MAGAZIN
OBILENI	11.30	
LEUȘENI	11.50	
BUJOR ȘIȘCANI		SUNĂM
BOLȚUN	12.00	SAT
CRISTEȘTI	12.10	BENZIĂRIE
VĂRZĂREȘTI	12.30	MĂNĂSTIRE
NISPORENI	12.50-13.30	
AUTOGARA		
SELIȘTE	13.40	OPRIRE
CIUOULENI	14.00	CENTRU
DRĂGUȘENI	14.10	MOARA
STOLNICENI	14.20	OPRIRE
LOCĂNEȘTI	14.30	CENTRU
VĂSIENI	15.10	CEN. DE
CULTURA		

MIERCURI
060 881 531 C NJ 312

MERENI	7.10
TÎNTĂRENI	7.45
ANENI NOI	8.00
CĂUȘENI	9.00
ȘTEFAN VOĂ	9.40

VARNIȚA	11.00
DELACĂU	11.40
VADUL LUI VOĂ	12.30
BOȘCANI	12.50
CRIULENI	13.15
USTEA	13.30
HOLERCANI	13.50

MIERCURI
069 951 704 C YU 444

SÎNGERA	6.50	COPAC
CHETROSU	7.00	TRASA
MERENI	7.10	BEZINĂRIE
TODIREȘTI	7.25	TRASA
TÎNTĂRENI	7.30	ESTACADA
ANENI NOI	7.40-8.15	CERC
GRIGORIEVCA	8.40	TRASA
CĂUȘENI	9.00-9.30	
AUTOGARA		
POPEASCA	9.45	TRASA
ȘTEFAN VODĂ	10.00-10.30	
SLOBOZIA	10.35	CENTRU
RĂSCĂIEȚII NOI	10.45	CENTRU
VIȘOARA	10.50	TIREX
ANTONEȘTI	11.00	CENTRU
CARAHASANI	11.20	CENTRU
FEȘTELIȚA	11.50	
HÎRBOVEȚI	13.15	LUKOIL
VARNIȚA	14.00-15.00	
GURA BÎCULUI	15.15	VAMA

ROȘCANA	15.30 ARMEANA

MIERCURI
060195553

BUȚENI	5.10	MAGAZIN
GURA GALBENĂ	6.00	VIN PUNCT
CIMIȘLIA	6.30	AUTOGARA
BASARABEASCA	7.00	BRUTĂRIA
COMRAT	8.00	AUTOGARA
SADÎC	8.20	PRIMĂRIA
CAHUL	10.30	PARC
CANTEMIR	11.45	PIAȚA
LEOVA	12.20	ALIMENTARA
SĂRATA GALBENĂ	13.00	CENTRU
HÎNCEȘTI	13.30	AUTOGARA
LĂPUȘNA	14.00	LA BISERICĂ
SOFIA	14.10	GRĂDINIȚA
NEGREA	14.15	LA ULCIOR
CĂRPINENI	14.30	PETROM
MINJIR	14.45	LA OPRIRE
VOINESCU	15.00	BAR BOREA
POJORĂNI	16.10	ALIMENTARA
IALOVENI	16.30	LA CERC

MIERCURI
060109595 N 881

MĂGDĂCEȘTI	7.00	BAR
PERESECINA	7.30	
ORHEI	7.40	CASA DE OIL
RAZ. SOROCII	8.30	

RATUȘ	9.00	LA STRADĂ
VERIJENI	9.00	
PREPELIȚA	9.30	
COPĂCENI	9.40	
SÂNGEREI	10.00	
MAG. MOLDOVA		
BĂLȚI	10.30	PIAȚA
BALDUCOVA		
FĂLEȘTI	12.00	AUTOGARA
SCULENI	12.30	
UNGHENI	13.00	
PÎRLIȚA	13.30	
CORNEȘTI	14.00	
SIPOTENI	14.40	
CĂLĂRAȘI	15.00	AUTOGARA
BUCOVĂȚI	15.40	
STRĂȘENI	16.00	AUTOGARA

MIERCURI
069 214 048 N 881

REZINA	8.00	CASA DE OIL
ȘOLDĂNEȘTI	9.00	UNIVERMAG
OLIȘCANI	9.30	
FLOREȘTI	10.30	STADION
SOROCA	11.30	AUTOGARA
DROCHIA	13.00	GARA FER.
RÎȘCANI	13.40	AUTOGARA
EDINEȚ	14.30	PIAȚA AUTO
TELENEȘTI	17.00	AUTOGARA

MIERCURI
060 881 531 C NJ 312

CRICOVA	7:00 CLUB
CIORESCU	7:20
CRIULENI	8:00 AUTOGARA
USTEA	8:30 BAR
JEVRENI	8:45 EROI
MĂSCĂUȚI	9:00 CENTRU
HOLERCANI	9:30 CENTRU
SLOBOZIA DUȘCA	10:00 CENTRU
ONIȚCANI	10:10 TRASĂ
BOȘCANA	10:20 TRASĂ
VADUL LUI VODĂ	10:40 BISERICĂ

MIERCURI
060 195 553 IL BE 225

BUȚENI	5:10 MAGAZIN
GURA GALBENĂ	6:00 VIN PUNCT
CIMIȘLIA	6:30 AUTOGARA
BASARABEASCA	7:00 BRUTĂRIA
COMRAT	8:00 AUTOGARA
SADÎC	8:20 PRIMĂRIA
CAHUL	10:30 PARC
CANTEMIR	11:45 PIAȚA
LEOVA	12:20 ALIMENTARA
SĂRATA GALBENĂ	13:00 CENTRU
HÎNCEȘTI	13:30 AUTOGARA
LĂPUȘNA	14:00 BISERICĂ
SOFIA	14:10 GRĂDINIȚA
NEGREA	14:15 LA ULCIOR
CĂRPINENI	14:30 PETROM
MINJIR	14:45 LA OPRIRE
VOINESCU	15:00 BAR BOREA
POJORĂNI	16:10 ALIMENTARA

MIERCURI
079 426 660 C TP 881

MĂGDĂCEȘTI	7:00 BAR
PERESECINA	7:30
ORHEI	7:40 CASA DE CULTURĂ
RAZV. SOROCII	8:30
RATUȘ	9:00 LA STRADĂ
VERIJENI	9:00
PREPELIȚA	9:30
COPĂCENI	9:40
SÎNGEREI	10:00 MAG.MOLDOVA
BĂLȚI	10:30 PIAȚA BALDUCOVA
FĂLEȘTI	12:00 AUTOGARA
SCULENI	12:30
UNGHENI	13:00
PÎRLIȚA	13:30
CORNEȘTI	14:00
SIPOTENI	14:40
CĂLĂRAȘI	15:00 AUTOGARA
BUCOVĂȚI	15:40
STRĂȘENI	16:00 AUTOGARA

MIERCURI
069 214 048 V LU 420

REZINA	8:00 CASA DE CULTURĂ
ȘOLDĂNEȘTI	9:00 UNIVERMAG
OLIȘCANI	9:30 CENTRU
FLOREȘTI	10:30 STADION
RACOVĂȚ	10:50 LA OPRIRE
SOROCA	11:30 AUTOGARA
DROCHIA	13:00 GARA FEROV.
RÎȘCANI	13:30 AUTOGARA
RECEA	13:50 LA OPRIRE
PELENIA	14:00 LA OPRIRE
TELENEȘTI	15:00 AUTOGARA
VERIJENI	15:00 ÎN SAT
CODRU NOU	15:10 ÎN SAT
CHIȘTELNIȚA	15:15 ÎN SAT
TÎNTĂRENI	15:15 ÎN SAT
NUCĂRENI	15:20 ÎN SAT
CAZĂNEȘTI	15:30 ÎN SAT

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