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Migrant-Led Political Change at the Local Level: The Transformative Case of Borșa, Romania



Migration's impact goes beyond economic development, influencing politics as well. In 2012, Borsă, a small Romanian town, underwent a transformative political shift led by its diaspora. Frustrated with years of neglect and stagnation, emigrants rallied behind Toader Mihali, a returnee entrepreneur, as mayoral candidate. A study by MIGRADEMO researchers delves into this event and its implications.

Cultural centre in Borșa, Romania

In Borșa, dissatisfaction with local governance had simmered for years, especially among migrants accustomed to better public services abroad. In 2012, this frustration spurred the emigrants into action. Mihali ran for mayor with grassroots support from Borșa's diaspora in Italy. These migrants did not just vote—they campaigned, persuaded families, and travelled home *en masse*. Their efforts secured Mihali's election and a Green Party majority in the council.

The study identifies several key factors behind this success. On a micro level, migrants' strong ties to their hometown, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and Mihali's credibility were crucial. Meso-level factors included cohesive networks, influence on non-migrants, and

effective campaigning. Macro-level factors, such as EU mobility policies, free elections, and proximity between Italy and Romania, made transnational engagement possible.

A defining aspect of this campaign was what the authors call “*ad-hoc transnational mobility*”, where migrants returned home specifically to vote. This short-term mobility directly influenced the election, demonstrating its power as a novel form of diaspora engagement.

The election’s aftermath revealed the challenges of sustaining political change in the long run. The study introduces the concept of “*negotiated political integration*” to describe Borșa’s hybrid outcome. While the diaspora disrupted entrenched power structures, many old practices persisted. Despite pushing for improvements in local infrastructure, Mihali also allegedly got involved in some of the established clientelist practices. He therefore resigned before the end of his term; his successor, a returnee too, aligned with a mainstream party, blending reform aspirations with established politics. This compromise illustrates the incremental nature of change in transitional democratic contexts.

The case of Borșa deepens our understanding of migrant-led political change, offering a framework for similar scenarios. It highlights the transformative power of migration in shaping politics and the future of communities.

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