

Politics of Emigration - Transcript

SPEAKERS

Rob McNeil, Madeleine Reeves, Jacqui Broadhead, Anna Kyriazi, Julia Rone

Rob McNeil 00:00

Hello, and welcome to another episode of The Migration Oxford Podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Jacqui Broadhead 00:04

And I'm Jacqui Broadhead.

Rob McNeil 00:06

And in today's episode, we are talking about the politics of emigration. Now, in theory, Jacqui was supposed to be asking the questions on this one, but unfortunately, she had to go to the dentist, so I ended up doing them. Nevertheless, I'm going to ask Jacqui, why did you want to talk about this subject?

Jacqui Broadhead 00:21

I think, firstly, because often we talk about the politics of public opinion around immigration. But we don't often consider emigration. And, from Julia's really interesting paper, there was also this idea of the politics of emigration within European countries. So again, often when we talk about, you know, a very simplistic binary between sending and receiving countries, this idea that countries are either countries of immigration or countries of emigration that some countries move between the two. But actually, we know that all countries are countries of immigration and countries of emigration. And the way that we think about emigration isn't as obsessed over as attitudes towards immigration. And that was, I thought, a really interesting finding of this piece of public opinion research and, and a question that we don't think about often enough.

Rob McNeil 01:21

So Jacqui, can you explain what the basic idea is behind this discussion today, then?

Jacqui Broadhead 01:26

So I think the starting point is a piece of research that looked at Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain, and about half of the respondents in those countries revealed a preference for emigration controls that would prevent people from leaving the country for extended periods of time. And that was really surprising. It's not something that features by and large within the politics of the EU, generally, there is a belief in a right to exit, essentially, a kind of rights, in particular to free movement is very important within obviously, the culture of the EU. What was so interesting to me about it is that we talk all of the time about immigration control. And in fact, when we think about net migration statistics, for example, obviously, they include both immigration and emigration, but we never really think about the emigration side of things. And what was so interesting to me about this piece of work and this conversation, is that it talked both about emigration, but also the politics of emigration. And in ageing societies, for example, or countries that are in demographic decline, this could really become a growing issue, and it's not really one that researchers or politicians are talking about at the moment.

Rob McNeil 02:39

Absolutely.

Jacqui Broadhead 02:40

We're now joined by Anna Kyriazi, a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Milan, Julia Rone, a postdoctoral researcher at the Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy at the University of Cambridge, and Madeleine Reeves, Professor in the Anthropology of Migration here at the University of Oxford.

Rob McNeil 03:01

So firstly, look, thank you so much to all three of you for joining us today. Let me start with you, Julia. Your recent work is based on this intriguing question, what are the political effects of emigration on sending countries? So can you explain what drew you to this topic and what you found?

Julia Rone 03:18

Yeah, of course. So, I'm a social movements scholar, and I realised quite quickly that there has been a discussion about the basically tension between emigration and political participation. And so with a colleague of mine, Tom Junes, first we did a paper which was trying to see, basically, the consequences of emigration for protest participation. We thought that if politically active people emigrate, that's basically the end of it. And so there is this very interesting hypothesis by Kelemen, about the authoritarian equilibrium and the idea that if progressive people emigrate abroad, basically, we have authoritarians having a very comfortable and cosy time at home. But what we found was surprisingly different. So, we realised that actually people quite often continue to participate. So exit does not necessarily hinder voice, it might transform it. But then, of course, we asked ourselves, is this the same in very different contexts? And with Anna, my colleagues, Manès Weisskircher and Mariana Mendes, we decided to do this big comparative agenda, setting paper, basically, studying the consequences of emigration. So yeah, I would say in short, for me, it was this interest about, interest in how does immigration influence protest? And then you've got expanded to voting and other forms of participation.

Rob McNeil 04:34

And so Madeleine, I mean, obviously, you deal with a very different part of the world. You also deal though, with this issue of the political effects of emigration on sending countries so, how about you, what would you say your experience, or your kind of work tells you about this?

Madeleine Reeves 04:51

Yeah, it's really interesting hearing Julia's answer that because I think, so, I work in Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, predominantly and in a sense at a very different scale in terms of conducting sort of long term ethnography rather than big survey research. But I think also, I found interesting, dynamics around the impact of emigration, for instance, on political mobilisation in Kyrgyzstan, in a context of significant political turmoil. And I think one of the interesting dynamics here is the role now of social media. That means that sometimes diasporic populations can actually be extremely politically engaged. And in authoritarian political context, they might in some ways have greater access to information than those inside a country. And so it can have a significant, kind of, impact on political dynamics, whether that is sort of revolutionary movements, or social mobilisation, or just sort of demands for greater representation, and so on.

Rob McNeil 05:52

Fascinating. And, Anna, can you tell me a little bit about what we know about the people who stay and what they think about emigration, how they frame it?

Anna Kyriazi 06:00

So I will just take a step back and also tell you a little bit about my motivation to research the subject and actually link this to my answer to your question. So I come from two European countries, I'm half

Greek, half Hungarian. And so I follow the debates in these countries a lot. And what I saw is that there is a lot of talk about immigration in both contexts. You know, in Greece, after the economic crisis, many people leaving the country to go work somewhere else in Hungary as well, a lot of people immigrating. And as Julia said, sometimes this connects to the kind of autocratisation of the country no? But at the same time, in the academic literature, we actually didn't find a lot of research about this. So we thought that there is a bit of a blind spot here, we talk so much about immigration, you know, how natives react to immigration, immigration parties, how they shaped, you know, political competition, but we didn't really have much to work with, in relation to the other side of the coin. So in relation to what people think about emigration, in countries of emigration, you know, in countries from which a lot of people leave, this was also a bit of a blind spot, we didn't really have a lot of information about this, because surveys basically don't really ask these questions. And there was a survey a few years ago, commissioned by the European Council for foreign relations. There are, of course, some surveys done domestically in these countries. And then we also did a survey in the research project, for which I am working on asking people exactly these questions. And what we find, in brief is that in countries where a lot of people emigrate from there is indeed a big concern with emigration. So, people are actually worried about this. They are worried about the sustainability of welfare states. They just see emigration also as part of a broader failure of the state, economic but also political. And it's very interesting that when you ask these questions in countries that are more on the receiving side of immigration, here, respondents focus a bit more on kind of personal autonomy. So if you ask them, why are people migrating here, they will say are because they seek life experiences, you know, these type of things. While in countries of emigration, people focus a lot on the factors that actually push people away.

Rob McNeil 08:28

This is really interesting. It brings me to the next question, which if I can maybe speak to you about Julia, we hear a lot about this idea of brain drain and the idea that sending countries risk losing their best and brightest, what all three of you have described so far is a kind of political brain drain. But I mean, what are the other impacts that people who stay consider when they're thinking about people who leave?

Julia Rone 08:51

Yeah, the brain drain narrative is particularly interesting, because it's usually the way emigration is being framed in sending countries, we are losing our brightest and youngest, etc. But actually, so I'm Bulgarian I forgot to mention this eastern European and what we see is a cross sectional migration of the population, which actually is very rarely discussed in the start, we see also a lot of agricultural migration, care migration, etc. And the effects of this cross-sectional migration are various and very curious for us. So first of all, of course, we have, basically population decline. And this leads quite often to lower levels of political participation. There has been very interesting research by Anelli and Peri on this topic in the Italian context. We also have this hypothesis about the strengthening of the far right in sending countries. So as older people remain and more conservative people, we see a rise basically a far right voting and this is a very interesting connection that I think is not enough explored. So, there is a lot of research on immigration in the far right but much less on the effect of emigration. And of course, beyond the political effects there, as Anna already mentioned, very serious socioeconomic effect in terms of basically being able to sustain your pension systems. Healthcare is another aspect, which is very much affected by emigration. We see from the experience of a lot of Eastern and Southeastern European countries, a lot of doctors migrating. And this was particularly clear during the COVID crisis, where we had such a shortage of doctors and nurses who had all emigrated. So, there are many, many interesting and important effects that are sadly overlooked. And we hoped with our article basically, to draw attention to these issues and spur a bit more research and interest in this.

Rob McNeil 10:43

Madeline, does that resonate with you? Or do you think that you have a very different set of experiences that people feel in Central Asia?

Madeleine Reeves 10:50

I think there are certain sort of interesting parallels, but also certain interesting differences. So, this phenomenon of, as Julia was saying, sort of different demographics emigrating. And although this is often framed, just as brain drain, certainly in the Central Asian context, where you know, we have states that are some of the most remittance dependent in the world, there's a sense that migrating now is just a necessity for young men who finished school. And the discourse around that is just, you know, it's there aren't job opportunities here. So, we have to leave. And I think that feeds back in a really interesting way, then into the politics. Because, say, in the Central Asian case, the vast majority of those migrating as labor migrants are migrating to Russia. And that creates then particular kinds of political dependencies as well, that people are acutely aware of and their political leaders are acutely aware of right, it reflects then in say, the Central Asian states, very restrained voting patterns in the UN when it comes to condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and things like this. So there are all sorts of, sort of, very interesting political consequences. And in addition to the social and kind of cultural impacts, that Julia mentioned, for instance, around the migration of doctors, which is certainly something we see from Central Asia, I think it also plays into anxieties around demographic decline. And indeed, right at the moment, for instance, in Turkmenistan, which is one of the most closed and repressive states in the world, right sort of up there in the top league with North Korea. There's actually a lot of attempts to actually prevent people from exiting the country ahead of a national census, because the question of demographic decline associated without migration is so intensely politicised. So, you know, there are demographic anxieties, there are cultural anxieties. There are sort of public discourses around, let's say, from a political elite around those migrating being unpatriotic and lazy, and so forth. So it's a very, very kind of deeply politicised field, I would say.

Rob McNeil 12:47

So, Julia emigration seems to have an important impact on political voice, so on who's listened to and who gets to participate. One interpretation sees exit as essentially an alternative to voice whereby those who leave essentially cease to participate, though in some contexts, expat voices can shape political debates from afar. So how does your research reflect this?

Julia Rone 13:09

Yeah, so basically, one of the things that I find very interesting is this trade off, as we mentioned earlier, between exit and voice, interestingly enough, Madeleine mentioned that sometimes people who are far have more resources, but very good research on the Iranian 2009 Twitter revolution. So the last big wave of protest has shown that quite often also, people who are afar don't have a super realistic perspective on what's happening on the ground. And so they might push for things that are a bit too extreme for the local context. So there are these very interesting details that I think needs to be taken into account. And of course, the importance of emigrants is very strongly contested. Coming from the Bulgarian context, the biggest fights, basically, the last few years in the country, were fights around the electoral basically, law that would have allowed emigrants to have their own basically representative region. And that would have allowed them to have more voice. And of course, this was a very hotly contested issue. And this is maybe also one of the biographical reasons why I'm interested in this. Because with a population where such a large percentage of the population is abroad, the participation of these people really matters. And it is an object of political contestation. And that, of course, raises many important philosophical questions such as should someone who is not in the country have a say on how the budget is made, whether infrastructure is being invested in, etc. So these are very interesting and controversial topics that are still very open. And again, we need to do more research on them. So I think if there is one thing we want to do is to urge people please pay attention to this as well.

Rob McNeil 14:48

So Anna, some states have considered incentivizing return how does this affect how states engage with their diaspora communities and how that is viewed by those who stay?

Anna Kyriazi 14:58

Yeah, that's a very good question and there is quite a bit of research on the so called diaspora policies. So we know a lot about, you know, how states are trying to engage their so called diaspora, so people who live abroad, and so policies to incentivize return is one type of the diaspora policies, but there are also others. So for example, how to engage them economically, we talked about remittances a little bit, how to cultivate cultural linkages, but also a diaspora policy can also be a policy of neglect, no? Now, what is very interesting are these explicit return policies, so you don't want people to stay abroad, you actually want them to come back. And there is some interesting research on zooming into the specific topic because this hasn't been really the focus of research, like independently. So, we don't know much about it. One thing that we know is that most of these policies seem to be targeting these kinds of valuable immigrants. We talked a little bit about this. So young people, highly skilled people, it's really interesting to look at the labels of these policy programs. So many of them have the word brain in them. So, the Rebrain Greece, for example, is, is one such program, in the Greek context. And so these can be policies such as, for example, the state takes over paying the salary of a particular person who has proven to come back and to take up a job in their home country. So another thing that we know about these policies is that they seem not to be really working. Actually, these programs many times they are announced, you know, in a very pompous way, we are instituting this policy, we want our young and bright people to come back, we will do this, we will do that, will we allocated all this money. And then if you follow up on these projects, many of them actually attracted back handful of people and maybe like a few 100, or something of the sort. Because, well, emigration policies, these return policies are really difficult actually, to design because people move for all sorts of reasons, right? And so here, we are talking about the necessity of kind of broad labor market reforms, raising minimum wages, correcting kind of imbalances and inefficiencies in welfare states. So these would be you know, the necessary policies and these type of smaller targeted programs, they seem not really to be working.

Rob McNeil 17:44

Okay. So, all of this raises wider questions about demographics. And these being interlinked with questions about population decline, ageing populations, and other anxieties about demographic change. How does understanding perceptions of emigration help us to understand these dynamics better? I mean, Madeleine, can I start with you on that?

Madeleine Reeves 18:04

Sure. Yes, I mean, in the Central Asian context, I think it's important to sort of separate out the kind of policy implications of labor migration and the ways that that affects, for instance, concerns about pension provision concerns about the politics of care and provision of care for the elderly, and so forth. And then there's a kind of symbolic level as well around anxieties over demographic decline. So I mentioned a little moment ago, the case of Turkmenistan, and the sort of the anxieties around the census there. We see this in other Central Asian states, too, in context of sort of significant out migration, a symbolic politics around protecting the gene pool, as it's often referred to, in fact, in Kyrgyzstan in 2013, there were attempts to prevent the out migration of women under the age of 23, right? So basically, women of reproductive age, were being encouraged to remain in the country. So, there are all of these ways in which this plays out not just in terms of particular policies around demographics, but in the symbolic level around demographics. And I think that this plays out also in interesting ways in terms of who is incentivized to return. So Anna and Julia were drawing attention to the fact that it's a sort of, it's very often those who are educated migrants, the brain element being implicit in these policies. And what I was thinking of when I was listening to that answer is how in a central Asian context, it's also very much bound up with ideas of a sort of national identity. And, for

instance, if we take the case of Kazakhstan, particular incentives around encouraging ethnic Kazakhs, from Mongolia, from China, to migrate to Kazakhstan, less as a form of re-brain-ing than more as a kind of drawing back the authentic Kazakhs to their homeland. And so I think it's really important to draw attention to sort of look, not just the kind of economic motivations for incentivizing return migration, return here in kind of scare quotes, but also in the sort of ideological dynamics that underlie that in terms of, for instance, concerns to rebalance what are perceived to be demographic inequities, or to compensate for forms of cultural loss. And so it's very much bound up, I think also with kind of politics of post coloniality in Central Asia.

Rob McNeil 20:22

And so, Julia, I mean, does this resonate with the European context, do you think?

Julia Rone 20:26

Yeah, so I absolutely agree with Madeleine's point because also within the European Union context, we see very clearly how concerns about demographics, the big picture, for example, very strongly relate with concerns over immigration. So immigration and emigration are very tightly connected, we cannot understand this fear of immigration in Eastern Europe without paying attention also to the element of emigration and the fear of nations disappearing. And very similar to what Madeleine describes, in at least in the European context, we can see also very clearly that emigration is very much racialised, and it's also very much it has very strong gender aspects. So there was very interesting research actually, on female emigration from Ukraine before the war, like in the early years. And it was very strongly culturally sanctioned with people really being very abusive toward women who emigrate because they don't stay at home to give birth to children and contribute to the basically fixing the demographic problem. Similarly, a lot of Eastern European nations do not have problem with their Roma populations migrating, which is extremely problematic. And they're rarely included in the policy measures that Anna mentioned. So demography, these ideas of what the nation should be, how the demographic problems should be solved, is extremely important to understand this. So emigration, immigration, race, these are all very, very strongly interrelated questions.

Rob McNeil 21:58

In that case, I would like to thank all three of you very much indeed. It's been extremely interesting. And I think a really, really great chat. So, I really appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

Julia Rone 22:09

Thank you.

Madeleine Reeves 22:10

Thank you.

Anna Kyriazi 22:11

Thank you.

Jacqui Broadhead 22:12

You've been listening to The Migration Oxford Podcast. I'm Jacqui Broadhead.

Rob McNeil 22:15

And I'm Rob McNeil.