The Effect of Labor Migration on the Diffusion of Democracy: Evidence from a Former Soviet Republic

Toman Omar Mahmoud

Abstract

Migration contributes to the circulation of goods and knowledge as well as to the diffusion of social and cultural norms. We use community and individual-level data from Moldova to investigate the impact of international labor migration on the evolution of political preferences and electoral outcomes at home. We show that the emigration of Moldovans that started in the late 1990s strongly affected electoral preferences in Moldova during the following decade and provide suggestive evidence that these effects work through the diffusion of information and democratic values from abroad. Identification relies on the quasi-experimental context under which the episode of emigration took place and on the fact that emigration was directed both to more democratic Western Europe and to less democratic Russia. We find that labor migration to the West reduced electoral support of the ruling Communist Party in favor of democratic opposition parties. Counterfactual simulations suggest that political spillovers of westward migration significantly contributed to bringing down the last ruling Communist government of Europe, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall.