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'It was us, from Italy, that made him mayor': drivers of migrant-led political change at the local level

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, researchers working on the nexus between migration and politics in countries of origin have started to pay more attention to the local level, but important empirical and theoretical gaps remain. By drawing upon semi-structured interviews, field observation and documentary research, this paper presents the exploratory case study of the 2012 local elections in Borşa, Romania, when an emigrant became mayor due to the mass mobilisation of the diaspora. Our analysis makes a three-fold contribution to the emerging literature on the impact of migration on local politics. First, it provides fresh empirical evidence from the largely underexplored context of intra-EU mobility. Second, it proposes an inductive classification of the factors and mechanisms at micro-, meso- and macro-level that allowed for the political change in Borşa in 2012, thus providing the basis for a framework of the prerequisites for migrant-led political change at the local level. This includes recognising *ad hoc transnational mobility* as a distinct mechanism of migrant political mobilisation. Third, by identifying also some of the post-election challenges faced by the migrant political actors, we extend Danielson's (2017) framework of 'acceptance', 'rejection' and 'integration' by proposing the category of 'negotiated political integration'.

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Introduction

The recently growing literature on the nexus between migration and political change in countries of origin has largely overlooked the local level. The few exceptions (e.g. Córdova and Hiskey 2015; Danielson 2017; Jimenez 2018; Smith and Bakker 2005) mostly deal with the case of Mexico. Apart from these empirical limitations, current research also lacks an analytical framework of the factors facilitating migrant-led political change in the locality of origin. We build on documentary research, semi-structured interviews and field observation in Borşa, a small town in northern Romania, to unfold the decisive role of the diaspora in the 2012 local elections. Thousands of

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emigrants returned to vote in person for a returnee candidate running against the long-standing incumbent mayor. They also persuaded their families and friends to vote the same. The returnee candidate won by a large margin, although he ended up resigning less than two years later. What conditions were met for that remarkable migrant-led political change to take place? And what can the aftermath tell us about potential long-term outcomes of transnational political mobilisation in the locality of origin?

The paper contributes to the research on transnational politics in several ways. First, we present fresh empirical evidence underscoring the importance of the local level in understanding the political impact of migration on the country of origin. This is an exploratory case study that may be especially relevant to the European Union context, where free movement and EU citizenship are likely to encourage and facilitate diasporas' involvement in local politics at home. Second, we use a grounded theory approach to inductively classify the factors at micro-, meso- and macro-level (see Diehl and Blohm 2001) that allowed for the political change in Borşa in 2012 and thereby propose a tentative framework of the drivers of migrant-led political change at the local level. Here, we also identify a new mechanism, distinct from both remittances and return migration, by which migrants may have an impact on politics at home through *ad hoc transnational mobility*. Third, we also identify some of the challenges faced by returnees' involvement in local politics, such as navigating a political culture characterised by clientelist practices. In doing so, we extend Danielson's (2017) framework of outcomes of migrants' involvement in politics in the locality of origin by proposing the category of *negotiated political integration*.

The paper is structured in four sections. The first one outlines the current literature on trans-local political mobilisation and change. The second section describes the methodology. The following section presents the case study through a process tracing approach. The discussion in the fourth section draws out the key factors at play and proposes an explanatory framework for migrant-led political change at the local level. The conclusion sums up the key findings and suggests potential avenues for further research.

Overview of the literature

Migrant transnational political mobilisation is a central strand in the literature on the political impact of migration in countries of origin (e.g. Kapur 2014; Østergaard-Nielsen 2024). Most studies focus on the diasporas' engagement from afar in homeland politics, which may take place by sending financial resources, voting, or mobilising support campaigns, as part of a wider transfer of social remittances (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). Transnational mobility is not commonly seen as a defining feature of transnational political mobilisation. That said, there are some accounts of how political parties in countries that only allow for emigrant in-country voting, such as Turkey before 2014 or Lebanon, flew in their supporters to cast their ballots (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Pearlman 2013).

However, those are cases of mobilisation from above, where migrants were politically mobilised by existing, often mainstream, political parties at home. By contrast, the case discussed here is one of migrant-led political change, which lacks a specific definition in the current literature. Thus, while 'political change' may take many understandings, for the present purposes it is defined as the change in political elites, policies or/and

institutions. ‘Migrant-led’, therefore, refers to current and/or return migrants taking the initiative and mobilising – not merely by voting but also by standing in elections – to challenge and defeat long-standing, incumbent political elites.

With regards to return migrants specifically, the literature on their involvement in domestic politics has made notable progress over the past decade (Barceló 2020; Gift and Krcmaric 2017; Mercier 2016; Spilimbergo 2009). This literature, however, largely amounts to quantitative studies focused on the positive effect of the foreign education of heads of state. The handful of qualitative or mixed methods studies are less optimistic though (Danielson 2017; Félix 2018; Freyburg 2015; Pearlman 2013; Smith and Bakker 2005). Looking at the case of Lebanon, Pearlman (2013) finds that returnees going into politics rather adapt to the existing structures and practices than significantly challenge them. Domestic political elites act as gatekeepers who may reject or negotiate, rather than merely absorb, outside influence (Akdağ 2017; Tolstrup 2014).

All in all, there are still major gaps in terms of capturing the mechanisms mediating returnees’ political involvement and diffusion in the country of origin. This is particularly true of the local level, where the literature is still rather scarce and mostly limited to the case of Mexico (Danielson, 2017; Félix 2018; Jimenez 2018; Smith and Bakker 2005). This gap is significant given that dissatisfaction with local political elites is often a reason for emigration in the first place (Danielson 2017: 99). Indeed, there is evidence of sizable shares of return migrants among local political elites in places with long-standing migration patterns (e.g. Bortun 2020; Fox and Bada 2008).

In their pioneering study, Smith and Bakker (2005) showed how the declining popular support for local political elites in Mexico in combination with a ‘multidimensional heroic migrant narrative’ can facilitate the entry of migrants in local politics. In one of the most systematic studies to date, Danielson (2017) unpacks the different interests at play leading migrants to enter into local politics. They may be motivated by their continued community identity and engagement in local affairs and can mobilise when they feel their interests are not promoted by the current political elite. Focusing on the state of Oaxaca in Mexico, he also finds that migrants are more likely to enter politics in remittance-dependent municipalities and when their empowerment holds the promise of better representation of groups (e.g. indigenous populations) who have previously been underrepresented in local politics. However, while these studies help understand the motivations of key actors, they do not offer a comprehensive framework of the different types of factors that may engender migrant-led political change at the local level.

Another key line of inquiry regards the outcomes of trans-local political mobilisation. As Félix (2018) shows, the local status quo may either co-opt or alienate returnees who challenge the status quo, resulting in a more complex and contradictory power dynamics than one might assume. Danielson (2017) identifies three main types of outcomes of migrant mobilisation ‘from below’ in local politics at home: *repression by local elites*, characterised by conflict and disequilibrium; *acceptance by local elites*, characterised by pluralism and a new democratic equilibrium; finally, *integration by local elites* represents the co-optation of initially autonomous migrant actors, characterised by shored up status quo equilibrium.

Thus, even when migrants achieve local political change by winning elections, substantive change does not necessarily follow. It is important to study these processes in

a wider range of political systems, such as the ‘new democracies’ from Central and Eastern Europe, where the prevalence of clientelism and corruption in local politics may well complicate the process of migrant-led political change. In the particular case of Romania, Mares and Young (2019) argue that electoral clientelism persists in local elections, especially in more deprived communities. It has not yet been explored, though, to what extent migrant-led political change may challenge or, conversely, reinforce said practices of clientelism at the local level.

Methodology

This paper is based on multimethod qualitative research conducted between December 2021 and October 2023 in the region of Maramureş in northern Romania. The research included fieldwork observation and 26 semi-structured interviews with people from Borşa who had had previous migration experience themselves or had, at the time, a close family member living abroad. We also conducted seven interviews with members of local civil society in the city of Baia Mare, the regional capital of Maramureş. As the interviewing progressed, the story of the 2012 local elections in Borşa proved to be a recurrent feature, with more than ten interviewees involved, some of them in leading roles, in the 2012 local elections.

As the migrant involvement in those elections was becoming more apparent, we realised that the 2012 local elections in Borşa could serve as an exploratory case study – as defined by Yin (2013) – for the under-studied phenomenon of migrant mobilisation and, indeed, migrant-led political change in the locality of origin. Thus, we extended and repeated some interviews with those who had been involved in that event.¹ We built inductively on this data to propose a tentative framework of conditions that may facilitate migrant-led political change at the local level.

One methodological challenge is the distance in time, as roughly a decade separated the 2012 elections from when the interviews were conducted. Nevertheless, we believe this choice stands for four distinct reasons. First, these interviews qualify as oral history and criticism of such interviews notwithstanding (see Tuchman 1996), they can ‘provide unique historical perspectives on political events’ (Kapiszewski et al. 2015) and allow us to capture ‘lived experience’ (Janesick 2020: 458). In this optic, the interviews are a cornerstone in the endeavour to unpack the migrants’ motivations for their political behaviour.

Second, the memories recollected here by the participants meet all three conditions identified by Linton (1978) for an event to endure reliably in people’s memory: (1) to be perceived as highly emotional at the time of occurring, (2) to be perceived as instrumental in the subsequent course of events and (3) to be relatively singular, unblurred by repetition. The 2012 local elections in Borşa were not only significant to the people involved in them but were clearly seen as a turning point in the locality’s recent history, which was not repeated since.

Third, we also took some of the measures that Kapiszewski et al. (2015: 200) recommend to political scientists drawing on oral history interviews, including interviewing multiple subjects (10) about the same event, repeating some of those interviews in order to revisit certain themes, and combining these interviews with two other methods of data collection in a process of triangulation, namely documentary research and field

observation. The former covered materials from the electoral campaign and the local press from around the time of the elections in 2012 up until the elected mayor's resignation in 2014 and its immediate aftermath. The latter, conducted during four visits to Borşa, was aimed at comparing the track record of the post-2012 administration, as perceived by the interviewees, to the realities on the ground.

Finally, the distance in time allowed the interviewees to reflect on how the impact of the 2012 election unravelled, particularly in terms of how that matched their initial expectations. While that aftermath is not the main focus of the paper, those reflections have nevertheless revealed some interesting potential obstacles and challenges to more structural, long-term political change.

Case study

National and local migration patterns

Emigration from Romania rose to significant levels only after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 (Andrén and Roman 2016) and today has the largest stock of working age migrants of all EU member states, at 27% as of 2022, and one of the highest proportion of returnees among all member states (Hassan et al. 2023). While there is a growing body of literature on how the diaspora shapes the national political landscape, mainly through voting from abroad (Burean 2011; Crăciun and Țăranu 2023; Dragolea 2022; Romascu and Micle 2021; Soare and Tufiş 2023), there is virtually no research on its impact on local politics. Further, the few existing studies on return migrants deal with their outlook on specific topics such as ethnic prejudice (Anghel and Fosztó 2022), religious tolerance (Cosciug 2019), gender norms (Vlase 2013), trust in public institutions (Birou 2022) or interest in politics (Sandu et al. 2006). Yet, there is very little on the political participation of returnees in general and at a local level in particular. That gap persists despite the growing anecdotic evidence of returnees standing and sometimes winning in Romanian local elections (Bortun 2020).

The 2012 local elections in Borşa represent an interesting case of political change at the local level that was decisively determined by the involvement of both migrants and returnees. Situated in a remote area of northern Romania, in the county of Maramureş, Borşa [pronounced borʃa], is a former mining town with a registered population of just under 28,000 (INS 2023). In the broader context of de-industrialisation in the latter half of the 1990s, the closure of the mines led to a decrease in the number of employees in Borşa by more than 70% between 1991 and 2012 (Radu 2015: 224–225).

Unlike in other ex-mining localities in Maramureş (e.g. Cavnic), where people sought employment in the tourism sector or nearby cities, the main coping strategy in Borşa was international migration (Radu 2015: 211–255). It was mainly younger miners who used their redundancy packages as capital to seek opportunities abroad, predominantly in Italy (Boswell and Ciobanu 2009: 1351–1356). The 2011 census showed Borşa's out-migration rate at 23%, one of the highest in the country at the time (INS 2020), but the real size of emigration might be significantly underreported, as many Romanian emigrants maintain their residence in the locality of origin (Bertelli et al. 2022). According to estimates by the local authorities cited by Ban (2009: 133), 'out of its 30,000 inhabitants, about 15,000 lived in Milan [Italy]'. That is corroborated by the fact that, in 2012, while

only 2524 people from a working age population of 17,576 were employed, merely 275 were registered as unemployed, which means it is plausible that the difference was made by emigrants still holding residence in Borşa (Radu 2015: 226).

Those who migrated to Italy – locally dubbed ‘the Italians’ – have maintained strong transnational ties with the locality of origin. That is reflected not only in the networked character of migration, as existing migrants help others emigrate and sometimes even employ them (Anghel 2012), but also in emigrants visiting Borşa every year for the summer and winter holidays (Ban 2009: 133). It is a ‘migrant corridor’ (Carling and Jolivet 2016) that relies on numerous transport links, with bi-weekly coach rides that the locals call ‘cabs’ and which are also used to transport packages in either direction (Boswell and Ciobanu 2009: 1352-1353).

Migrants send significant amounts of remittances, often used not only for the benefit of the immediate but also extended family (Ban 2009: 138). That includes a range of functions, from paying for healthcare to starting a small business in town to building/renovating a (new) house, where the latter has also become a strong indicator of social status (Radu 2015: 227). Between 1990 and 2012, the number of dwellings in the locality increased by nearly 50%, although the development of infrastructure did not keep up with that increase (Radu 2015: 222–223).

Migrants have generally enjoyed a positive image among the non-migrants, as they are associated with hard work and prosperity (Boswell and Ciobanu 2009: 1352). Migrants turned entrepreneurs are particularly well-perceived, as they often employ other people from Borşa, mainly in the construction sector (Boswell and Ciobanu 2009: 1353). Thus, becoming a construction entrepreneur has become ‘a sign of status ascension to the ranks of the local middle class’ (Ban 2009: 143) and, thereby, ‘the subject of symbolic admiration’ from non-migrants (Anghel 2012: 332). At the same time, precisely because of their high stakes in Borşa, Radu (2015: 241–242) also found migrants to be, prior to 2012, more dissatisfied with how the town was being run.

The 2012 Moment

The 2012 elections saw the two-term incumbent mayor lose to the candidate of the Green Party, Toader ‘Toni’ Mihali – a 34-year-old newcomer to politics who had emigrated to Belgium as a teenager and become a successful entrepreneur in the construction sector. His 54% share of the vote was more than double the incumbent’s 23%.² Indeed, despite being a minor political force that had never had any electoral gains in Borşa, the Green Party also secured a majority on the local council with over 42% of the votes. These results were all the more impressive as the incumbent’s party – an electoral coalition of the two main parties of post-1989 Romania, the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) – won the parliamentary elections that year with 59% nationally and 55% in the Maramureş county.

According to the interviews, Mihali’s surprise victory was largely due to the unprecedented participation of the diaspora. Several said that around 2000 Borşeni living abroad at the time came home specifically in order to vote ‘for change’. Given the anonymity of the voting process, it is virtually impossible to fully determine whether that was indeed the case. Nevertheless, the significant increase in turnout on the previous elections, from

34% to 49%, could plausibly account for the figure of migrant voters quoted by the interviewees as well as for the family members whom they also mobilised to vote.

What motivated this mobilisation? According to the interviewees involved in Mihali's electoral campaign, the main pull factor was the poor state of the infrastructure, from roads to schools to access to running water. As claimed by a returnee³,

The schools were a disaster, I don't even know if there are words to describe how the schools looked in 2012 in Borşa. Terrible. They had no heating, nothing had been done in the schools since we were pupils 10–12 years ago. ... And I was very disappointed, although it could have been done if it was the right person. And so, we got involved. (Returnee 1)

Another interviewee who had been abroad stated that, at the time, 'nothing [had] happened for so many years: there were four streets paved out of 200, there was no school renovated, there was no light bulb working, there was nothing' (Returnee 3). All this was largely blamed on 'a mayor who had done nothing for a few terms' (Migrant 2).

At the same time, the dissatisfaction with local authorities also concerned their broader relationship with the citizens. That came out most clearly from the interviewees' contrasting experience with local authorities in Italy:

when I arrived in Italy, as an immigrant, each time I needed documents, or I had to go to the town hall, I noticed that I was given the same consideration as the others, and there was no notion of 'Oh, here comes this person who owns I don't know what in town and I have to give him priority', like in Romania. (Returnee 1)

Experiencing a different kind of interaction with local authorities further motivated migrants to want change at home. As one of them put it, 'I would like to implement everything I saw there, what I have seen in the way the town halls do things abroad' (Returnee 2).

But people wanting things to be different does not necessarily entail them also acting upon it. One key factor in that regard was the greater confidence of those with migration experience in challenging authority. As one of the interviewees put it,

[the experience] abroad has also helped me a lot, because there I've seen that the ordinary citizen can tell the policeman if he's not doing something right, he can tell the mayor, anyone. In our country, that fear from the time of Ceauşescu has taken hold ... Nobody dares to tell the policeman if he is not right, or the mayor. I'm past that. (Migrant 2)

Another interviewee also highlighted that, compared to those who remained in Borşa, those with migration experience 'come with a different baggage of experience, they don't get trampled on easily, they don't bow their heads so easily'. This perceived lower degree of deference towards local powers would arguably enable migrants and returnees to challenge them more than those who never left Borşa.

Thus, in 2012, several local young entrepreneurs, most of them return migrants, set up an association to promote their economic interests which quickly took a political turn. According to one of them, 'as absolutely nothing was changing [in Borşa] ... the idea came from among the members of the association: 'what if we got involved in the election campaign and put someone who would change something?'' (Returnee 3). They decided to put forward as a candidate Toni Mihali, who had already been toying with that idea, as he elaborated himself in a post-election press interview, where he explicitly linked his decision to run to his migration experience:

I was waiting, year after year, to see a change for the better, to see the town becoming again what it used to be ... Due to this ongoing dissatisfaction, I reached the conclusion that there is no other way than to get ourselves involved – to return from abroad, to stand in elections take over political positions and our city the way we want to. (Jurnalul TVR 2012)

The plan quickly attracted the support of other returnees in the locality, as explained by one of them:

seeing that there was someone from abroad who wanted to change the system, we said ‘Let’s get involved!’. Maybe we can add value through what we have learnt from our experience abroad and try to make a difference in our country. (Returnee 1)

Mihali’s profile as someone who had spent a long time in ‘the West’ was, therefore, a core element of what fellow returnees, and potentially other voters, found appealing about him. Indeed, he was a ‘successful’ returnee, who had built a business in the construction sector, as pointed out by one of the interviewees: ‘The man bought a small helicopter, built a mansion, even brought in a firm – a successful man, a successful businessman’ (Migrant 2). Mihali’s electoral campaign explicitly tried to capitalise on his experience of living and building a business abroad. The slogan on his electoral posters around Borşa read ‘Borşan soul, European experience!’ (Babici Man 2015; see the Supplementary Material for poster).

Given that the two main parties (PSD and PNL) ran with a common candidate (the incumbent mayor), Mihali and his backers found a non-mainstream political vehicle for his candidature – the Green Party. On the one hand, that was deemed an advantage, as it was not tarred by the corruption allegations and top-down modus operandi associated with mainstream parties:

[Mihali] tried to find a new party, a party that was not corrupt, that was not with people from the PSD or the PNL. Now I don’t know exactly why they even chose the Green Party, but I think that was the idea – to come up with a party that doesn’t have any kind of political influence at the national level, so to speak, not to be ordered around. Because you know what it’s like in the big parties, you’re kind of controlled from the national level, you can’t really do what you want. (Returnee 1)

Therefore, Mihali’s team soon decided that their best chance to win the election was to mobilise the diaspora. As recalled by another returnee who played a leading role in Mihali’s campaign and who had previous political experience in the county, ‘the most important component was diaspora outreach ... we didn’t start the electoral campaign in Borşa, but in Milan, Treviso and Trento. We went there’ (Returnee 6). Another returnee involved in the campaign expanded on the thinking behind that diaspora outreach: ‘We talk to those in the West, those in the West call their mothers, their fathers at home and tell them what and how to vote. Maybe we get them to come home and vote, and maybe we’ll succeed’ (Returnee 3).

Thus, Mihali paid himself for members of his team to go to Italy and campaign for him among the Borşa people living there. A returnee who had pioneered migration from Borşa to Italy in the early 1990s and thereby had strong links over there was one of those entrusted with this mission: ‘He said – “take another friend with you and go and campaign; [here is] 2,000-3,000 euros”, he says, “so that you can pay for food, expenses, rent, accommodation, a hall, logistics, everything you need there”’ (Returnee 4).

The transnational campaign kicked off with a preliminary visit meant to test the mood among the diaspora, as detailed by another interviewee:

at the meeting in Asolo⁴, 600 Borşeni gathered. ... I told the story, everyone was looking at you very reluctantly. ... Look, that's what we'd like, we could certainly change it, you come along, you can return home. ... we had to vacate the hall, because there was another event going on there, we went out into a courtyard ... everybody stayed and we talked until late at night. (Returnee 3)

The campaigning among the Borşa diaspora in Italy was corroborated by someone who was living there at the time and participated in one of those meetings. The weight placed by Mihali and his team on the importance of the diaspora vote is particularly noteworthy:

they came to Italy, to us, and said – 'well, we have to change the system. I'm running for mayor, Green Party, you have to help me to come home, to vote, because people at home won't vote for me'. ... I believed in him. It was us, from Italy, that made him mayor, because if it wasn't for us, we would still have the same administration in Borşa that we had for years. (Migrant 1)

One of the returnees prominently involved in the campaign elaborated on how they tried to motivate people to come home to vote:

I tried to explain to them that their only chance of planning a future return home is to first send one of their own home – a man who slept under the bridge in Milan with them, a man who worked every possible job day and night, a man who understands them, and who understands their need to return home. (Returnee 6)

It also helped that, given the strong networked character of emigration from Borşa, the people representing Mihali were well-known figures among the diaspora. One of them highlighted his status as a migration entrepreneur who had helped many others emigrate and find work abroad: 'I have a long history, because over there many people from Borşa knew me and at least owed me respect' (Returnee 6).

While it is difficult to confirm the numbers via an official source, several interviewees claimed that around 2000 people came from Italy to Borşa specifically to vote in the local elections, amounting to roughly 7% of the town's official population at the time. One of them described this ad hoc mass return:

I was one of the 2,000. We left in the cars as we left work. ... For example, there were seven of us in the car. Seven drivers, we drove seven people. ... Friday evening I left, Sunday morning I voted, Sunday evening I was back in Italy. ... So over 2,000 votes came in, who went home for a day, just to vote. (Migrant 1)

As anticipated by Mihali's team, the returnees' impact was not limited to their own vote, but they also persuaded family and friends to go vote for their preferred candidate. In some cases, the persuading effort was on the verge of blackmail. As recalled by one of them, many migrants phoned their families home and said 'we'll stop sending you money if you don't vote for change' (Migrant 1). This kind of pressure was combined with mobilisation on the ground on election day. According to one of the interviewees leading the campaign, simply calling people at home would have not sufficed: 'Through the phone you cannot convince people to go and vote for the candidate of change. You need to come home and take them by their hand' (Returnee 6). Thus, on

election day, ‘Everyone picked up their mum, dad, brother, sister, whoever they knew from home and took them to vote’ (Returnee 3).

Mihali’s victory came against all odds, as the incumbent was not only politically backed by the coalition of two mainstream parties but also by the other local powerful actors. One of the interviewees prominently involved in Mihali’s campaign claimed that ‘the mayor in office had all the priests, he had all the foresters (in Borşa, the forester is an influential man), he had all the businessmen on his side. We were exactly like David against Goliath’ (Returnee 6). Not only did ‘David’ win but the Green Party he ran on the ticket of also gained a majority on the local council.

Aftermath

The remarkable diaspora-led victory of Mihali notwithstanding, its aftermath was more complicated than many of his supporters might have hoped for. Mihali resigned after only one year and seven months of his four year-mandate, being replaced by his deputy, Timis (MaraMedia 2014), who is still mayor today. Indeed, according to an investigation by the National Agency for Integrity, Mihali was guilty of conflict of interest while serving as mayor, when the institution he ran awarded several contracts to a company he had headed before 2012 (Graiul Maramureşului 2015).

By contrast, some interviewees put Mihali’s unexpected resignation down to the resilience of vested interests:

[in] an area where industry has been destroyed, the most important sucking tit is the local budget. That’s where the money comes from for road paving. ... after the first rain, you have to put in another round. When we came here, we said – ‘not a single alley, not a single street will be paved [with stone]; as long as there’s money, we’ll lay asphalt’ ... and they began to see their financial interests threatened, and they set up all kinds of traps. The fact is that they found something to blackmail him with. (Returnee 6)

Others emphasised Mihali’s perceived unwillingness to negotiate with such powerful actors:

his mistake was [that] he said that he was destroying the mafia in Borşa. And I explained to him then that nobody is going to destroy the mafia. ... In 2012, at that time, Borşa was also called on TV Little Sicily. (Returnee 1)

This perspective was reinforced by Mihali himself, who complained in the local press at the time that neither the police, nor his colleagues on the local council would enact his orders to check the trucks transporting logs from the nearby mountains, with illegal logging having been a long-standing issue in the area (ActualMM 2013).

The lack of influence was arguably also a result of the Green Party’s lack of representation at regional and national levels, where the mainstream parties have generally remained dominant in Romania. That may also explain why the current mayor, himself a returnee prominently involved in Mihali’s 2012 campaign, eventually ran for his subsequent three terms on PSD’s ticket. According to several interviewees, that conferred him the political support needed for projects that Mihali’s administration had wanted to implement, particularly the road infrastructure and the redevelopment of the nearby ski resort. Mihali himself had motivated his resignation to the local press by blaming the ‘political system’ blocking his development plans for Borşa as well as the

local population at large, who was not, after all, ‘ready to accept a real major change’ (Admin eMM 2014).

At the same time, some of the interviewees broadly supportive of the current mayor claimed his connection to PSD has not meant full co-optation – or what Danielson calls integration – and that he is ‘still arguing with the PSD-ists and calling a spade a spade’ (Returnee 4). Another interviewee recollected a dialogue between the mayor and the PSD regional leader, where the former would have alluded that people of Borşa would only vote for the party in exchange for public funds to help develop local infrastructure. Thus, if the current mayor’s track record seems to align, at least partly, with the expectations of the returnees and migrants who mobilised in 2012, some elements of the *modus operandi* that they had criticised about the pre-2012 mayor seem to have survived. This duality is paradigmatic for the post-2012 landscape in Borşa.

On the one hand, the political shift enacted by migrants and returnees in 2012 has been partly consolidated under the returnee who succeeded Mihali in office, as arguably illustrated by the aforementioned improvements to the infrastructure. The degree of change that has been achieved since 2012 is perhaps also corroborated by the current mayor having kept his seat following elections in 2016, 2020 and 2024. While that is hard to verify, several interviewees claimed that many of his votes came from migrants, returnees and their families. Thus, the diaspora mobilisation of 2012 was not a one-off event and, albeit at a lower degree, was at play in subsequent elections. As one interviewee put it,

Afterwards, every election, there has been contacting and campaigning in the diaspora. They came home, they influenced, now it’s very easy on social media ... they don’t come to vote, but they call home and influence in one way or another. Or even if he doesn’t call home, if his mother sees him voting, she supports him, because her son knows what he knows, he’s not living on charity in Italy. (Returnee 3)

On the other hand, there seems to be a continuity with the pre-2012 status quo, illustrated by the current mayor’s ties to PSD and alleged practice of promising the party votes in exchange for political support for public funds. According to another interviewee,

in small towns, such as Borşa, the mayor has a lot of influence in directing the vote one way or the other. ... if there are parliamentary elections and you say – ‘we have to vote for so and so, because he is from my party or he will help us with something or other’, they will vote in that direction in a very large proportion. (Returnee 3)

The obstacles to change have to do, therefore, with both persistent practices among political elites but also what many interviewees referred to, more generally, as ‘people’s mentality’. One of them complained that, whereas in Italy ‘the population pretty much knows what they’re voting for’, in Borşa ‘there is no such culture, and people hear from candidates what they want to hear’ (Returnee 3). Another interviewee talked of the scepticism about change among the older generation:

Parents who, more often than not, are bland and complacent in perpetuating a state of affairs ... [believe] everybody steals, we are too small to be able to change anything ... if others come, they will steal even more to fill their pantry. (Returnee 6)

Interestingly, though, some of the interviewees also complained about fellow migrants or returnees not having really assimilated the better practices they had to comply with abroad, such as paying taxes:

there are some people who pay when they are forced...but they don't pay like in Italy, without complaining, you know? In Italy they go, they pay, they have nothing to say. Here, they always have something to comment on, they are always unhappy. (Returnee 1)

However, the same interviewee also acknowledged that such reluctance might be explained by people's suspicion of how public money is handled: 'they always have the impression that if you pay taxes locally, the people in the City Hall don't use those resources as they should' (Returnee 3). This indicates some of the challenges that might have slowed down the process of change relative to initial expectations. Perhaps that partly explains why turnout in local elections steadily went back down from the 49% peak in 2012–2040% in 2016 to merely 33% in 2020. Equally plausible, though, is that the diaspora is not mobilising to the level of 2012 because it is content with the current administration, as illustrated by its scores in the 2016 and 2020 elections – 37% and 58% respectively.

Towards an explanatory framework of migrant-led political change

The previous section told the story of how migrants and returnees from Borşa mobilised for the 2012 local elections to put one of them at the helm of the town. In line with similar studies (Danielson 2017), they were primarily motivated by the discrepancy between their interests – chiefly their desire to return to Borşa one day – and the perceived performance of the local administration at the time, particularly with regards to public infrastructure, relative to their experience abroad. The latter also gave them more confidence in challenging authority at home.

The idea of an electoral challenge to the status quo emerged among financially successful returnees who convinced another financially successful migrant, Mihali, to run as candidate. Illustrative of what Smith and Bakker (2005) called the 'multidimensional heroic migrant narrative', that conferred him the kind of legitimacy that successful migrants had always enjoyed in Borşa (Anghel 2012; Ban 2009; Boswell and Ciobanu 2009). At the same time, Mihali was also able to financially support his own campaign and send a team abroad to mobilise the diaspora in his support. That transnational campaign was further facilitated by the reputation of some on Mihali's team who had acted as pioneers of the markedly networked migration from Borşa.

Unlike the prevalent cases of diaspora mobilisation 'from above' (e.g. Borz 2021), this instance of political mobilisation was characterised by the prominent roles played by both current and return migrants in the successful attempt to replace the two-time incumbent mayor running on behalf of the strongest political force at the time. Thus, the 2012 local elections in Borşa constituted a case of migrant-led political change at the local level, in the sense of both return and current migrants playing key roles in that event: the return migrants who came up with the idea of challenging the incumbent; the mayoral candidate himself; several of the councillors who stood on the same ticket as him including his deputy mayor who would subsequently become mayor; the return

migrants who led his electoral campaign; and, of course, those in the diaspora who mobilised ahead of and during the voting day.

The diaspora mobilised in several ways. First, migrants called their families back home to persuade them of voting for Mihali. In some cases, those social remittances were accompanied by the threat to stop sending financial remittances. This illustrates Borşa being a ‘remittance-dependent municipality’ (Danielson 2017) but also the paradox of attempting to effect democratic change through clientelist methods. Second, by all accounts, a non-trivial number of migrants came back themselves specifically to cast their vote on election day. That was greatly facilitated by the existing ‘migration corridor’ (Carling and Jolivet 2016; Molina et al. 2022) and relative proximity between Borşa and northern Italy. This type of transnational engagement is distinct from both remittances and returns and may be best described as *ad hoc transnational mobility*. It might be particularly relevant to geographical regions characterised by intense transnational mobility such as the European Union.

The 2012 local elections in Borşa provide a good starting point for an explanatory framework of migrant-led political change. Table 1 below identifies and briefly explicates the factors that facilitated that in the case at hand. They are classified at three distinct yet interconnected levels: the micro level (individual characteristics of actors involved in the process), the meso level (collective characteristics of actors involved), and the macro level (structural factors linked to geography as well as political contexts in countries of origin

Table 1. Facilitators of migrant-led political change at the local level.

Micro-level factors	Meso-level factors	Macro-level factors
<i>Migrants’ desire to return and strong ties with non-migrant family/friends – stakes in the state of affairs in community of origin, frequent communication and regular visits home.</i>	<i>Size and cohesion of diaspora – it mattered there were many migrants from Borşa and most of them in the same region of Italy, allowing them to hold large electoral gatherings and travel home in groups.</i>	<i>Mass diaspora/emigration in a consolidated democracy – Italy has a more consolidated democracy than Romania.</i>
<i>Migrants’ dissatisfaction with the status quo – greater than among non-migrants, regarding both material and immaterial issues.</i>	<i>Developed migrant networks – well-established migration corridor between Borşa and northern Italy, meaning also relatively reduced costs of transport due to high demand.</i>	<i>Free and regular elections – despite the corruption and clientelism in Borşa, there was still a basic democratic process in place that allowed for political change to happen.</i>
<i>Migrants’ (partly) positive experience abroad – interaction with Italian authorities contrasted with that experienced at home and provided a point of reference for what change could look like.</i>	<i>Multidimensional diaspora mobilisation – social remittances, ad hoc mobility, persuasion by migrants of family at home.</i>	<i>Legal framework – intra-EU mobility allows for migrants to keep their residence in their hometown, meaning they keep their voting rights.</i>
<i>Credibility of (returnee) candidate – the winner in 2012 was known as a successful businessman with a ‘Western mentality’.</i>	<i>Influence of migrants/returnees over non-migrants – whether because they had more credibility or used financial coercion, migrants could persuade non-migrants about the vote.</i>	<i>Geographical distance between destination and origin – Italy is relatively close to Romania (compared to other cases, e.g. Ecuador-Spain).</i>
<i>Financial resources of the candidate – his money funded the transnational campaign among the diaspora.</i>	<i>Support from powerful local actors – the association of returnee entrepreneurs that came up with the idea of electing a migrant as mayor. Untainted/new political party – Green Party was not associated with corruption as mainstream parties.</i>	<i>Size of locality – it is obviously easier to have migrant-led political change in a relatively small locality than in a big city.</i>

and destination). While these factors have been identified inductively, based on the research conducted in Borşa, some of them also corroborate with much of the existing literature, as indicated above.

At the same time, the change in political elites brought about by the 2012 local elections in Borşa was not necessarily followed by a structural, long-term change. Important obstacles and challenges, mainly linked to persistent power structures, as well as an old 'mentality' among both migrants and non-migrants, have led to a mixture of change and continuity. While the current mayor is himself a former migrant who was part of Mihali's team in 2012 and who has overseen improvements to local infrastructure over the last decade, one might also argue that this administration still ended up being run by a representative from one of the mainstream parties (PSD) that the 2012 mobilisation was supposed to be an alternative to. However, the local administration arguably aligns politically with PSD in exchange for regional and national political support needed precisely for the kind of infrastructure projects that people expected when they voted for change in 2012. Such a complex outcome of migrant involvement in local politics adds an important dimension to the typology proposed by Danielson of repression, acceptance, and integration. What happened in post-2012 Borşa is, in this optic, neither acceptance in the sense of a new democratic equilibrium of further pluralism, nor integration in terms of a preservation of the status quo. Instead, it is but a hybrid of the two that may be best described as 'negotiated integration' – a new equilibrium centred around people involved in the 2012 migrant-based challenge to the local political elite but with strong elements of the old status quo, namely the subsequent integration in a mainstream party and the perceived persistence of old clientelist practices.

Conclusion

This paper has presented and analysed an exploratory case of the impact of migration on local politics in the country of origin, thereby making a three-fold contribution to the emerging literature on this topic. First, it provides fresh empirical evidence from the largely underexplored context of intra-EU mobility, where we suspect that cases such as the 2012 local elections in Borşa may be more widespread than currently known. Indeed, more evidence is needed from a wider range of political geographical contexts, as the existing literature is mostly focused on the case of Mexico.

Second, we have advanced an inductive framework of the prerequisites for diaspora-led political change at the local level. However, we do not make any strong claims of causality. This framework is neither exhaustive, nor does it suggest that all these conditions have to be met to in order for migrants to effect political change at a local level in the country of origin. Which particular configuration factors are necessary *and* sufficient might vary from one local (and national) context to another and could make the object of future, potentially quantitative research. In that respect, it is also important to explore other methodological choices, such as network analysis, which may be particularly suitable for studying 'transnational social fields' that connect places or regions in different countries (Molina et al. 2022).

Third, while not focusing but merely touching on some of the post-election challenges faced by the migrant political actors, we have expanded on Danielson's (2017) framework of 'acceptance', 'rejection' and 'integration' by suggesting the category of 'negotiated

integration' (although this may entail the notion of 'negotiated acceptance' and further conceptual clarification is thus warranted). This notion captures the complexity of local politics dynamics, arguably raising important questions of existing accounts of political clientelism at the local level in 'new democracies' that tend to overlook how such practices may play out among political elites themselves at various levels of the polity (see Mares and Young 2019). Hence, future research could also explore and theorise these, and other, factors that may inhibit more substantive, long-term migrant-led political change at the local level.

Notes

1. Despite repeated attempts, we were not able to secure an interview with the returnee who became mayor of Borşa in 2012.
2. All the data on electoral turnout and results have been collected from the rezultatevot.ro website (Code 4 Romania 2020).
3. From here on, 'returnees' will designate those who had returned to Borşa from abroad prior to the 2012 elections, while 'migrants' will refer to those who were still living abroad at the time, even though they might have returned to Borşa since then.
4. Town in the Treviso region in northern Italy, where many people from Borşa – known as *Borşeni* [pronounced borşeni] – live.

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