Research Proposal MA Thesis: Emigration and Voting Behaviour in Central and Eastern European EU Member States

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Abstract

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Introduction

Central and Eastern European (CEE) European Union (EU) member states[1] have shown high levels of emigration in the past 20 years. Figure 1 provides an overview of migration levels across Europe at NUTS3 level. It shows that emigration has been generally higher in regions across CEE countries compared to other parts of Europe.

The United Nations estimated a population decline of 18 million people in Eastern Europe between the early 1990s and 2015, with emigration being the main reason for the decline (Romei 2016). In one concrete example, Lithuania has lost a quarter of its population, with certain regions losing over 50% of residents (Ubarevičienė and van Ham 2017, 58). Intra-EU migration is driven by economic and labour market factors, as people emigrate to look for better job opportunities (Vasilopoulou and Talving 2019, 810).

Does a country's accession to the EU, and with it gaining access to the EU's Freedom of Movement (FoM), have an effect on emigration rates? Figure 2 displays a simple visualisation of a selection of countries that provided data on international emigration before and after the country's accession. The vertical blue line represents when the country joined the EU. The time span covers, when data are available, ten years before and after accession.

I perform a Chow-Test (Chow 1960) for each individual country to examine if EU accession creates a break in the rate of emigration over time. The results show that, apart from the Czech Republic, EU accession does create a break in the time series with conventional significance ($p < 0.05$). Because of these breaks in the emigration rates, I assume that there is a link between a country's accession to the EU and a change in emigration rate. This is because a country's membership in the EU makes emigration easier, due to the EU's FoM. The FoM transition period, that all EU member states were allowed to implement in order to adjust for immigrants from new member states, is not taken into account here.

Emigration has profound impacts on the sending countries, e.g., population decline, lack of labour (Roos 2023, 187; Thaut 2009, 220) or a change in the population's ethnic profile (Vorländer 2021, 51). Emigration affects individuals through a sense of loss or by causing anger, distress and depression (Ivlevs et al. 2019, 135; Marchetti-Mercer 2012, 388).

Does emigration change the voting behaviour of the people left behind? There exists a correlation between emigration rates and vote switching. There is a negative significant ($p < 0.05$) correlation between average migration rate and vote switching: The higher the average emigration rate, the higher the number of vote switchers in the

[1] Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia

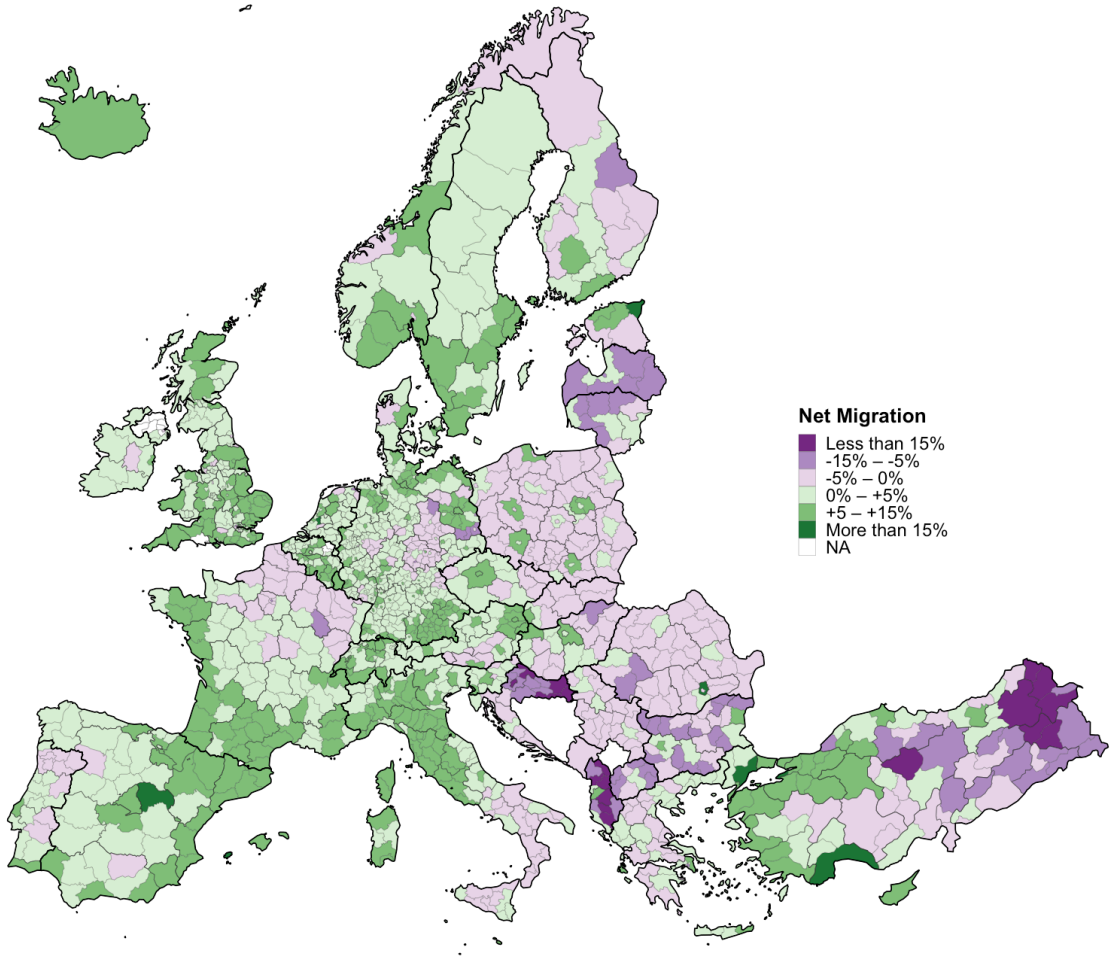

Figure 1: **Average Net Migration 2000–2021 at NUTS3 Level.** Source: Eurostat's CNMIGRATRT variable.

NUTS3 region (see Figure 3 for details). The rate of change is substantial: A 10% increase in emigration is associated with an increase of switchers by roughly 3.6%. This is enough to sway an election. However, this correlation contains a caveat. The migration data do not differentiate between internal and external migration, thus the effect of EU accession cannot be shown here directly.

Despite the caveat, this thesis will ask the following research question. Why does international emigration from CEE EU member states cause vote switching amongst the voters left behind?

Dancygier et al. (2022) describe how emigration leads to voting for populist and radical right (PRR) parties: Regions hit by high emigration are prone to service cuts. These cuts cause grievances amongst the people left behind, who react by voting for PRR parties (Dancygier et al. 2022, 2). However, the authors do not show what exactly causes a change in voting behaviour and suggest that future research should look into what type of service cuts eventually lead to PRR voting (Dancygier et al. 2022, 35).

This thesis will examine three types of emigration induced service cuts that can cause grievances. These cuts are

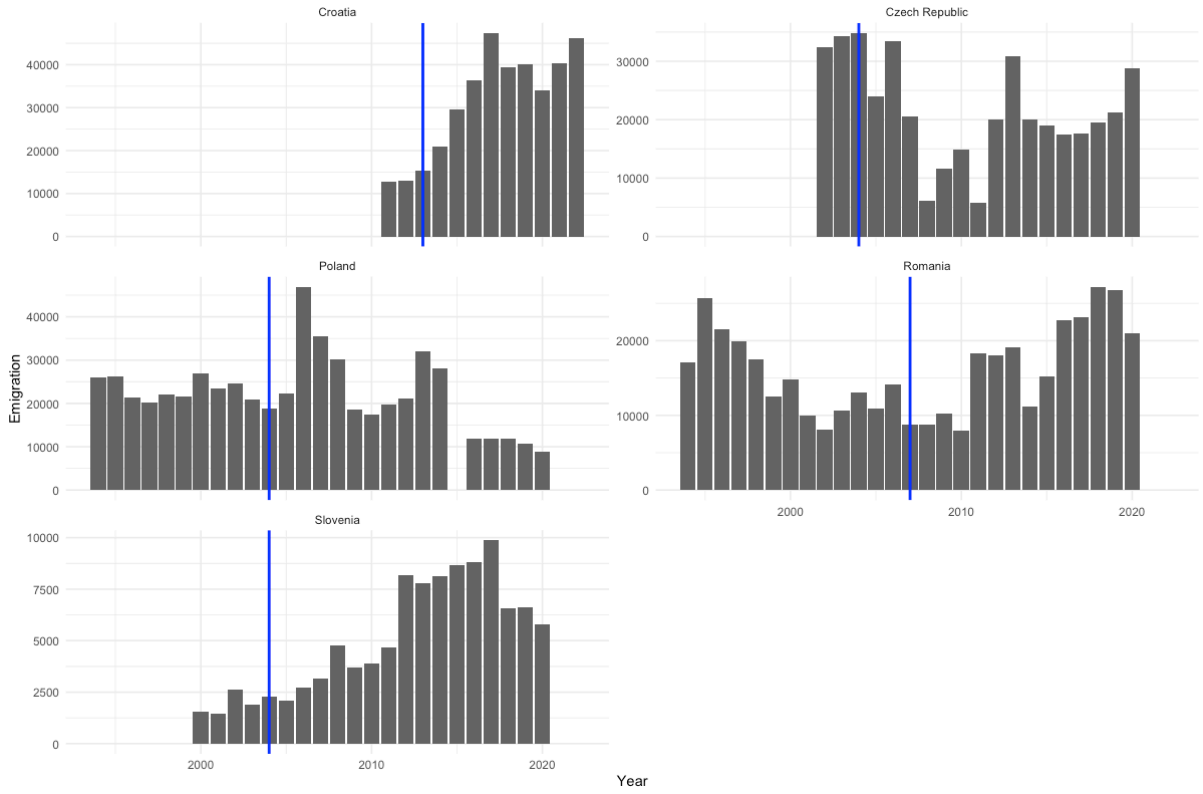

Figure 2: **International Emigration and EU Accession (selected countries).** Blue line represents the country's year of EU accession. See appendix for sources.

school closures, hospital closures and closures of "third places" (Oldenburg 1999, 16), such as cafés and restaurants. I put forward the idea that these service cuts occur gradually, unbeknownst to the population who do not emigrate. The cuts build up until reaching a tipping point, when an individual experiences a watershed moment, realising how emigration has had a negative impact on their surroundings. This watershed moment leads to grievances that in turn alter an individual's voting behaviour.

There is a research gap when it comes to understanding the political repercussions of emigration on sending regions (Kyriazi et al. 2023, 564). This despite the fact that, globally seen, the people who do *not* emigrate outnumber the people who do (Marchetti-Mercer 2012, 378). In the specific case of the EU, the FoM should be studied not only from the view of a right to enter, but also as a right to exit (Bruzelius 2021, 35).

FoM, a foundational aspect of the EU, affects voting behaviour in all member states, regardless if they are sending or receiving migrants. Understanding how FoM alters voting behaviour in emigration-hit regions will help understand the effects of future European integration, e.g., when further Balkan states or the Ukraine join the EU.

A caveat of this thesis will be the difficulty of disentangling the effect of emigration on individual voting behaviour. This problem is linked to a potential lack of individual level data, which may result in resorting to aggregated data, such as electoral results, which will lead to less accurate results.

State of the Field

The impact of emigration on vote switching and electoral outcomes varies by time and location. Studies have explored this phenomenon, ranging from 19th-century Sweden (Karadja and Prawitz 2019, 2) to early 21st-century Mexico (Pfutze 2014, 295).

Emigration can affect electoral outcomes in two ways. First, emigration can change the composition of the elector-

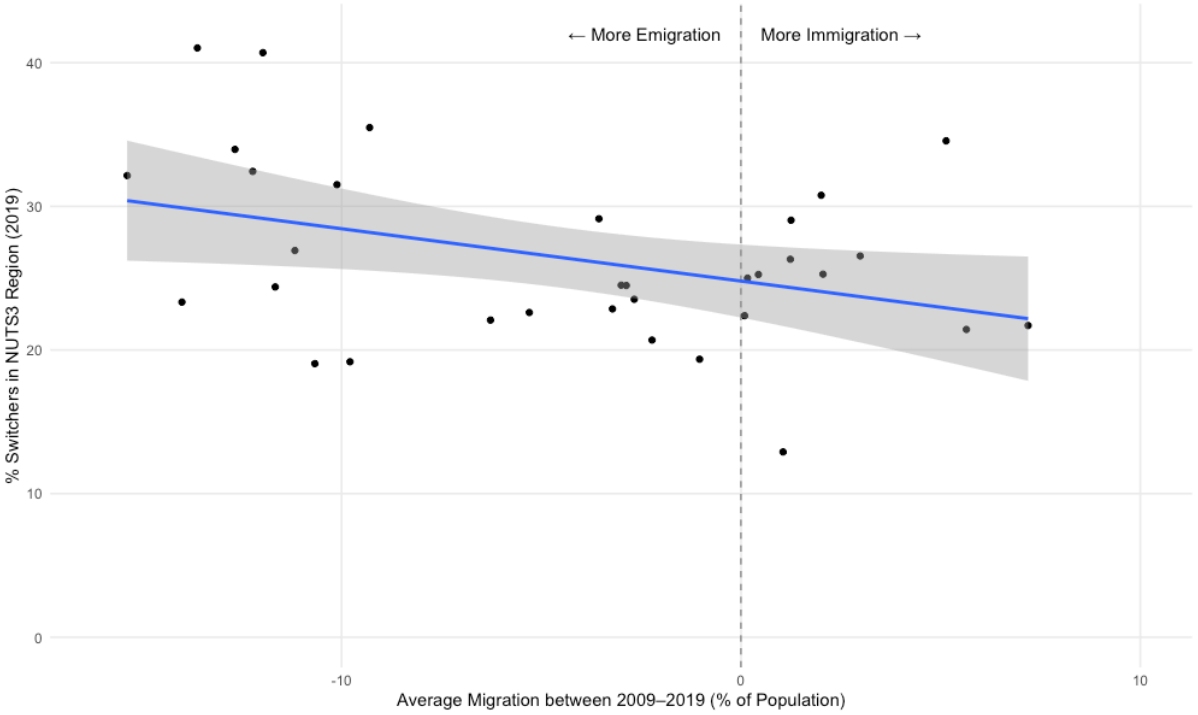

Figure 3: **Migration and Vote Switching in selected NUTS3 Regions.** An increase of average migration by 1% leads to a decrease of a region's share of switchers by -0.3641% ($p = 0.0305$). A negative migration rate means the region has experienced more emigration than immigration. Adjusted R-squared: 0.1146; $N = 33$
Sources: Schmitt et al. 2022 for vote switching; Eurostat's CNMIGRATRT variable for average migration.

ate. Lim (2023, 39) shows that emigrants from CEE are disproportionately younger, cosmopolitan and politically progressive, resulting in a remaining population that is older and more conservative. As a result, electoral results are more likely to be conservative.

Second, emigration can affect the electoral preferences of the people left behind. Altering their voting behaviour can trigger vote switching. Emigration can have an indirect and a direct effect on a voter's political behaviour.

The indirect effect occurs when emigration alters a voter's overall wellbeing. Family members or neighbours of emigrants have a higher life satisfaction and budget easing through remittances, but suffer from more depression and stress (Ivlevs et al. 2019, 135) and are more prone to anger and distress (Marchetti-Mercer 2012, 388), caused by people close to them who have left.

There are multiple direct effects of emigration on political behaviour. A wide range of literature explains how emigration causes a decrease in political interest. This can be caused by a decrease in political mobilisation and collective action (Sellars 2019, 1220), a decrease in civic engagement (Bravo 2009; Goodman and Hiskey 2008, 172), opposing voices leaving and thus resulting in a more supportive electorate (Peters and Miller 2022, 14) or through a loss of political actors (Lim 2023, 44).

Despite this decrease in political interest, some remainers still vote. If the number of people casting their ballot decreases, then it becomes all the more important to understand how the remaining voters are affected by emigration and how they thus cast their ballot.

One concrete example why this is important is shown by Barsbai et al. (2017, 36), who reveal a negative effect between emigration and votes for the Communist Party in the Moldovan elections of 2009 and 2010. Elections during those years brought significant political change to the ex-soviet country (Barsbai et al. 2017, 41), because voters switched away from the Communist Party, who had gained electoral power in previous elections. Voters

switched because returning emigrants brought western social norms and political preferences to Moldova (Barsbai et al. 2017, 66). These preferences then diffused amongst the electorate.

A further reason why the effects of emigration on voting behaviour is important is its implications on voting for populist and radical right parties (Dancygier et al. 2022, 34; Herold and Otteni 2020, 19; Lim 2023, 56). However, there are two reasons why this link between emigration and radical parties can be questioned.

First, Vorländer (2021, 33) and Schütze (2023, 9) provide mixed results of this claim, showing that emigration induced support for these parties is only given under certain conditions, or look at country-specific cases such as intra-German migration from east to west (Schütze 2023, 2).

Second, there are three points to be made that non-extreme parties, e.g., a mainstream opposition party, may also benefit from emigration. One, a voter does not necessarily have to cast a ballot for an extreme party. Instead they can simply critique the incumbent government or status quo parties if emigration becomes politicised (Vorländer 2021, 91). Two, voters receive remittances which realigns their party preferences closer to their personal ideological preferences (Pfutze 2012, 161). This realignment does not necessarily have to lead to voting for an extreme party. Three, voters cannot cast a vote for an extreme party if there is no such party on the ballot. For these three reasons and due to the mixed empirical results, I will look into vote switching in general and not focus on voting for radical right parties.

Dancygier et al. (2022, 35) uncover a correlation between emigration and the rise of Populist Radical Parties (PRR). The authors suggest that emigration decreases an area's quality of life, e.g., through cuts in public services. These service cuts create grievances amongst voters. These grievances then affect voting behaviour. Voters turn against incumbents and cast a ballot for PRR parties.

I argue that these grievances are different to the ones described by Ivlevs et al. (2019, 135). Ivlevs et al. (2019)'s grievances are more personal and intimate, caused by family matters. Dancygier et al. (2022)'s grievances are less intimate and of more general and economic nature. Because they are less intimate, I argue that a person is more likely to voice them in public, e.g., by changing their voting behaviour. This claim is supported by Kapur (2014, 488), who underlines the importance of understanding the reason behind a person's emigration when examining the impact of emigration in the sending country. Emigration from CEE EU member states is primarily due to economic reasons (Vasilopoulou and Talving 2019, 810), thus I assume the grievances of the people left behind to be closely linked to economic factors and less to family matters.

The causal mechanism according to Dancygier et al. (2022) can be summarised as follows:

$$Emigration \rightarrow Service\ Cuts \rightarrow Grievances \rightarrow Vote\ for\ PRR \tag{1}$$

However, the authors do not show which service cuts cause grievances (Dancygier et al. 2022, 35). They leave this aspect open for future research. This thesis sets out to detect which emigration induced service cuts cause vote switching.

Project Description

Key (1966) states that voters evaluate a government's past performance and their policy outcomes (Key 1966, 35, 58–59, 61). They vote retrospectively and their voting behaviour is influenced by salient issues (Key 1966, 73), such as the described service cuts. These cuts, especially cuts to public services, will give the incumbent government a poor performance record in the eyes of the voter. This will increase the likelihood that the voter switches party, away from the incumbent, towards another party.

Based on Dancygier et al. (2022)'s assumption that service cuts lead to grievances which then lead to PRR voting, this thesis asks the following question: Which emigration induced service cuts cause grievances?

To answer this question, I suggest the following approach. As Figure 2 shows, emigration existed before a country's accession to the EU and has a gradual nature across most countries. Due to this steady attrition of a country's population, I expect that the big picture surrounding emigration goes largely unnoticed to the individuals who remain. However, there comes a point where the impact of emigration on a region reaches a tipping point, causing a watershed moment amongst its inhabitants. In this watershed moment, the remaining people suddenly realise the impact emigration is having on their region. I regard these watershed moments as critical turning points in the lives of the remaining population. They can lead to dissatisfaction with existing conditions and a sense of reduced community belonging, leading to a change in their voting behaviour.

I will examine three possible watershed moments that I believe significantly influence the voting behaviour of the remaining residents. The first moment is the closing of local primary and secondary schools. Schools contribute towards community feeling (Sageman 2022, 964). Closing a school will reduce a community's cohesion and negatively impact the lives of families with school-aged children. They must either travel further to reach the next school or must put up with classes that have increased in size due to the consolidation of schools.

The second watershed moment is the closing of hospitals. Because emigrants tend to be younger (Lim 2023, 39), the remaining population is likely to be older. The elderly are more reliant on hospitals, thus I argue that a hospital closure can cause distress and thus grievances amongst the remaining population. Hospitals closures in CEE are spurred on by the emigration of medical professionals (Vorländer 2021, 13; Walker 2019).

To underline the importance of these two watershed moments, Dancygier et al. (2022, 32) show how newspapers report on schools and hospitals closing in Swedish emigration-heavy regions. This indicates that there may exist a link between these closures and grievances.

Schools and hospital closings are services made available by the state. In contrast, the third and final watershed moment I will examine is a service cut in the private sector, namely the decrease in the number of public spaces that act as "third places". These are local "informal public gathering places" that foster community building (Oldenburg 1999, 16), e.g., cafés, bars and restaurants. Their closure can erode a communal sense of belonging and push people towards populist parties (Bolet 2021, 1653).

This is the updated causal chain of events, based on the causal chain displayed in (1):

$$Emigration \rightarrow Service\ Cuts \rightarrow Watershed\ Moment \rightarrow Grievances \rightarrow Vote\ Switching \tag{2}$$

Based on this causal chain, I set up the following empirical specification:

$$\begin{aligned} Switcher\ Share_{i,j} = \beta_0 &+ \beta_1 Service\ Cuts_{i,j} \\ &+ \beta_2 External\ Emigration_{i,j} \\ &+ \beta_3 Economic\ Factors_{i,j} \\ &+ \beta_4 Remittances_{i,j} \\ &+ \varepsilon \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

i indexes a NUTS3 region in the year j. The dependent variable is the share of vote switchers in the electorate who "moved across party lines" (Key 1966, 16), i.e., switched from one party to another, between two national elections. I will measure individual level vote switching using the European Election Study (EES, Schmitt et al.

(2022)).[2]

Service Cuts, the main independent variable, are operationalised as ratios to their respective target audiences. There is one service cut for each watershed moment described above. The first is the ratio of children per school in a region. The second is the ratio of people to hospitals in a region. The third is the ratio of people to third places (cafés, bars, restaurants) in a region.

I will control for the following variables. First, external emigration from a region, which entails the crude number of citizens emigrating abroad from the region. Second, I take the inflow of remittances in a region, because remittances can realign a voter's party preferences in favour of ideological preferences, thus changing their voting behaviour (Pfutze 2012, 161). Third, I take a region's economic factors, e.g., unemployment or GDP per capita, into account. I do this because I assume that a region's overall economic climate will impact the perception of the described watershed moments. Inhabitants of a region that is worse off will develop stronger grievances if schools, hospitals and third places close down. This in turn will have a stronger effect on voting behaviour.

As a general relation between dependent and independent variables, I assume a higher ratio in service cuts, e.g., more children per school, leads to a higher share of vote switchers. I define the following three hypotheses:

H1: A higher ratio of children to schools in a region leads to a higher share of vote switchers in that region.

H2: A higher ratio of seniors to hospitals in a region leads to a higher share of vote switchers in that region.

H3: A higher ratio of people to third places in a region leads to a higher share of vote switchers in that region.

Research Design

I differentiate between internal and external migration and focus on the latter, as I want to examine the effect of FoM on emigration and voting behaviour.

I will measure the effect of service cuts on a subnational, NUTS3 level, data permitting. I do this for the following two reasons. First, measuring subnational regions instead of countries will increase sample size and thus provide more accurate results. Second, regions within countries have different levels of emigration (see Figure 1), allowing us to make differentiated measurements.

I will examine CEE EU member states because emigration in this region has not been studied in detail and because I see an opportunity to measure the impact of FoM on the region. In order to measure an effect of a country joining the EU, I will focus on a time span around the country's accession, e.g., ten years before and after joining, if data is available for the time span. The time span will only go up to and include the year 2019, because I assume the COVID-19 pandemic to have a strong influence on emigration in 2020 and beyond.

A potential disadvantage of the case selection could be cultural differences between CEE EU member state NUTS3 regions, leading to inaccurate results. I have chosen a very broad definition of CEE countries, possibly making a comparison between regions difficult. It may make sense to narrow down the selection, e.g., by excluding the three Baltic states. A further disadvantage is missing data in emigration time series and a lack of individual level data at NUTS3 level.

I will use quantitative methods to answer my research question. In order to gain a general overview, I will perform a subgroup analysis, e.g., by analysing NUTS3 regions within a country. I will then build simple regression models

[2] If a respondent's answer to question 9 is not the same party as the highest rated party in question 10, then they are labelled a vote switcher. From the European Parliament Election Study 2019 Irish Country Questionnaire (Schmitt et al. 2022): Question 9: "Which party did you vote for at the Irish General Election of 2016?" Question 10: "We have a number of parties in Ireland each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please answer on a scale where 0 means "not at all probable" and 10 means "very probable"."

that uncover potential correlations between emigration and vote switching. Data quality permitting, I can then focus on regions that show promising results.

Such a focus may involve mediation analysis. Due to the chain of causal events described in (2), service cuts act as a mediator between emigration and vote switching. This analysis can help explain how the three service cuts influence vote switching in different ways.

A further deep dive will involve the Regression Discontinuity Design method in order to compare regions in EU and non-EU countries. This uses EU accession as the treatment and allows to measure the effect of introducing FoM.

NUTS3 level international emigration data are provided by the national statistics agencies of the respective countries.[3] As a fallback, NUTS3 level migration data is also provided by Eurostat.[4] However, these data do not differentiate between internal and external migration.

Data on individual level vote switching are provided by EES (Schmitt et al. 2022). Of the around 7300 respondents from CEE countries, about 2700, or roughly a third, are assigned to a NUTS3 region. Data on individual level well-being (happiness, grievances) are provided by the European Social Survey (ESS, "European Social Survey Cumulative File, ESS 1-9" (2020)) and the European Values Study (EVS, EVS/WVS (2022)). Data on school closings in Croatia are available through the Croatian Bureau of Statistics.[5]

The thesis can be expanded in the following ways. First, going beyond vote switching, which parties explicitly profit from emigration? Which parties do the switchers switch to? NUTS3 level electoral results are provided by the EU-NED European NUTS-Level Election Dataset.[6] Individual level data from Poland, provided by the Polish Panel Survey[7] can also help expand on the question of who the switchers turn to.

Second, regional elections can be taken into account. I am currently examining vote switching between parties in national elections. However, it may also make sense to take regional elections into account, as these are closer to NUTS3 regions and thus more directly affected by emigration from a region.

Conclusion

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[3] See sources of Figure 2 in the Appendix

[4] Variable: CNMIGRATRT; Online data code: DEMO_R_GIND3; Link: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_R_GIND3__custom_7113680/default/table?lang=en (retrieved 4 September 2023)

[5] https://podaci.dzs.hr/en/statistics/education/basic-and-upper-secondary-schools/ (retrieved 7 September 2023)

[6] https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/IQRYP5 (retrieved 5 September 2023)

[7] https://polpan.org/en/ (retrieved 5 September 2023)

Appendix

Sources of Figure 2

- **Croatia**
  - https://podaci.dzs.hr/2021/en/10485 (retrieved 3 September 2023)
  - https://podaci.dzs.hr/2022/en/29029 (retrieved 3 September 2023)
  - https://podaci.dzs.hr/2023/en/58062 (retrieved 3 September 2023)
- **Czech Republic**
  - https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/en/index.jsf?page=vystup-objekt&pvo=DEM11D&z=T&f=TABULKA&katalog=all&c=v3~8__RP2002&&str=v66 (retrieved 3 September 2023)
- **Poland**
  - https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/en/defaultaktualnosci/3289/2/2/1/main_directions_of_emigration_and_immigration_in_the_years_1966-2020_for__permanent_residence.xlsx (retrieved 3 September 2023)
- **Romania**
  - http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table → emigrants with a change of permanent address (definitive emigrants) → POP309A (retrieved 3 September 2023)
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  - https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/en/Data/Data/05N1042S.px/table/tableViewLayout2/ → International migration by citizenship, statistical regions, Slovenia, annually → Citizens of RS (retrieved 3 September 2023)

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