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The Politics of Emigration in Europe: A Research Agenda*

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Abstract

While the politics of immigration in destination countries has been a prominent topic of research in comparative political science in Europe, the same does not apply to emigration and to the perspective of peripherical EU countries. This is true even though the flows of people moving from east to west and from south to north pose potentially significant challenges to 'sending countries' in Europe. This article sets up a research agenda aimed at contributing to redress this imbalance. It highlights the need to explore more systematically themes such as (1) the impact of emigration on the political behaviour of both those who stay and those who leave and (2) and how emigration is framed and politicized by relevant societal actors. Ultimately, it draws attention to the fact that a lot of the questions that have been asked about 'entry' (immigration) need to be asked about 'exit' too (emigration).

Keywords: emigration; freedom of movement; European Union; political participation; politicization

'People no longer dream of the future. Instead, they dream of other places.'
Ivan Krastev (2016, p. 97).

Introduction

The politics of immigration in destination countries has been a prominent topic of research in comparative political science, with scholars exploring the roots, causes and frames surrounding the politicization of immigration, as well as its impact on public opinion, party politics, voting, and protest patterns (for example Grande et al., 2019; Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019; van der Brug et al., 2015). *Emigration*, however, the flipside of the immigration coin, has received much less attention in those same fields. While there are different strands of literature that have explored the multifaceted nature and impact of migration from various points of views – particularly political economy scholarship (Meardi, 2013; Wagner, 2018) and the interdisciplinary literature on migration studies (Adamson, 2019; Waldinger, 2015) – political science research on political behaviour and politicization has mostly overlooked the *political* consequences of emigration for 'sending countries'. This is also true for political science research on European integration and one of its core components – the free movement of persons – which is more focused on concerns arising from the *entry* of people in the EU economic core rather than the impact of *exit* in the periphery (see also Bruzelius, 2021). This is despite the fact

that every immigrant is an emigrant and that for every country of destination there is a country of origin.

This imbalance is also notorious in public opinion surveys. While there are countless surveys on people's attitudes towards immigration, the same is not true for emigration. Therefore, a 2019 poll by the European Council of Foreign Relations took many by surprise when showing that several countries in the east and south of Europe worry more about emigration than immigration (Rice-Oxley & Rankin, 2019). This includes countries where immigration has been a far more visible and controversial topic, such as Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain. Strikingly, about half of the respondents in these five countries revealed a preference for emigration controls that would prevent their fellow citizens from leaving the country for extended periods of time – even though such a step would constitute a violation of the almost universal 'right to exit' as well as of the core principle of free movement within the EU. This contrasts with the fact that significant majorities continue to consider freedom of movement as the most positive aspect of European integration (Standard Eurobarometer, 2018).

The comparatively little attention paid to *exit* in research on political behaviour and politicization is also remarkable given the increase in migration flows following the 2008 economic crisis and the visibility of migrant care and agricultural labour during the Covid-19 crisis. To be sure, there are important reasons – explored below – that make emigration a much less attractive object of politicization than immigration. Still, the dearth of research on the politics of emigration in Europe is also the result of an *academic* blindspot, possibly reflecting a broader tendency to relegate the concerns of the 'periphery' to the sidelines (Kukovec, 2015) and the fact that 'sending countries' have fewer resources for academic research (Schiermeier, 2020). To the goal of overcoming this gap, we offer a research agenda which, whilst not comprehensive, opens important new avenues for research. We follow Bruzelius (2021), who has also drawn attention to the need to take emigration within Europe seriously, with the difference that Bruzelius focused on the study of the welfare-state related implications of emigration in the EU periphery, while we focus instead on the similarly neglected fields of political behaviour and politicization.

We outline two specific research avenues. The first deals with the impact of emigration on political behaviour, in particular *how emigration impacts political participation in 'sending countries' of those who stay as well as those who leave*. While existing research on the impact of emigration tends to focus on its (more visible) socio-economic consequences (such as labour shortages), we know much less about its potential political impact. This is particularly relevant because the exit of critical citizens or the resentment of those 'left behind' can aggravate symptoms of democratic decline at 'home'. The second research avenue is focused on emigration as a political issue, that is*, the ways in which emigration is framed and politicized by relevant societal actors*, such as national governments, political parties, or civil society organizations. We call for more empirical and comparative research in this regard (see for example, Blauberger et al., 2021), paying particular attention to the actors involved, as well as their ideas, narratives, and motivations. Studying the politics of emigration has an added significance in the context of the EU, where citizens' freedom of movement is so closely coupled with the legitimacy of the EU.

Before proceeding, a note on terminology. The free movement of persons and non-discrimination between citizens are fundamental principles of EU integration, which constructs 'Europe as a single geographical space' (Berezin & Díez-Medrano, 2008, p. 2).

Accordingly, within this space, population movements are often labelled as 'mobility' rather than 'immigration' or 'emigration' and EU movers are referred to as 'mobile citizens' rather than '(im−/e)migrants'. Nevertheless, we chose to use the term 'emigration' because we consider this the best lens to capture what we think is a comparatively neglected dimension of population flow in the EU – that is, outgoing migration from peripherical member states. Similarly, the focus on 'emigration member states' is the most unambiguous when it comes to drawing attention to countries for whom the *exiting* of citizens is an issue of concern. Tellingly, the handful of recent contributions addressing this same lacuna refer to 'emigration' too (Bruzelius, 2021; Roos, 2021). This is not to deny the clear importance of concepts such as 'mobility', 'transnationalism' or 'diaspora', which have been used productively to capture the complex temporalities, spatial relations, and forms of belonging of contemporary migrants (Adamson, 2019; Recchi, 2015; Schiller et al., 1995). These issues are, however, outside the scope of this piece, more narrowly focused on *exit* and its political impact on 'sending countries'.

I. Emigration in Europe: An Overview

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been the region with the fastest shrinking population, not only in Europe, but globally (UN Population Division, 2019). Emigration alone accounts for almost three-quarters of population decline (Fihel & Okólski, 2019). Since the early 1990s, a combination of push and pull factors have driven several waves of out-migration from the region. It is estimated that between 1990 and 2012 close to 20 million people left their country of origin (Atoyan et al., 2016). Considerable regional variation exists, though. The Baltic States and Bulgaria have lost between 16 and 26 per cent of their population between 1991 and 2015 (Lutz et al., 2019). Romania and Croatia also stand out when looking at the number of its citizens of working age (20–64) residing in another EU country – the equivalent of 17 per cent of its resident population in the case of Croatia and almost 19 per cent in the case of Romania (Eurostat, 2021a). Furthermore, there are good reasons to think these figures provide conservative estimates, given how difficult it is to track emigration as well as the upsurge in forms of temporary migration, such as seasonal or posted work.

Although the demographic picture is not as adverse as in the east, south European countries registered a sharp increase in emigration rates in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. In Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain alike, the yearly number of outgoing migrants during the crisis years increased by at least three times (Eurostat, 2021b). In the post-crisis years, emigration numbers continued to be far superior to the ones registered prior to the crisis. While the region attracts much larger inflows of people than CEE, emigration rates have nonetheless contributed to population decline in the cases of Portugal and Greece, which saw their population numbers decrease between 2 and 4 per cent from 2011 to 2021 (Eurostat, 2021c).

What is more, while the old-age dependency ratio is set to rise everywhere, it is projected to reach the most uneven levels in southern Europe – as life expectancy is higher than in the east and fertility rates are the lowest in the continent. By 2040, Greece, Italy and Portugal are predicted to have less than two persons of working age for every person aged 65 and over (Eurostat, 2021c). The burden of pension and health care spending might thus increase substantially, in a region that already struggles fiscally. Therefore,

demography is another important source of south–north and east–west divergence within the EU. This, in turn, can contribute to accentuate economic divides, since smaller and older workforces are likely to have a negative impact on productivity, foreign investment, and economic growth. This raises important questions over the potential distributive effects of freedom of movement in the EU (Bickerton, 2019).

To be sure, emigration has positive consequences too. Its multifaceted and context-dependent effects – together with data availability issues – signifies that the balance of positive and negative consequences for countries of origin remains an unsettled research question. On the one hand, emigration can have a positive impact on the economic development at origin (for a review, see Mendola, 2012). Remittances, and in case of return, enhanced 'human capital', are the most relevant factors in this regard, together with emigration's dampening effect on unemployment rates. On the other hand, the loss of human capital ('brain drain'), labour shortages in important sectors, the erosion of the tax base, or the lack of returns on investment in education, are commonly considered potential negative effects (Lutz et al., 2019). The socio-economic challenges and/or opportunities provided by emigration are, however, not the same everywhere and, in the European context, need to take into consideration the effects of a demographically adverse picture. Focusing on the EU polity in specific, researchers in the fields of industrial relations, labour migration and social policy have documented and analysed the effects of migration in their respective fields, paying attention to issues such as labour relations, trade union action and the social rights of movers, and emphasizing in particular the production and reproduction of spatial (east–west) and social class divides (for example Bruzelius et al., 2017; Meardi, 2013; Stan et al., 2021; Stan & Erne, 2016).

Socio-economic consequences aside, the political impact of emigration has, so far, been much less of a concern. This is in spite of an incipient field of research analysing the influence of emigration on political and institutional development (for example Kapur, 2014; Meseguer & Burgess, 2014), though this literature has so far focused on low-income countries only. In the next two sections we set out two broad avenues for future empirical research on the relationship between emigration, political behaviour, and politicization that would allow us to better grasp the politics of emigration in Europe.

II. Emigration and Political Behaviour

To be clear, the effects of emigration in the EU are not expected to be the same everywhere and will depend in part on numbers, the socio-economic profile of those who leave (as well as those who stay), the political contexts of the countries of origin and stay, and whether migration is mostly temporary or not. Having this caveat in mind, it is nonetheless striking how little we know about the political effects of emigration.

This is especially true for the impact of emigration on the political behaviour of *those who stay*, particularly in areas affected by high emigration rates. Krastev & Holmes (2019) argue that, when high shares of young people leave or yearn to leave, those who remain end up feeling like 'losers' themselves, regardless of how well they are doing. This may affect political participation in different ways. Anelli & Peri (2017), for example, have found that Italian municipalities with larger emigration rates experienced lower levels of political participation. This is in part because those who leave were more likely to engage in politics, but it is also a likely outcome of the fact that those who who stay take

emigration as yet another symptom of political inefficacy. The same authors find that emigration had a negative impact on indicators of political change, such as the share of young, educated, and women among elected officials. More case-study and cross-country research would be useful in determining whether Anelli & Peri's (2017) findings apply to other contexts.

Another avenue yet to be further explored is whether voters from areas with high emigration rates are more inclined to vote for anti-establishment or nativist political parties. Existing evidence in this regard is so far mixed. On the one hand, Anelli & Peri (2017) find that Italian municipalities with larger emigration rates have lower share of votes for anti-status-quo parties. On the other hand, in contexts such as eastern Germany there is a strong ecological correlation between population decline and the strength of the far-right (Diermeier, 2020; Otteni & Herold, 2020; Weisskircher, 2020). A recent working paper by Dancygier et al. (2022) finds a positive correlation between population decline and voting for the populist radical right (at the county level) and uses the case of Sweden to suggest that this is not only an outcome of compositional changes in the population but also of changes in the preferences of those 'left behind'. Furthermore, the fact that emigration contributes to increase the relative share of political power of older cohorts raises a series of concerns related to political influence and policy preferences (for example prioritization of pensions over investment in education).

Relatedly, we know little about the links between emigration-related public attitudes and political behaviour as well as other attitudes or policy preferences. Partly, this is due to the lack of available data, as major public opinion surveys rarely if ever ask people about their views on emigration. But when they do, they reveal noteworthy patterns. Echoing the findings of the aforementioned poll by the European Council of Foreign Relations, a survey conducted by the SOLID research project (Policy Crisis and Crisis Politics: Sovereignty, Solidarity and Identity in the EU post-2008) in 16 European countries in 2021 showed high levels of concern related to the emigration of co-citizens to other EU countries in the EU's southern and eastern member states, much more than in the north and west (Kyriazi & Visconti, 2022). Given the level of concern and its territorially concentrated nature, we may want to learn more about the way emigration-related attitudes are structured and what their impact may be on policy preferences, including support for European integration. Here research can draw on a handful of existing studies examining public attitudes on freedom of movement (Lutz, 2021; Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2019) or on Kustov's (2020) original contribution, exploring how opposition to emigration relates to opposition to immigration and mobility in general.

A different strand of research concerns the profile and voting behaviour of emigrants themselves. A growing body of literature has recently emerged, focusing on the factors that account for emigrants' voting behaviour (Chaudhary, 2018; Ciornei & Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020). The same is true for research explaining voting rights and party mobilization abroad (Burgess & Tyburski, 2020; Wellman, 2021). Most existing research has, however, focused on countries outside Europe. Given the increasingly large shares of southern and eastern European migrants, this is a field of research worth of further exploration in these regions too. This is the more so when it has been suggested that migrants can have an impact on electoral outcomes, as with the 2014 election of President Klaus Johannis in Romania (Burean, 2018) or that the exodus of young and well-educated people can damage the chances of liberal parties in the east (Krastev & Holmes, 2019).

This, in turn, relates to broader concerns on the effects on *exit* on democratic quality. If one thinks of emigration in Hirschman's (1970) terms, *exit* can be interpreted as an alternative to *voice* – through leaving, migrants stop being an agent for political change in their countries of origin. Since free movement within the EU lowers the costs of exit, it is legitimate to ask whether it decreases incentives to use voice back home, thus contributing to disengagement and declining levels of democratic quality. Writing about what is typically regarded as the worst case of democratic backsliding in the EU, Hungary, Kelemen (2020) has pointed to emigration as a crucial pillar of 'Europe's authoritarian equilibrium'. In line with the common idea that political elites 'back home' have an interest in the exit of critical voices, he claims that intra-EU free movement facilitates the exit of dissatisfied citizens, thus weakening opposition, while also generating remittances that contribute to regime survival. While this hypothesis is compelling, it needs empirical backing. This is the more so when existing research on autocratic regimes suggests that emigration can be a double-edged sword: while capable of boosting their survival and helping produce quiescent populations, emigration to democracies can also lead to the diffusion of democratic norms and to an increase in political protest (Escribà-Folch et al., 2018; Miller & Peters, 2020; Peters & Miller, 2022). Indeed, a growing body of literature on social and political remittances, more specifically, has explored how the flow of political principles, vocabulary, and practices can lead to empowerment and democratisation in sending countries (Ahmadov & Sasse, 2016; Kessler & Rother, 2016; Krawatzek & Müller-Funk, 2019).

Finally, the study of the impact of *exit* on *voice* should focus on non-institutional forms of participation too. A recent study indicates that not only exit, but even the awareness of the possibility of exit in itself can decrease an individual's incentive to participate in collective action (Sellars, 2019). Large-scale emigration thus may hinder the participation of those who left but also demobilize those who have stayed (Kelemen, 2020). Nevertheless, the ways in which exit and voice can nowadays be more easily combined deserve attention too. Given the mass access to low cost flying within Europe and new forms of online activism, some have been able to keep alive not only their interest in the politics of their home country but also their contacts and even to some extent protest activity. It is no coincidence that many protest waves in Bulgaria have started in the summer and Christmas breaks, after emigrants came back (Rone & Junes, 2021). In 2018, Romanians abroad travelled *en masse* back home to join protests that opposed corruption in the country (Macrea Toma, 2019). What is more, examples of exit spurring voice exist too. Spain's *Marea Granate* movement is a case of a transnational initiative among Spanish emigrants aimed at voicing their outrage over their condition as 'forced economic emigrants'.

All in all, in light of often scattered and contradictory evidence, there is much room both for more case-study analyses in the European context as well as more systematic and comparative research on the effect of emigration on changes in institutional and non-institutional forms of political behaviour.

III. Emigration and Politicization

Beyond the impact of emigration on the political participation of citizens, we also know little about the impact of emigration as a *political issue* in countries where emigration is a relevant phenomenon. Under what conditions does emigration come to be publicly

debated and seen as a matter of policy intervention? How do relevant actors frame it? These are some of the questions one can ask when looking at emigration as a subject of *politicization*, broadly understood here as the process of 'making previously unpolitical matters political' (Zürn, 2019, p. 798) and often operationalized in terms of an increase in issue salience (visibility), actor expansion (range) and actor polarization (intensity and direction) (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). While national governments and political parties are of primary interest in this regard, it is also relevant to explore to which extent emigration has become an object of contestation across different settings. It is possible that the politicization of migration takes very different forms at the micro, meso and macro level, with individuals, political parties, civil society, and governments having preferences that might align or go in different directions. For example, while individuals might problematize emigration and aim to make it salient through organizing protest (as in the case of the Spanish Marea Granate protests), governments might prefer to downplay emigration as a political issue.

To be sure, even in countries where emigration is a quantitatively more relevant phenomenon than immigration, immigration seems to attract substantially more attention. This is, in itself, a puzzle worth exploring too. It is likely that political actors find it more difficult to tap into concerns over emigration than immigration. One reason for this relates to different normative understandings of both types of movement – while the 'right to exit' is a well-established and inalienable individual right, the 'right to enter' is a prerogative of the sovereign state (Ypi, 2008). A second reason has to do with ethnic boundaries. While immigration is typically politicized because of its alleged 'threat' to the ethnic boundaries of the national community, the same obviously does not apply to emigration. Third, it might also be the case that political actors are deterred by a couple of fundamental predicaments. On the one hand, there is the sheer complexity of analysing the trade-offs between the potential benefits and costs of emigration (for example remittances vs. 'brain drain'; labour market 'safety valve' in some sectors/periods vs. labour market shortages in others). On the other hand, certain actors might have an interest in *depoliticizing* emigration – most notably governments, but perhaps EU institutions too – so as to deflect the blame for the exodus of citizens. More research is needed to map and explain these politicization/depoliticization dynamics.

This said, despite all the factors that make emigration a more difficult object of politicization compared to immigration, there is ample evidence that it can become a political or even publicly relevant issue . An example (admittedly an extreme one) is Lithuania, where the previous marginal farmers' party (Lithuanian Farmers and Green Union) won the 2016 elections after turning emigration into a central issue (Kustov, 2020). Emigrant voting and the political rights of emigrants more broadly also became a highly salient and debated topic in both the 2020 anti-governmental protests and the May 2021 Bulgarian elections (Rone, 2021). Furthermore, trade unions across CEE have used labour mobility as a threat in collective wage bargaining (Szabó, 2014), however inconsistently and not with equal success across contexts (Stan & Erne, 2016).

Plenty of examples can also be found in southern Europe following the recent economic crisis. Contexts of crisis can be particularly fertile in breeding politicization, since governments might perceive certain benefits in emigration (for example reduction in the shared of unemployed, decrease in social expenditure) while opposition parties blame governments and their 'austerity policies' for driving people out. Take the examples of

Portugal and Spain, where emigration became a source of contention after (right-wing) government representatives framed it in a positive light, either as viable alternative for those who could not find opportunities back home (in the Portuguese case) or as a symptom that the Spanish have 'finally stopped being local' (Mendes, 2020a, 2020b). In both cases, such statements were met with an extensive backlash, both by the public and opposition parties. Besides obvious government-opposition dynamics, it is also relevant to explore to which extent different views of emigration connect to different socio-economic programmes and ideologies.

While it is likely that emigration is predominantly framed in socio-economic terms, it is also relevant to explore to which extent it has been used to feed nativist political agendas, considering its negative demographic impact. This is noticeable in some CEE countries, such as Hungary and Poland, where Fidesz and PiS have fostered a sense of demographic emergency, linking emigration to the 'decay' and 'survival' of the nation, together with low fertility rates. In this type of discourse, emigration and immigration are part and parcel of the same problem – both contribute to a diminishing share of 'natives' (typically ethnically conceived) among the population. This is essentially the thesis of Krastev & Holmes (2019), who argue that, to understand the seemingly puzzling anti-immigrant appeal in CEE – where immigration rates are low – such stances must be put in the context of a greater 'demographic anxiety' where depopulation – in part due to emigration and in part due to low fertility – is real.

The study of how emigration is framed across actors and contexts should also explore how emigrants (just like immigrants) are not all perceived in the same light, and how ethnic, gender, and class lines apply to discourses on emigration too. The quintessential 'other' in CEE has been the Roma population, whose emigration is taken with much relief by parts of the political elites (Dumbrava, 2017). Similarly, the Latvian and Estonian governments encouraged and even promoted the westward migration of Russian speakers after the EU enlargement to permanently 'expunge the "problem" of minority presence' from these countries' (Hughes, 2005, p. 759). Though less obvious, gender (Solari, 2014) and class differences also weigh heavily on perceptions of emigration. Despite the very mixed socio-economic profile of emigrant populations in Europe, educated migrants (associated to the so-called 'brain drain') seem to be a much greater object of public and political attention in 'sending countries', while low-skilled are rarely worthy of visibility (Tintori & Romei, 2017).

Finally, and related to this, it remains to be explored how racialized, gendered and class-based framings of emigration link to policies that incentivize return. Indeed, eastern and southern EU member-states' governments are increasingly introducing policies to provide 'soft' incentives for people to stay or return – another symptom of a growing concern with emigration. Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Portugal have all created specific return programs with various types of financial stimuli to would-be returnees. Though it is largely anticipated that these policies will be ineffective in deterring or attracting migrants back (as the benefits afforded can hardly compete with the gains of working in some of the world's richest economies), we need more research on the entire policy process, including agenda-setting, policy design and implementation, as well as the stated specific motivations and narratives behind their adoption. In doing so, studies can draw on and extend a considerable body of work examining the ways in which sending states construct and engage 'their' emigrant populations abroad (Adamson, 2019; Gamlen, 2006).

Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed two broad areas of research on the politics of emigration. These are meant to complement the existing body of research on emigration's socio-economic consequences for sending countries. We call attention to the need to explore how emigration impacts the political behaviour (in protest and party politics) of both those who stay and those who leave. Second, despite in-built weights which keep emigration from taking off as a political issue, in some places and at some instances, emigration has been propelled onto the public debate. How emigration is framed and politicized and how this affects return policies remains to be unpacked.

That said, a major stumbling block for research is the problem of data availability and reliability. This is true both for administrative and survey data. There are several reasons to question existing administrative data on emigration, not least because different countries adopt different procedures to estimate their number of emigrants. Data on the profile of those who leave is also relatively scarce. Moreover, existing surveys do not usually include items on (the perception of) emigration or whether respondents, for example, lived or worked abroad or have children living and working abroad. Pan-European surveys, such as Eurobarometer, could include regular items on emigration. Similarly, and even though acknowledging this is a herculean task, Member States could work together to optimize and harmonize their statistics on emigration.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that a lot of what is said about the impact of emigration and its politicization does not apply exclusively to the cross-border outflow of people but is part of a growing concern with adverse population dynamics. Emigration is only one among several simultaneous demographic trends (together with low fertility rates, aging, depopulation of rural areas, and a changing ethnic composition of society because of immigration). It is one, however, that has asymmetric effects within Europe: it concerns above all eastern and southern European countries and has contributed to make demographic anxieties more pressing here. It was precisely because of 'years of nagging from eastern member states' that the issue of demography became part of the European Council's strategic agenda and has now its own responsible EU commissioner (The Economist, 2020). Thus, it makes little sense to focus almost exclusively on the political impacts of free movement on 'receiving states' in the EU core, as has so far been the case. If the goal is to achieve a comprehensive assessment of the multifaceted impacts of intra-EU mobility, the political consequences of 'exit' for the periphery should be considered too.

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