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# Mass Emigration and the Erosion of Liberal Democracy

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In many regions of the world, liberal politics is on the retreat. This development is usually explained with reference to inherently political phenomena. We propose an alternative explanation, linking democratic backsliding to deep-reaching demographic change caused by mass emigration. We argue that because migrants tend to be more politically liberal, their departure, if quantitatively significant, can hurt liberal democracy. Empirically, we focus on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Since 2004, the region has lost about 9 percent of its population due to migration to Western Europe. Drawing on data from 430,000 individuals and a panel analysis, we show that CEE migrants systematically hold more liberal values than non-migrants and that their exit went along with a deterioration of democracy in their home countries. Further analyses show that the mechanism we describe generalizes to various other world regions. Mass emigration may pose a challenge to democratic development in migrant-sending countries around the globe.

En muchas regiones del mundo, la política liberal está entrando en una fase de retroceso. Este desarrollo suele explicarse con referencia a fenómenos inherentemente políticos. Proponemos una explicación alternativa, vinculando este retroceso democrático con el profundo cambio demográfico causado por la emigración masiva. Argumentamos que, debido a que los migrantes tienden a ser más liberales políticamente, su partida, si esta es cuantitativamente significativa, puede llegar a dañar la democracia liberal. De manera empírica, nos centramos en Europa Central y Oriental (ECO). Desde 2004, la región ha perdido alrededor del 9 por ciento de su población debido a la migración hacia Europa occidental. Demostramos, partiendo de datos obtenidos de 430.000 personas y de un análisis de panel, que los migrantes procedentes de Europa central y oriental tienen, de manera sistemática, valores más liberales que los no migrantes, y que su salida acompañó a un deterioro de la democracia en sus países de origen. Otros análisis muestran que el mecanismo que describimos se puede generalizar a otras regiones del mundo. La emigración masiva puede plantear un desafío para el desarrollo democrático en los países emisores de migrantes de todo el mundo.

Dans nombre de régions du monde, la politique libérale recule. On explique souvent cette évolution par référence à des phénomènes intrinsèquement politiques. Nous proposons une autre explication, et relient le retour en arrière démocratique à un changement démographique important causé par l'émigration de masse. Nous affirmons qu'étant donné que les migrants ont tendance à se montrer plus libéraux sur le plan politique, leur départ, s'il est d'une importance quantitative, peut nuire à la démocratie libérale. Sur le plan empirique, nous nous concentrons sur l'Europe centrale et de l'Est (ECE). Depuis 2004, la région a perdu environ 9 pour cent de sa population à cause de l'émigration vers l'Europe de l'Ouest. En nous appuyant sur des données issues de 430 000 personnes et d'une analyse de panel, nous montrons que les migrants de l'ECE présentent systématiquement des valeurs plus libérales que les non-migrants, et que leur départ s'est accompagné d'une détérioration de la démocratie dans leur pays natal. D'autres analyses montrent que le mécanisme que nous décrivons s'applique aussi à d'autres régions du monde. L'émigration de masse pourrait présenter un défi au développement de la démocratie dans les pays d'où sont issus les migrants dans le monde.

## Introduction

Can mass emigration undermine liberal democracy? Throughout history, the world has seen recurring large-scale movements of people. The emigration to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, refugee movements at the end of the Second World War, and the great move to the cities of an urbanizing China are just some examples (Hatton and Williamson 1998). What are the political consequences of such mass movements? Scholars have linked migration to both the creation and downfall of empires

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(Gibbon 1843; Turchin 2003), the fall of the iron curtain (Hirschman 1993), and violent intergroup conflict (Horowitz 1985). Scholarship also suggests that migration can shape economic and political culture. The strong entrepreneur culture and dedication to individual freedom in the United States are often linked to the frontier mentality that defined the country in its founding decades, and the spirit of the emigrants who brought that mentality with them (Fischer 1989). Implicit to this understanding is a theory that migrants are individuals with specific character traits and political leanings that consequently shape the social and political character of the societies to which they migrate. On the flip side, this suggests that the migrants' countries of origin—now void of the influence of those who left—are also likely to change.

We use this idea to suggest an alternative explanation for democratic backsliding—understood as the decay in established democratic norms and institutions (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018)—focusing on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In the 1990s and early 2000s, observers saw the region set to follow Western democracies on their path towards a steady expansion of liberties (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). In recent years, however, the region took the opposite direction, with civil liberties and individual rights being systematically rolled back by many of the region's conservative governments (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Zielonka 2018). Scholars have sought to explain these developments with the declining leverage of Western democracies in the region (Way and Levitsky 2007), uneven gains from globalization (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Flaherty and Rogowski 2021), the dismantling of the welfare state (Bustikova and Kitschelt 2009), domestic political constellations that weakened institutions and made external pressure ineffective (Jenne and Mudde 2012), and increasing political polarization (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). These accounts seek to explain democratic backsliding with political dynamics in the region. Instead, echoing similar arguments by Goodman and Hiskey (2008), Kelemen (2020), and Lim (2022), we link democratic backsliding to deep-reaching demographic change afforded by mass emigration.

We show that currently about 9 percent of CEE citizens have left their home countries for Western European countries, and demonstrate that the decline in democratic quality in the CEE region closely tracked their departure. We demonstrate that emigrants hold systematically much more pro-democratic values than their non-migrant compatriots. In other words, mass emigration deprived the region of its most democratically inclined citizens.<sup>1</sup> The migrants' absence matters not only because their voices are missing from day-to-day political discussions, but also because their engagements and votes are missing. Migrants vote at much lower rates than non-migrants (7 percent vs. 58 percent, *cp.*, Kostelka 2017), and this reduced turnout mainly harms the political prospects of liberal parties, which lose an estimated half a million votes every round of elections. In several extensions, we show that the migrant-liberal-value nexus holds in a wide range of contexts, including among domestic migrants in the United States and Germany, and in a global sample of individuals interviewed for the World Value Survey. Our findings, therefore, likely generalize to other high-migration contexts around the globe. The migrants' absence matters on the country-level. We show that

the number of emigrants in a given year predicts the subsequent decline in democratic quality in the CEE region as measured by several country-level datasets. Several robustness checks suggest that this relationship is plausibly causal.

Apart from putting forward and rigorously testing an underappreciated explanation for democratic backsliding, our argument contributes to the literature on the socio-political effects of emigration on the migrants' context of origin (Levitt 1998; Goodman and Hiskey 2008; Hiskey and Córdova 2012; Meseguer and Burgess 2014; Ahmadov and Sasse 2016; Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020; Lim 2022). A major finding of this literature is that migrants can improve the quality of government in their home countries by remitting pro-democracy political norms and behaviors (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2010; Pfutze 2012; Chauvet and Mercier 2014; Córdova and Hiskey 2015; Duquette-Rury and Chen 2019; Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright 2022). Our argument challenges this finding both empirically and theoretically. We maintain that, at least under certain conditions, the deleterious effect of the selective emigration of pro-democratic individuals should outweigh the potential beneficial effect of the migrants' influence from abroad. In this way, our paper echoes scholarship showing that emigration can cause 'political brain drain' (Goodman and Hiskey 2008; Hiskey and Córdova 2012; Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright 2022). More fundamentally, we hold that the correlation between migrant-presence in democratic host contexts and democratic improvements at home, which often is used as evidence for the norm-transfer argument, may not always reflect the influence of democratic socialization and the transfer of norms from abroad (*cp.* Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Ahmadov and Sasse 2016; Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020; Lim 2022). Rather, this correlation may be caused by the self-selection of liberally minded individuals into democratic host contexts, plus their concomitant personal influence on their home context. In other words, we argue that migrants do not necessarily become more liberal abroad and then transmit these newly acquired values back. Instead, migrants are liberal individuals in the first place who continue influencing their home context while—and despite—being abroad. In what follows, we first review the rich literature on the political effects of emigration. We then introduce our data and analyses, and demonstrate the robustness and generalizability of our findings. The last section concludes.

### Literature and Theory: Political Consequences of Mass Emigration

Migrants often live their lives 'in-between' their destination context, where they work and reside, and their context of origin, thereby connecting those places and opening up transnational channels of exchange for money, norms, and ideas (Levitt 1998; Ahmadov and Sasse 2016). In addition to monetary remittances—estimated at USD 716 billion globally in 2019 (World Bank 2020b)—migrants have been shown to send back political remittances, understood as the transfer of "political principles, vocabulary, and practices between two or more places" (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020, 1004). Scholars have linked political remittances to shifts in political behavior in the home country, such as increased voter turnout (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2010; Córdova and Hiskey 2015), heightened political participation (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2010; Pfutze 2012; Chauvet and Mercier 2014; Córdova and Hiskey 2015; Duquette-Rury and Chen 2019), lower support for

<sup>1</sup>We should stress that our argument only applies to contexts of voluntary migration. Where migration is forced, because individuals have to flee violence or a sudden deterioration of their living conditions, migration is also likely less selective in terms of political values.

corruption (Ivlevs and King 2017), increased pro-social behavior (Nikolova, Roman, and Zimmermann 2017), and improved gender norms (Diabate and Mesplé-Somps 2019). Despite some critical voices that show that migrants may also transmit nefarious types of norms and behavior,<sup>2</sup> the overall consensus seems to be that migrants' remittances are typically positive for democratic development. By making populations less dependent on top-down clientelism, monetary remittances, too, may help to undermine the stability of autocratic regimes and thus help democracy succeed (Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright, 2015, 2022).<sup>3</sup>

#### *Critique of the Idea that Migration Improves Democracy*

Here, we argue and empirically show that in the European context, large-scale emigration led to the deterioration of democracy in sending countries. Our predicted effect of emigration is thus in opposition to that stipulated by the remittances literature. Why should this be the case? We see three reasons, one specific and two more general ones. A first general reason is that remittances are not the only way migrants can influence their home polities. First and foremost, migration means that individuals physically leave and, hence, their influence is removed or at least much reduced from the local context. In other words, the migrants' departure leaves a gap, which might have its own economic and political effects. For instance, in situations of labor surplus and high unemployment, emigration can ease the pressure on the local economy and improve conditions for those who remain (Karadja and Prawitz 2019). Analogously, under conditions of political suppression, the emigration of political dissenters can stabilize autocratic regimes (Hirschman 1993; Peters and Miller 2021). Case studies of single countries and work on rural-urban migration have confirmed these results and also documented changes in voting behavior in the communities left behind by migrants (Abramitzky, Boustan, and Eriksson 2012; Anelli and Peri 2017; Maxwell 2019).

A few scholars have explicitly pointed to negative political effects of emigration, which they refer to as 'political brain drain' (Hiskey and Córdova 2012; Lim 2022; Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright 2022), analogous to the brain drain of skilled professionals described by economists (Docquier and Rapoport 2012). For example, in an argument very similar to the one made here, Goodman and Hiskey (2008) and Hiskey and Córdova (2012) argue that Latin American countries may have lost particularly risk-accepting individuals, who, they argue, would naturally tend to support democratization processes, and whose absence hence may harm democratization. Using data from the US-Mexican migration context, Goodman and Hiskey (2008) show that high-emigration municipalities have lower rates of political engagement.<sup>4</sup> The effects of the gap left behind by migrants, then, may support, neutralize, or countervail the positive effects of political remittances for democracy.

Second, and specific to our case, we argue that large-scale emigration led to the broad-based deterioration of democracy in CEE because selective migration in terms of demo-

cratic values is particularly strong in the European migration system. This is because in Europe, economic differences are not as pronounced as in other migration systems. For instance, in 2020, the ratio in per-capita GDP between the United States and Mexico, was 8:1, compared to a ratio of 3:1 between Germany and Poland.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, violence and persecution—otherwise important causes of emigration—do not constitute relevant migration drivers in CEE. Taken together, these factors arguably make the economic and safety-related pull of the destination context less important for the migration decision, and, relatively speaking, increase the importance of lifestyle considerations and questions of personal political attitudes. In other words, CEE-Western European migration might be particularly selective in terms of democratic value orientation, meaning that the negative effects of emigration on democratic development might be stronger here than elsewhere. This said, below we show that the migration-liberalism nexus is a general phenomenon that holds in a variety of contexts around the world and is not confined to the European migration context.

Third, and most fundamentally, it is not clear that existing studies on political remittances always capture the actual effects of the democratic context on migrants, whom they then 'transmit home.' If migrants are systematically more liberal than non-migrants, as we demonstrate below, it is also plausible that particularly pro-democratically inclined individuals chose more democratic destination countries—not least in order to match their personal political preferences (Docquier, Tansel, and Turati 2020; Holland and Peters 2020). If these individuals continued to influence their origin context from abroad, this would create a correlation between democratic migration destinations and more democracy 'at home.' However, in reality, in this scenario, both the destination choice and the influence exerted by the migrant were caused by the individual's character traits rather than reflecting the effect of the democratic destination context. In other words, it is possible that some of the studies that attempt to measure political remittances in fact pick up selection effects.

#### *Self-Selection Along Personal Traits*

We argue that emigration can be harmful for democracy because it is not a random sample of individuals that leaves but rather individuals that, had they stayed, would be good democrats. Migration is known to be a highly selective process in a variety of dimensions. Individuals with certain demographic and economic profiles leave at higher rates than others. An extensively researched phenomenon is the selective migration of young, educated individuals with lower levels of risk aversion into societies that reward human capital with higher earnings (Borjas 1994). Less well understood are differences between migrants and non-migrants in terms of psychological and political dispositions (Docquier, Tansel, and Turati 2020). Studies linking migration desires to personality traits show that potential migrants show stronger achievement motivation and score higher on extraversion and openness, and lower on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability (Jokela 2009; McCann 2015). They also show lower affiliation motivation and family centrality (Boneva and Frieze 2001).

Migrant self-selection in terms of personality traits matters for political outcomes because the same traits that

<sup>2</sup>For example, migration has also been linked to voting for radical parties and a decline in electoral participation in the migrants' countries of origin (Karakoç, Köse, and Özcan 2017; Anelli and Peri 2017).

<sup>3</sup>At the same time, monetary remittances have been shown to reduce social spending, which may somewhat reduce this effect (Pfütze 2012; Doyle 2015).

<sup>4</sup>In an interesting extension to the argument, Goodman and Hiskey (2008) argue that emigration may also lead to political disengagement at home because it diverts the focus of those who stay behind away from their home context and towards their migrant-relatives' destination context.

<sup>5</sup>In 2020, the GDP per capita of the United States was \$63,028, of Mexico \$8,432, of Germany \$46,253, and of Poland \$15,743. Source: World Bank (2020a).



migrants are selected on influence political behavior. Openness and agreeableness have been shown to positively predict political participation, while emotional stability tends to have the opposite effect (Mondak et al. 2010; Gallego and Oberski 2012). Conscientiousness, in turn, has mixed effects depending on the nature of the participatory act (Gerber et al. 2011; Ha, Kim, and Jo 2013). Personality and individual value orientation also correlate with political attitudes and preferences, a relationship that is most likely due to common genetic predispositions (Verhulst, Eaves, and Hatemi 2012). Higher scores on conformity, tradition, and conscientiousness tend to predict voting for parties of the political right, while higher scores on openness and universalism tend to go along with voting for left-liberal parties (Caprara et al. 2006; Duckitt and Sibley 2016).

#### *Emigration as a Challenge to Liberal Democracy*

Core to our argument is the assumption that for liberal democracy to succeed, citizens have to engage with the state and embrace liberal values—and that where this support wanes, democracy is in peril. This is a longstanding argument in political science, with scholars arguing that some form of commitment to democracy or civic culture is crucial for the long-term viability of democracy (Dahl 1971; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). However, liberal democracy is usually defined with a focus on the state and state institutions—as a system of government where there is a division of powers, rule of law, and where basic human rights and freedoms are guaranteed (Bollen 1993). As such, it is not immediately obvious why the behavior and attitudes of the citizenry should matter.

A first set of arguments stresses participation. Political participation—voting, protesting, contacting politicians—has traditionally been seen as arguably the single most important ingredient of how citizens matter for supporting democracy (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Dalton 2008). Political engagement matters because citizens can use it to hold a government accountable if things go bad, notably by taking to the streets and the ballot box. A vigilant and democratically minded populace can put pressure on elites to strengthen democratic institutions (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Voting, in particular, also matters because it allows citizens to guide the general political direction in which their country is moving. Simply put, citizens who are committed to liberal democracy will vote for parties committed to liberal democracy, which will hence maintain and strengthen its institutions.

However, more recent work, written under the impression of widespread democratic decline, not least in CEE, has stressed that participation does not guarantee the persistence of liberal democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Goodman 2022). As argued by Sara Goodman “given their capacity for mobilization, citizens can be either the bulwark against or handmaid of erosion [meaning that] democratic breakdown may be as much about the decisions that citizens make—to engage in politics, to guard against elites’ authoritarian impulses—as it is about the violation of norms by those in charge” (Goodman 2022, 7–8). What is needed, hence, are democratically minded citizens that “do not just support abstract democratic principles but practice them [...], while also accepting the legitimacy of elections and commitment to rules that structure transfers of power” even if holding intensely opposing views (Goodman 2022, 7). Moreover, liberal values matter. A liberal mindset will keep “ethnocultural impulses at bay” and allow “citizens to respectfully engage with one another, even on controversial

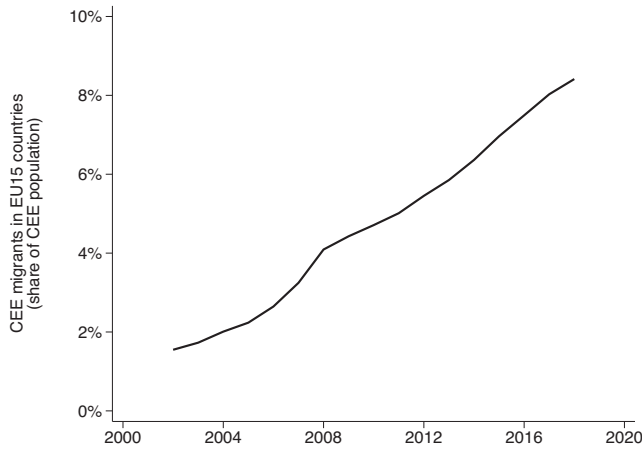
subjects” (Goodman 2022, 41). In other words, not only participation matters, but also the mindset and motivation driving this participation.

What, then, is a liberal, democratic predisposition, and how is it expressed? In Western Europe, the attributes outlined by Goodman usually pertain to supporters of the political left (van Der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Not so in CEE, where, due to its legacy of state socialism, the relationship between self-placement on the left–right dimension and support for liberal democracy is much more complex (Rovny 2014; Kostelka and Rovny 2019). Instead, Kostelka and Rovny (2019) show that pro-democratic engagement is best predicted by cultural liberalism, as measured by openness towards immigration and the LGBTQ community. We adopt their measure as our main indicator for a pro-democratic, liberal disposition (more on measurement below). Alternatively, Barnea and Schwartz (1998) and Schwartz (2003) have proposed that in order to circumvent problems with the left-right scale, support for liberal democracy can be best measured in terms of human values, notably the values of universalism and self-direction—an idea which we also draw upon in our analyses below.

Given the above, we argue that migration may weaken popular support for liberal democracy in at least three ways. First, migration mechanically removes the dimension of participation from the equation—since migrants do not live in their country of citizenship, their potential for participation is severely curtailed. Certain forms of political engagement, such as protesting, become almost impossible if participating necessitates long journeys ‘home’, and voting abroad is often a cumbersome undertaking. Second, if, as we will show, the ones who leave tend to be among the most democratically minded individuals, mass emigration will go along with lower turnout and reduced electoral support for liberal parties. Third, those who leave lose social influence. Research shows that social environments—and especially close friends, family, and neighbors—shape local political opinion and behavior (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Cho and Rudolph 2008). However, by being absent from everyday (political) discussions, migrants may no longer influence the socio-political environment in their communities of origin as effectively. In a situation of mass emigration, we should therefore expect a general shift away from the liberal political positions espoused by the migrants towards the less liberal positions held by non-migrants.

#### *Backsliding as a Cause of Mass Emigration*

An important argument in the literature holds that political repression—or the potential thereof—is a major factor why people leave (Hirschman 1993; Miller and Peters 2020), i.e., reverses the causal order between migration and political illiberalism vis-à-vis our main argument. On the face of it, this idea does not fully fit our case, however, since the governments of Central and Eastern Europe cannot be considered repressive in the classic sense. This said, some researchers argue that migration decisions are also influenced by a deteriorating political ‘climate’. For example, in a similar argument to ours, Kelemen (2020) links democratic backsliding in CEE to the option of dissatisfied citizens to leave to Western, more democratic countries. In the United States, research shows that county-to-county migration has contributed to reinforcing partisan sorting as individuals prefer neighborhoods dominated by co-partisans (Liu, Andris, and Desmarais 2019; Lang and Pearson-Merkowitz 2015). It is possible that in Europe, we are observing the same phenomenon on an international, country-to-country scale,



**Figure 1.** Trend in CEE migration over time.

Source: Eurostat (2020), own calculations.

Notes: The figure shows the aggregate number of CEE citizens (BG, CZ, EE, HR, HU, LT, LV, PL, RO, SI, SK) living in a EU15 country (AT, BE, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE) in a given year, presented as share of the total CEE population. Missing values are estimated by linear approximation.

with liberally minded individuals seeking out environments where they are surrounded by ideological allies. While we therefore concur that migrants at times intentionally select out of their eroding democratic home contexts, our argument is subtler. We argue that mass emigration may also inadvertently weaken democracy because individuals who in principle would be good democrats leave their home contexts because the very same traits that make them good democrats also make them good migrants. In fact, the initial, inadvertent emigration of liberally minded individuals might set in motion a self-reinforcing process by which their emigration turns into the cause for intentional emigration of like-minded individuals escaping their democratically eroding home contexts.<sup>6</sup>

## Data and Analysis

### *Context: Emigration and Democracy in CEE*

Over the last three decades, a great East-West movement of people has taken place in Europe, with individuals from CEE countries such as Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania leaving their home countries in search of opportunities in Western Europe. This process was significantly accelerated by the accession of the CEE countries to the European Union starting in 2004. As of 2019, no fewer than 8.8 million citizens of CEE countries—corresponding to 8.5 percent of the total CEE resident population (Figure 1)—lived in the Western member states of the European Union (EU15). Unlike previous episodes of mass migration, the westward movement of CEE citizens took place in the context of a well-developed research infrastructure that allows us to study its political and social consequences in unprecedented detail.

Figure 2 motivates the empirical part of our study by reporting trends in individual- and country-level liberalism in CEE and Western European countries over time. As explained in more detail shortly, we measure individual-level

liberalism in terms of ‘cultural liberalism’—acceptance of societal diversity. Between 2002 and 2018, cultural liberalism (dashed lines in Figure 2) decreased in CEE and increased in Western Europe. Simultaneously to these individual-level trends, society-wide liberal democracy (solid lines), measured in terms of V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index (Coppedge et al. 2021) in CEE also declined, while staying at a constant high level in the EU15 (Panel A). Strikingly, though, CEE countries had been on a converging path towards Western liberal democracies in the 1990s, but made a U-turn around 2004, just at the time when mass emigration from the CEE to the West commenced in the context of the European Union’s Eastern enlargement. As a result of these trends, the “liberalism gap” has widened between the CEE, an area where liberalism finds decreasing support, and Western Europe, where this support has remained stable or has been growing (Panel B).

### *Empirical Approach: Testing the Link Between Emigration and Democratic Decline*

We present three pieces of evidence at the micro-, meso-, and macro-level to support our argument that mass emigration has contributed to weakening liberal democracy in CEE. Figure 3 summarizes the logic of our proposed mechanisms: individuals with liberal value orientation support liberal parties and are simultaneously more likely to emigrate.

Because voter turnout and political engagement is expected to be lower among migrants than among non-migrants, the relationship between emigration and liberal vote share is negative. As a consequence, countries are confronted with a deterioration in liberal-democratic quality when experiencing eroding liberal value prevalence as a result of mass exodus. We now proceed to present evidence for each of these claims.

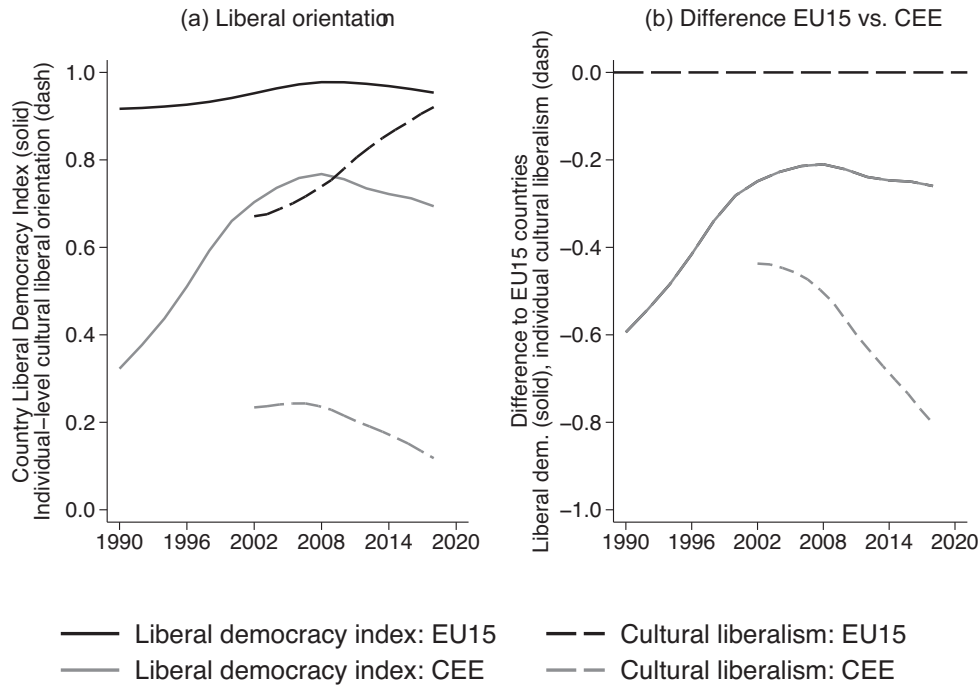
### *Micro Level: Liberal Value Orientation Among Migrants*

First, we test whether migrants systematically differ from non-migrants in their liberal value orientation. Data for this analysis comes from the European Social Survey (2020). The ESS is a bi-annual survey that has conducted approximately 430,000 interviews with both natives and migrants in all CEE and Western European countries across nine waves since 2002, just before the beginning of the major migratory movements. As mentioned, and following Kostelka and Rovny (2019), we measure individual-level liberalism in terms of ‘cultural liberalism’—acceptance of societal diversity. Cultural liberalism is operationalized in form of an index that combines three items on tolerance towards homosexuals and openness to immigration.<sup>7</sup> As an alternative measure, we construct an index for a liberal political orientation based on human values, as suggested by Barnea and Schwartz (1998) and Schwartz (2003). This indicator combines the values of universalism and self-direction into a measure for liberal political attitudes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The three items are (1) a question on whether a respondent believes that their country’s culture is undermined by migration, (2) a question inquiring whether the respondent’s home country should allow immigration by individuals of another race or ethnicity, and (3) a question asking whether “Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish.” Following Kostelka and Rovny (2019), we standardized and averaged over the three items to form the cultural liberalism index. For convenience, we rescale the index to range from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating the most culturally liberal attitudes.

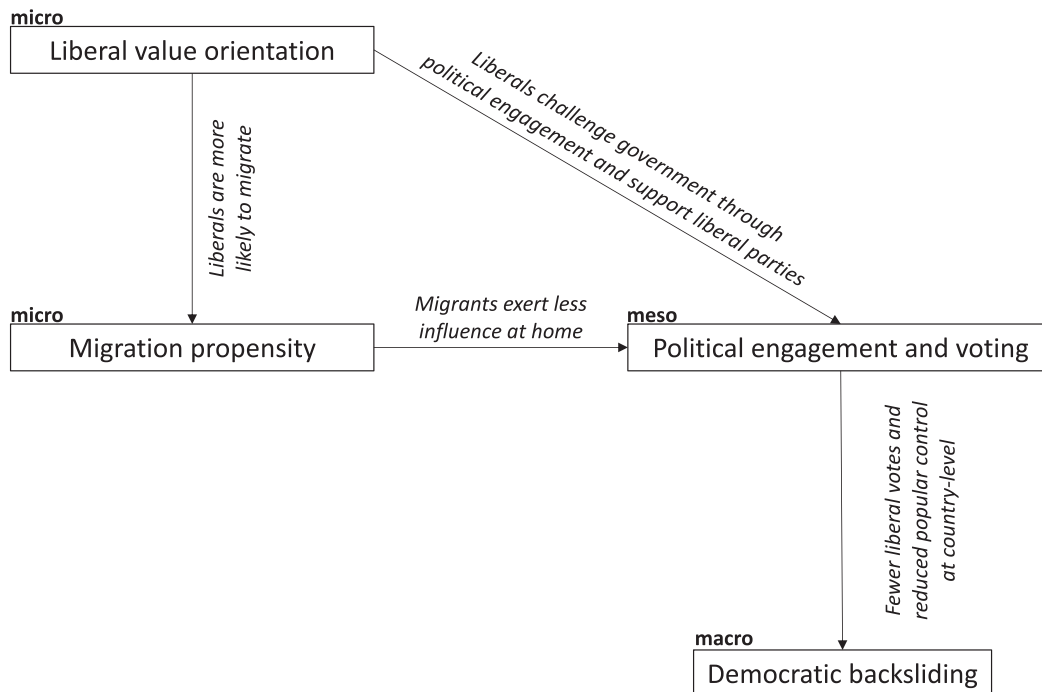
<sup>8</sup>The index is constructed by deriving the values of ‘universalism’ and ‘self-direction’ using five of the 21 value items included in the ESS. These are (1) the belief that every person in the world should be treated equally, (2) the im-

<sup>6</sup>We thank one of our referees for pointing out the potential self-reinforcing nature of the process.



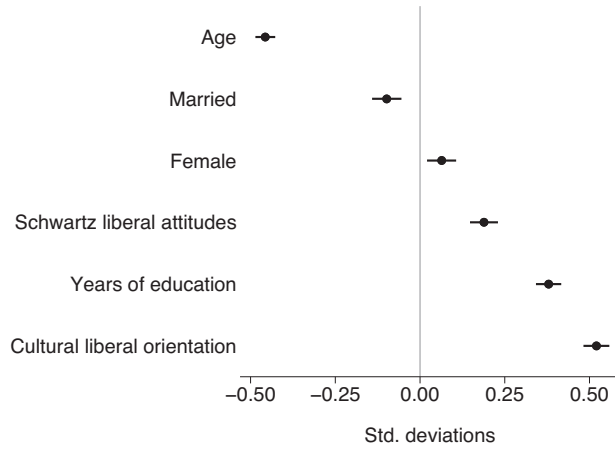
**Figure 2.** Liberalism in CEE and the EU15.

*Notes:* Panel A. Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem) and survey-based measures of individual cultural liberal orientation (ESS) over time in CEE and Western countries. Values normalized for the CEE/EU15 sample range from 0 to 1. Local polynomial smoothing functions ( $bw = 3$ ). CEE countries/citizens = [PL, LT, LV, EE, CZ, SI, SK, HR, HU, RO, BG]; EU15 countries/citizens = [AT, BE, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE]. Panel B. Difference CEE minus EU15 on liberal democracy index and individual liberal value orientation, with EU15 representing the baseline. Local polynomial smoothing functions ( $bw = 3$ ). [Figure A.2](#) in the appendix shows the development of the liberal democracy index and emigration for each CEE country in our sample.



**Figure 3.** How emigration affects democratic quality.

*Notes:* The figure provides a visual representation of our argument—that mass emigration leads to democratic erosion—which we test at three different levels, micro, meso, and macro.



**Figure 4.** Predictors of migrant status.

*Notes:* Estimated differences between migrants and non-migrants along the indicated dimensions, adjusted for country-of-citizenship fixed effects and using probability weights. OLS regression,  $N = 114,752$  individual CEE citizens. Markers are point estimates, lines 95percent confidence intervals.

To explore the relationship between being a migrant and cultural/civil liberal value orientation, we estimate a series of OLS regressions of the following form:

$$M_i = C_i\psi + \delta_o + \varepsilon_{i,o}, \quad (1)$$

where the probability of being a migrant  $M$  among people from the same country  $o$  (applying country of origin fixed effects) is a function of separately tested key individual characteristics  $C$ .<sup>9</sup>

Figure 4 shows standardized differences between migrants and non-migrants originating from the same country in terms of their demographic characteristics and value orientation. Compared with non-migrants, migrants are younger ( $b = -0.45$  SD,  $P < 0.001$ , or about 8.5 years), slightly more likely to be female ( $b = 0.06$  SD,  $P = 0.001$ ), slightly less likely to be married ( $b = -0.09$  SD,  $P = 0.001$ ), and more educated ( $b = 0.37$  SD,  $P < 0.001$ , with about 1.2 additional years of schooling; see also [Orrenius and Zavodny 2005](#); [Karadja and Prawitz 2019](#)). Apart from these demographic differences, what sets migrants apart is their liberal value orientation. Migrants score much higher on the cultural liberalism scale (0.52 SD,  $P < 0.001$ ) as compared to residents of their home countries. Using the human-value-based index for a liberal political orientation as an alternative proxy for liberal attitudes is likewise associated with a significantly higher migration propensity (0.19 SD,  $P < 0.001$ ). In fact, a person's cultural liberalism score is the strongest predictor of being a migrant among the set of character-

istics tested here. We can therefore confirm that CEE migrants indeed hold systematically more liberal values than non-migrants.

#### ROBUSTNESS

As discussed in the theory section, the observation that migrants hold more liberal values than non-migrants could, in principle, be caused by reverse causality. Rather than liberal individuals selecting into migration, it might be that migrants become more liberal by living in more liberal context of the EU15 countries ([Rodden 2010](#); [Gallego et al. 2016](#); [Maxwell 2019](#)). However, several robustness checks make this explanation appear very unlikely. A first piece of evidence is the case of EU15 migration moving within EU15 countries. Even though their host context is just as liberal as their country of origin, these EU15 migrants, too, embrace more liberal values than resident citizens (see [Figure A.3](#) in the Appendix).

Second, we investigate whether the effect of being a CEE migrant on liberal values changes depending on how long that person has lived in the West (see [Figure A.4](#) in the Appendix). If individuals only became liberal over time, we would expect a pattern whereby those who spent more time abroad would show successively higher levels of liberalism over time. However, this is not what we observe. While we see slight increases in migrants' cultural liberal value orientation with time spent in the (more liberal) host country, the most striking feature of the figure is the stark difference in the initial levels of liberalism among migrants as compared to non-migrants, independent of their duration of residence in a Western host country. Even very recent migrants show much higher values of cultural liberalism than non-migrants. The figure thus provides evidence that particularly liberally minded individuals select into migration—rather than those individuals becoming more liberal through exposure in their host context.

Third, using the same data, we explore the idea that migrants are only more liberal because they tend to come from cities. It is well known that migration often occurs in steps, with individuals first moving from the countryside to cities before eventually moving abroad ([King and Skeldon 2010](#)). We also have strong evidence that liberally minded individuals are drawn into cities ([Gallego et al. 2016](#); [Maxwell 2019](#)). It could therefore be that migrants tend to be more liberally minded because they selectively recruit themselves among the sending countries' urban populations only. While such a process would not challenge our overall argument because no matter their prior place of residence, the migrants' influence on their national political arenas would be missing upon their departure, descriptively, it is interesting to investigate whether stepwise migration plays a role in explaining the patterns we observe. In [Figure A.5](#) in the Appendix, we therefore explore the level of cultural liberalism depending on non-migrant and migrants place of residence. As expected, we can see that among non-migrants, city dwellers score significantly higher on the cultural liberalism scale than rural residents. However, even the cultural liberalism levels of residents of big cities are much lower than those of emigrants (for whom it makes no difference whether they settle in rural or urban environments in their destination context). This means that the liberalism-migration nexus goes beyond the fact that migrants recruit themselves from urban areas.

Fourth, we analyze data from the German Socio-Economic Panel, a large-scale panel dataset that follows a representative sample of Germans across the life course

portance attributed to listen to people who are different, (3) the belief that people should care for nature—which together capture the value of universalism, (4) the importance attributed to thinking up new ideas and being creative, and (5) the importance attributed to making one's own decisions about what do—which together capture the value of self-direction. Following the explanations in [Schwartz \(2003\)](#), the actual values are derived by first deducting the overall mean for the 21 items from the five items in focus and then averaging over the de-meaned items. The average of the standardized values is the index for a liberal political orientation, which we rescaled to range from 0 to 1. [Figure A.1](#) in the Appendix replicates the analyses above using this indicator.

<sup>9</sup>[Table A.1](#) in the Appendix provides summary statistics for our core variables. Note that we apply probability weights to increase representativeness of our findings. Results hardly change without weighting.



(Goebel et al. 2019; DIW 2020). This allows us to test if individuals show a more liberal value orientation even before they migrate when compared to those who subsequently stay put. Migrant status is measured as moving from one of Germany's 16 states to another, and we only consider individuals aged 17–23 years who had not previously moved independently (i.e., without their families). Political value orientation is measured with a question on the priority politicians should give to ensuring freedom of speech. The analysis shows that a liberal value orientation robustly predicts mobility later in life, while a conservative value orientation predicts non-migration (see Figure A.6). These tests suggest that the causal arrow indeed runs from a (culturally) liberal disposition towards emigration.<sup>10</sup>

#### EXTERNAL VALIDITY

In the theory section, we also argued that the link between a liberal value orientation and becoming a migrant might be unique to the context of the EU. However, two further analyses suggest that this link is a much more general phenomenon. For one, we show that the general relation between mobility and liberal values also holds in the United States. Using data from the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS, Smith et al. 2018), we relate an indicator for individual mobility—whether a person has moved between cities or states since the age of 16—to measures of liberal value orientation. Mobile individuals hold systematically more liberal attitudes favoring free speech and rights for sexual minorities, and value the ability to think freely over obedience in children (see Figure A.7 in the Appendix). For another, we conducted a similar analysis using data from the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2020)—a sample of individuals interviewed in 47 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. We identify migrants as individuals who live in a different country from where they were born (i.e., rather than in terms of citizenship, which is not always available), and compare them to individuals in their country of birth. Compared to non-migrants, migrants are significantly more likely to accept immigrants and homosexuals as neighbors, to see the protection of civil rights as one of the most important factors in democratic stability, and to value independence over obedience in children (see Figure A.8 in the Appendix). Taken together, these findings suggest that the association between migrant status and liberal values extends well beyond the CEE-Western Europe migratory context.

#### *Meso Level: Political Engagement and Voting*

Next, we assess our hypothesized meso-level link between selective migration and possible democratic erosion: the effect of mass emigration on political engagement and voting for liberal parties. We measure political engagement with a battery of items designed for this purpose from the ESS. Here, respondents are asked whether, during the course of the last 12 months, (1) they contacted a politician or government official, (2) worked in political party, action group, or (3) another organization, (4) wore a campaign badge/sticker, (5) signed petition, (6) took part in lawful public demon-

stration, (7) boycotted certain products, or (8) posted or shared anything about politics online. We construct a 'political engagement' index by standardizing and averaging over all items but the last (for which there are many missing values) and rescaling to 0/1.

With regard to liberal voting, the question of what should count as a liberal vote and what should not is more difficult to answer. This is due to the complicated party landscape of CEE, where traditional left-right policies are often reversed, and both left-leaning and conservative parties at times have shown populist, anti-democratic behavior (Tavits and Letki 2009; Engler, Pytlas, and Deegan-Krause 2019). In this context, it is therefore the liberal party family that remains the most consistently pro-democratic political force, even though it might embrace economic policies that can be considered conservative. Both points are demonstrated in Figure A.11 in the Appendix, where, using Manifesto data (Volkens et al. 2019), we show that the liberal parties in our sample are more strongly in support of freedom and human rights than other parties, and are more critical of traditional morality—while, unsurprisingly, also being more strongly in favor of the market economy and economic orthodoxy.

In order to determine whether respondents voted for a liberal party, we match the names of parties that respondents in the ESS reported voting for to information on these parties' political orientation from the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2019). This procedure allows us to match 643 different parties, corresponding to 95 percent of all voter choices recorded in the ESS. Based on this data, we construct a measure of liberal voting by assigning a value of 1 if a respondent voted for a party from within the liberal party family according to the Manifesto data, and 0 otherwise (Panel B in Table A.1).<sup>11</sup> With information on voting and party choice for each respondent, we run a linear regression model to assess which individual characteristics predict voting for a liberal party in general. The results, presented in Figure A.12 in the Appendix, show that liberal party support decreases with age and significantly increases with education and liberal value orientation. In other words, voters with a liberal value orientation are much more likely to vote for liberal parties.

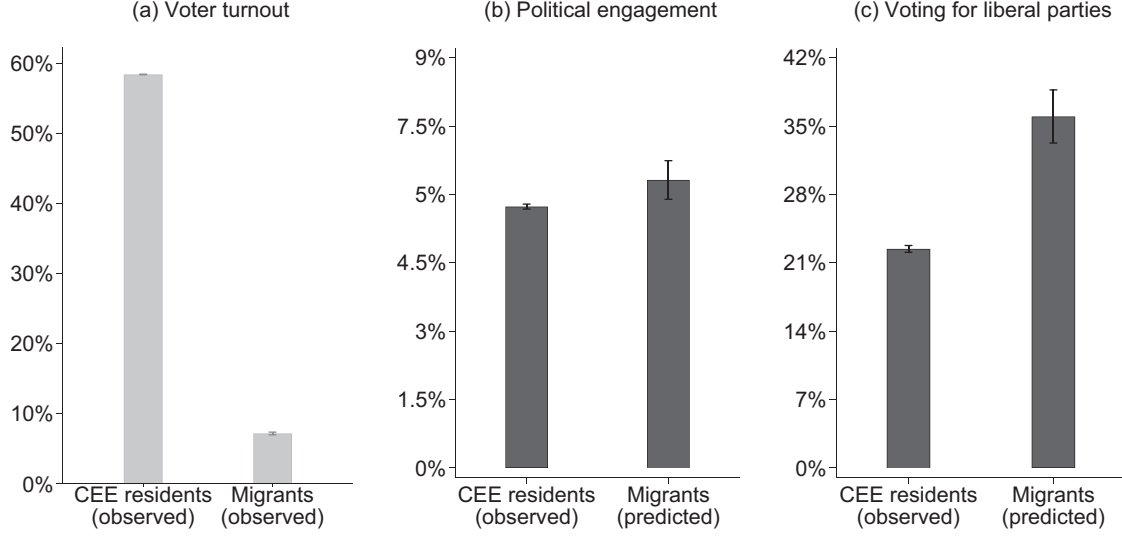
While our data thus allows us to measure political engagement and voting for liberal parties among our respondents, one challenge remains: to demonstrate that migrants would have been more politically engaged and would have voted for liberal parties had they stayed. The problem is that, as argued above, emigration systematically undermines political engagement and turnout because migrants tend to be absent from their home societies and because of the practical difficulties involved in casting their vote.<sup>12</sup> This is well documented for the case of turnout.

According to a comprehensive study by Kostelka (2017) that covered the majority of elections in CEE since 1990, average turnout among CEE migrants was less than 10 per-

<sup>11</sup>Volkens et al. (2019) assign each party in a given year to one of ten categories, such as 'conservative', 'ethnic-regional', or 'agrarian'. According to this classification, 140 party-year observations are identified as 'liberal'.

<sup>12</sup>CEE countries—like most democracies—guarantee diaspora or expatriate voting rights. According to the encompassing data provided by Wellman, Allen, and Nyblade (2023), citizens who resided abroad were formally allowed to vote in 94 percent of the country-year observations in our sample. However, citizens abroad often face a number of de facto constraints. Prior to casting ones vote, in 20 percent of the country-year observations, voters were required to register as voters in their country of origin, tied to sharp registration deadlines. Even for registered voters, actual voting can be arduous. In less than half of the CEE countries since 2000, embassies and consulates (which typically exist only in capitals and larger cities) serve as polling stations by default, and less than one third of the CEE countries have offered additional local polling stations.

<sup>10</sup>We also assessed whether economic trends affect selection into migration along value orientations. In Figure A.9 in the Appendix, we first show that GDP growth and social expenditure developed similarly in CEE and the EU15 countries. To assess temporal heterogeneity, we predict the liberal value orientation of CEE migrants and CEE stayers for each year in our sample period (2002–2018). Figure A.10 in the Appendix confirms that CEE migrants hold more liberal values independent of the year they were interviewed. We infer that larger economic trends do not affect the importance of liberal value orientations as a migration driver.



**Figure 5.** Voting and political engagement among non-migrants, migrants, and simulated migrants.

*Notes:* Panel A. shows observed turnout based on [Kostelka \(2017\)](#). Coverage: BG, CZ, EE, HU, LT, LV, PL, RO, SI, SK (HR missing) in national elections since 2004. Panels B and C. show marginal effects after OLS regression of the measures for political engagement and voting for a liberal party on the indicator of belonging to the simulated migrant population, simultaneously controlling for the citizenship of an individual (i.e., comparing individuals of the same nationality). ESS data. Bars show average values, lines are 95 percent confidence intervals.

cent, as compared to well over 60 percent among non-migrants. In [Figure 5](#), Panel A, we use these data to show voter turnout of migrants and non-migrants for the CEE countries in our sample. Here, average turnout is 7.1 percent for CEE citizens living outside their country of citizenship, as opposed to 58.4 percent, for CEE citizens residing in their country of origin.<sup>13</sup> As anticipated, we are thus faced with the challenge that we cannot assess the vote choices of migrants, since most migrants do not vote. A similar logic applies to political engagement.

#### SIMULATION EXERCISE

To overcome this counterfactual challenge, we engage in a simulation exercise. The simulation answers the question what level of political engagement migrants would have shown and which parties they would have voted for had they not migrated. We proceed by matching each migrant in our data to an otherwise similar non-migrant from the same home country. We use coarsened exact matching ([Iacus, King, and Porro 2012](#)) to identify each migrant's closest 'twin stayer':

$$\tau_{w,s} = \sum_{s \in S} w_s (\bar{Y}_{migrant,s} - \bar{Y}_{stayer,s}) \quad (2)$$

where the difference in liberal vote propensity  $\tau$  is the sum of the weighted difference between migrants' and non-migrants' liberal vote propensity in each stratum ( $N_s = 1307$ ). Weights are calculated using the above tested key observable characteristics: age, sex, marital status, educa-

tion, nationality, and cultural liberalism.<sup>14</sup> [Table A.2](#) in the Appendix shows that matching achieves excellent balance between migrants and their matched non-migrant counterparts. We then take the reported level of political engagement and reported voting behavior of the matched non-migrants to predict the migrants' vote choice.

Results are presented in [Figure 5](#), Panels B and C. Panel B compares observed levels of political engagement for CEE non-migrants to our simulated CEE migrants. We see that while overall levels of political engagement (as measured with our index) are low, simulated migrants show somewhat higher levels than their non-migrant co-nationals—a difference that is small, but nevertheless highly statistically significant ( $P < 0.01$ ). Emigration, our analysis suggests, deprives CEE of some of their more politically engaged citizens. Much more consequential, however, is the effect of emigration on voting for liberal parties, as shown in Panel C. As before, the bars indicate the average predicted vote share for liberal parties in the non-migrant population as compared to the simulated migrant population. The differences are striking. Whereas the actual vote share for liberal parties was about 22 percent, it is almost 35 percent for the simulated migrant population ( $P < 0.0001$ ). Scaling the observed difference up to the 8.8 million CEE migrants in the EU, and taking the non-migrant-participation rate of 58 percent instead of the 7 percent migrant-participation rate, this implies that more than half a million votes for liberal parties are lost in every round of elections in the region. Clearly, the influence of liberal parties the CEE region has been severely weakened by mass emigration—with likely consequences for country-level outcomes, as demonstrated in the next section.

<sup>13</sup>[Kostelka \(2017\)](#) uses official national accounts and takes the number of votes received from abroad to calculate migrant turnout. Since these figures do not differentiate by host country, the turnout rate includes votes from migrants in world regions other than Western Europe. However, as the vast majority of CEE migrants lives in the EU15, this problem does not matter much in practice.

<sup>14</sup>Note that the results are robust to using different observable characteristics (e.g., additionally adjusting for individual left-right orientation) and to applying alternative matching algorithms.

*Macro Level: Emigration and the Deterioration of Democracy*

The findings of the preceding two sections provide the foundation of our main hypothesis at the macro-level: that the departure of migrants over time led to a decline in the quality of democracy in CEE. We test for this implication in a panel analysis using official migration statistics and six different measures of liberal democracy (all standardized to ensure comparability). First, from V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2021), we borrow three indices capturing a) civil liberties, defined as the absence of physical violence committed by government agents and the absence of constraints on private and political liberties, b) electoral democracy, defined as the presence of conditions allowing for free and fair multiparty elections, and c) liberal democracy (the most encompassing concept), defined as the extent to which constitutionally protected civil liberties, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and multiparty elections limit the exercise of executive power.<sup>15</sup> These indices rely on expert panels who assess the degree to which the indicated outcomes are realized in a given country and year. Second, we use the degree to which parties belonging to different ideological ‘families’ are represented in national parliaments. These data come from the Manifesto dataset (Volkens et al. 2019), which provides information on vote share in the national assemblies for a) social liberal parties, embracing social justice and individual rights and freedoms, and b) conservative parties, embracing traditional values—and which, in CEE, have often been implicated in the dismantling of democratic institutions. Finally, from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al. 2022), we borrow a measure capturing how parties represented in national parliaments position themselves with regard to social and cultural values (measured in terms of the GAL/TAN scale). Similar to V-Dem, this measure relies on expert panels.

Country-level information on migration and citizenship is taken from the European Commission’s statistical unit, Eurostat (2020).<sup>16</sup> In order to relate these macro-level indicators of democratic development to emigration, we estimate a two-way fixed effects regression model of the following form:

$$Y_{o,t} = \text{emigration}_{o,t-1}\tau + X_{o,t-1}\beta + \delta_o + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{o,t} \quad (3)$$

where the different liberal democracy indicators  $Y$  of a given CEE origin country  $o$  in year  $t$  are a function of the (log) number of emigrants<sup>17</sup> from that country in the previous year,  $t - 1$ , a set of controls measured in  $t - 1$  (population size, life expectancy, unemployment rate, GDP per capita, GDP growth, social expenditure relative to GDP, inflation rate, unemployment rate, and tertiary education enrollment rate), and fixed effects for origin country  $o$  and year  $t$  (we test alternative specifications and operationalizations below). This analysis partials out trends over time and baseline differences in political culture between countries to identify the effect of the number of emigrants from a coun-

try in a given year on the country’s democratic development in the subsequent year.

The panel regression results are shown in Figure 6, and the corresponding regression output is reported in the Appendix, Panel A of Table A.4. A rise in emigration numbers is associated with an erosion in the overall state of the democracy, demonstrated by the decline of V-Dem’s civil liberties index and lower scores on the electoral democracy index and the more general liberal democracy index in the subsequent year. The turn away from liberalism is also clearly reflected in the composition of the national parliaments. The more citizens leave a country, the more representation changes towards conservative parties with more traditional and authoritarian (TAN) views in subsequent elections. These changes in representation come at the expense of parties which represent social liberal values. The fact that we even observe significant associations between emigration and electoral outcomes is striking, as the latter outcome variables are less sensitive to short-term changes in migration. After all, scheduled elections in CEE typically take place every four years, thus making electoral changes by construction less sensitive to contextual factors. The effects are statistically significant and large in magnitude. For instance, net of country- and time-specific trends, an increase in the number of emigrants by 1 percent in the previous year is associated with an increase in authoritarian and traditional views among parties represented in parliament by 0.18 standard deviations, or 2.5 percent at the sample mean. To that effect, the same increase results in an overall decline in the liberal democracy index by 0.33 standard deviations, or 0.8 percent at the sample mean. Emigration thus systematically predicts the subsequent deterioration of liberal democracy in the CEE region.

## ROBUSTNESS OF THE MACRO-LEVEL APPROACH

Table A.4 in the Appendix includes a series of robustness checks. We report results obtained without adjusting for covariates (Panel B), when estimating a one-way fixed effects model using country-fixed effects only (Panel C), and when estimating Equation 3 without imputed emigration values (Panel D). All panel regressions corroborate the results from the main specification. We note that we observe these effects despite the fact that our definition of non-migrants almost certainly includes a number of former migrants who have returned to their country of origin after having lived abroad—a common phenomenon for intra-European migration (Dustmann and Weiss 2007). This, however, does not challenge our argument. On the contrary: The fact that returnees likely re-engage in the political and discourse and possibly introduce new (liberal) values to their origin communities (e.g., Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2010), if anything, helps to dampen the effect of outmigration on the political culture in subsequent years. The results are also stable when using alternative operationalizations of the emigration variable (emigrants in million, emigration share, and inverse hyperbolic sine transformed), which we report in the Appendix, Table A.5. The non-transformed results are slightly more inaccurate in the representation outcomes, which we would expect when the residuals have a skewed distribution.

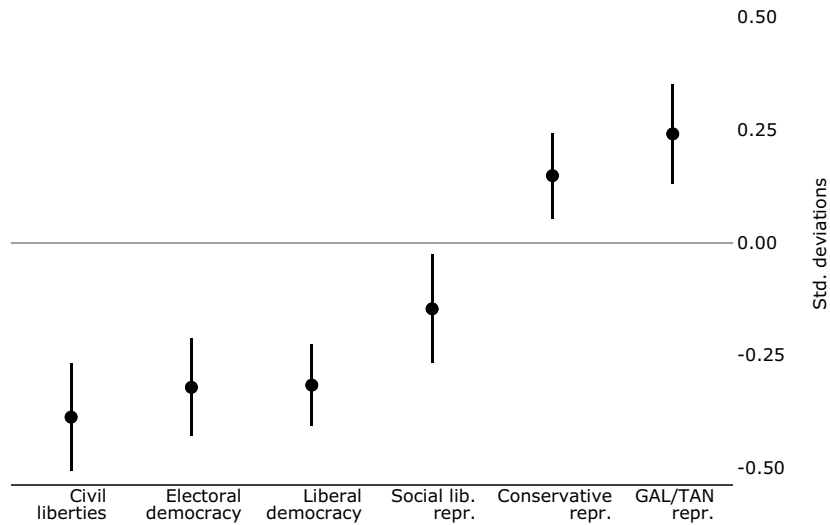
We report four additional robustness checks in Table A.6 in the Appendix. In Panel A, we show the results when using the logarithmic transformation of the population control instead of the population measured in millions. The results confirm our main findings. Second, in Panel B, we use standard errors proposed by Driscoll and Kraay (1998), which

<sup>15</sup>We reproduced the exact wording of the indicators in the notes to Table A.3 in the Appendix.

<sup>16</sup>Table A.3 in the Appendix provides summary statistics for our core variables. The data on outmigration contain some missing information on migration flows. In total, 17 country-year observations (about 8 percent of the total sample) had missing migration flow data, nine of which came from Bulgaria prior to 2002, six from Romania, and one each from the Czech Republic and Croatia. These values were imputed using a Poisson regression adjusting for the countries’ population, life expectancy, unemployment, GDP per capita, and GDP growth (see Figure A.13 in the Appendix for details).

<sup>17</sup>We use the logarithmic transformation of the number of emigrants to ease interpretation across CEE countries with different population sizes and to adjust for the skewed nature of the variable.





**Figure 6.** Effect of emigration on indices of liberal democracy and representation.

*Notes:* Panel regression estimating the effect of emigration (log) from CEE countries on the political landscape in the subsequent year. Covariate adjusted OLS regression with country- and year-fixed effects (N=209). Markers are point estimates, lines 95 percent confidence intervals.

are robust to autocorrelation in the spatial and temporal dimensions. The resulting standard errors are significantly smaller, suggesting that our main model provides a conservative estimate. Third and fourth, we assess the robustness of our model against reverse causality. As mentioned in the literature review, theoretically, it is possible that there is a causal path running from the erosion of liberal democracy towards increased emigration, i.e., in the opposite direction proposed here. We therefore add lags of our dependent variables to the right side of our two-way fixed effects model—an approach that has been suggested to account for possible reverse causality (Granger 1969; Wooldridge 2006). We consider both a simple autoregressive (AR(1)) model with lagged-DV (measured at  $t$ ) in Panel C of Table A.6 and in Panel D a dynamic GMM panel model in the style of Arellano and Bond (1991) with two-year lags for both the dependent and the main independent variable as suggested by Leszczensky and Wolbring (2022). As pointed out by Angrist and Pischke (2009), these are challenging models to estimate, especially in a context where the timing at which the causal effect materializes is not fully clear (Vaisey and Miles 2017).<sup>18</sup> We therefore consider these models to be the most conservative tests of our theoretical claims. While the results show insignificant effects for V-Dem’s electoral democracy index, we continue to find strong negative effects for civil liberties and the liberal democracy index, giving us confidence that reverse causality does not strongly bias our findings. Taken together, our three pieces of evidence—micro-, meso-, and macro-level—therefore show that mass emigration, by depriving the region of liberally minded individuals (and voters), has contributed to democratic backsliding in CEE.

<sup>18</sup>Indeed, Vaisey and Miles (2017) demonstrate that the lagged dependent variable model is downward biased if the timing of the true causal effect is inadequately reflected in the model specification. Moreover, since lagging the dependent variable would induce collinearity for electoral outcomes (which only change in election years, i.e., typically every four years), we can only implement this approach with regard to the democracy indicators (which change on a yearly basis).

## Conclusion

We argue that the departure of migrants may help to explain democratic backsliding in countries affected by mass emigration. To support this idea, we study the large-scale emigration of Central and Eastern Europeans over the past 20 years. Our results show that migrants systematically hold more liberal values, which is likely due to shared character traits that predict both support for democracy and an inclination to migrate. In a nutshell, good democrats also tend to be good migrants. The migrants’ departure, we show, was followed by a noticeable turn towards illiberalism in the political landscape of their origin countries. By reducing social pluralism in CEE and depriving the region of liberal voters, our argument goes, mass emigration has contributed to creating a socio-political environment where it became easier for governments to curtail civil liberties and individual rights. While the literature has often focused on the positive consequences of political remittances for democratic development, our paper thus joins those who take a more sober view.

We provide various tests to support our argument, including evidence from several large-scale individual-level surveys and panel analyses. Our evidence shows that the close relationship between liberal values and migrant status holds in other world regions, and can even be observed among domestic migrants in both Germany and the United States. It is thus likely that emigration negatively affects political outcomes elsewhere as well. This does not mean that emigration necessarily has profound political consequences everywhere. A likely scope condition is that migratory movements assume a certain size. With around 9 percent of the population living abroad, the CEE region is more strongly affected by the outmigration of its citizens than other regions. More modest migration flows may leave political developments unaffected. This said, many post-Soviet countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and several high-emigration countries in Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean show similar or even higher emigration figures as those seen in CEE (Pew Research Center 2019)—and may face similar political consequences. From a global perspec-



tive, our argument implies societal disruptions. The share of migrants among the world's population is on a steady rise (IOM 2019). Contexts of mass emigration may therefore become more common in the future, implying that liberalism gaps may continue to widen. As a consequence, we might see further shifts in the political culture in countries of mass emigration that are not necessarily compatible with the norms of liberal democracies.

### Supplementary data

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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