

## SPATIAL INEQUALITIES AND ELECTORAL PREFERENCES IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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**Abstract:** This study describes the electoral implications of spatial polarization in Poland, the Czech Republic and eastern Germany. Empirically, it highlights the voting behavior of residents from selected territories as examples of disadvantaged regions in these three countries, and the conditions that shape such behavior. We explore whether these implications can be explained by argument on populist preferences in peripheralized areas. An analysis of the results of the last three elections to the Polish, Czech and German parliament was used. In each country, we selected two territorial units representing less developed areas and contrasted them with a socioeconomically privileged area and the nationwide results. In Germany and the Czech Republic, support for populist parties is well above average in the peripheralized regions studied, and low in the dynamically developing places. There is no single political force that exploits voter discontent in lagging areas. Depending on the prevailing cultural and socio-economic conditions, these forces may be more right-wing, more left-wing or even rather centrist. In Poland support for clearly populist parties in disadvantaged regions reaches similar levels as in the rich community. Political differences are primarily visible on the conservatism/liberalism axis.

**Keywords:** left-behind regions; geography of discontent; political geography; political parties; European Union; Poland; Czechia; Germany

## DESIGUALDADES ESPACIAIS E PREFERÊNCIAS ELEITORAIS NA EUROPA CENTRAL

**Resumo:** Este estudo descreve as implicações eleitorais da polarização espacial na Polónia, na República Tcheca e no leste da Alemanha. Empiricamente, o estudo destaca o comportamento eleitoral dos residentes de determinados territórios como exemplos de regiões desfavorecidas nesses três países, além das condições que moldam esse comportamento. Exploramos se essas implicações podem ser explicadas pelo argumento das preferências populistas em áreas periféricas. Para a análise, utilizamos os resultados das três últimas eleições para os parlamentos da Polónia, da República Tcheca e da Alemanha. Em cada país, selecionamos duas unidades territoriais representando áreas menos desenvolvidas e as contrastamos com uma área socioeconomicamente privilegiada, além dos resultados nacionais. Na Alemanha e na República Tcheca, o apoio a partidos populistas é bem acima da média nas regiões periféricas estudadas e baixo nos locais que se desenvolvem de forma dinâmica. No entanto, não há uma única força política que canalize o descontentamento dos eleitores dessas áreas mais atrasadas. Dependendo das condições culturais e socioeconômicas predominantes, essas forças podem ser mais à direita, mais à esquerda ou até mesmo mais centristas. Na Polónia, o apoio a partidos claramente populistas em regiões desfavorecidas atinge níveis semelhantes aos da comunidade mais rica. As diferenças políticas são mais visíveis no eixo conservadorismo/liberalismo.

**Palavras-chave:** regiões marginalizadas; geografia do descontentamento; geografia política; partidos políticos; União Europeia; Polónia; República Tcheca; Alemanha.

## INÉGALITÉS SPATIALES ET PRÉFÉRENCES ÉLECTORALES EN EUROPE CENTRALE

**Résumé:** Cette étude décrit les implications électorales de la polarisation spatiale en Pologne, en République tchèque et dans l'est de l'Allemagne. Empiriquement, elle met en lumière le comportement électoral des habitants de certains territoires considérés comme des régions défavorisées dans ces trois pays, ainsi que les conditions qui façonnent ce comportement. Nous explorons si ces implications peuvent être expliquées par l'argument des préférences populistes dans les zones périphériques. L'analyse repose sur les résultats des trois dernières élections aux parlements polonais, tchèque et allemand. Dans chaque pays, nous avons sélectionné deux unités territoriales représentant des zones moins développées et les avons comparées à une zone socioéconomiquement privilégiée ainsi qu'aux résultats nationaux. En Allemagne et en République tchèque, le soutien aux partis populistes est nettement supérieur à la moyenne dans les régions périphériques étudiées et faible dans les zones en plein développement. Cependant, il n'existe pas une seule force politique exploitant le mécontentement des électeurs dans les régions en difficulté. En fonction des conditions culturelles et socio-économiques dominantes, ces forces peuvent être davantage orientées à droite, à gauche ou même plutôt centristes. En Pologne, le soutien aux partis clairement populistes dans les régions défavorisées atteint des niveaux similaires à ceux des communautés les plus riches. Les différences politiques se manifestent principalement sur l'axe conservatisme/libéralisme.

**Mots-clés:** régions marginalisées ; géographie du mécontentement ; géographie politique ; partis politiques ; Union européenne ; Pologne ; République tchèque ; Allemagne.



## Introduction

Many studies point out that rising populism and discontent with liberal democratic rule are associated with spatial inequality (MCCANN, 2020; DORLING & TOMLINSON, 2019; NORRIS & INGLEHART, 2019; BROZ et al., 2021). Recent decades have seen the rise of authoritarian-populist forces opposed to traditional norms of liberal democracy (NORRIS & INGLEHART, 2019). Good is identified with the common will of the people and evil with a conspiring elite (HAWKINS, 2009). Growing support for populist political parties has been manifested particularly in poor and peripheral regions. The notion of "places left behind" as a source of disadvantage and resentment, for example, has become one of the most common explanations for the results of the recent Brexit vote (DORLING

& TOMLINSON, 2019; SYKES, 2018; MCCANN & ORTEGA-ARGILÉS, 2021). It is noted, however, that not everyone who votes for a populist party can be called dissatisfied, and not everyone who is dissatisfied has to vote for parties of this nature (ROODUIJN & AKKERMAN, 2017; DIJKSTRA et al., 2020).

A new research direction has emerged, the geography of discontent (DIJKSTRA et al. 2020), in which the attention of authors focuses on explaining the factors of the political choices of communities living in less developed regions. The determinants identified are characterized by wide variation, and the conclusions of the research are sometimes contradictory. A. RODRÍGUEZ-POSE (2018), argues that support for populism is driven by territorial inequalities, not inequalities at the individual level. Economically declining regions offer their residents limited life opportunities. The result is a widespread sense of hopelessness that leads to rebellion against the status quo – hence his metaphor about populism and anti-establishment support as "the revenge of places that don't matter." Research by M. ABREU & Ö. ÖNER (2020) on Brexit, on the other hand, indicated that the most important contextual determinants of the "Leave" vote are cultural rather than economic. In their view, the combination of political disengagement and cultural dissatisfaction had the most significant contextual impact on voting.

Research devoted to the rise in social discontent in the US, which may have contributed to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, sees the impact of long-term adverse economic and demographic processes more than of deepening income inequality or social capital disparities (RODRIGUEZ-POSE et al., 2021). J. BROZ et al. (2021) come to similar conclusions by analyzing the widening inequality between lagging rural areas and small cities and resilient metropolitan areas in the US and Europe. In their study, they show that support for populists is strongest in communities that have experienced the greatest economic decline. However, differences in voting behavior are observed not only between urban and rural areas (SCALA & JOHNSON, 2017; BERGMANN et al., 2017; LICHTER & ZILIAK, 2017), but also between town districts characterized by different population structures (ESSLETZBICHLER & FORCHER, 2022; ROSSI, 2018).

The discussion in the literature focuses on the strength of the various factors behind support for populist groups. Economic factors and the feeling of being "left behind" in economic terms (e.g., RODRIGUEZ-POSE, 2018; DIJKSTRA et al., 2020) are contrasted with factors related to the "cultural backlash" against the expansion of left-liberal values in society (e.g., INGLEHART & NORRIS, 2016; ABREU & ÖNER, 2020). In particular, it seems important to seek answers to the question – does the role of the various factors behind the "cultural backlash" differ in countries with different historical backgrounds and levels of socioeconomic development?

While in the US and Western Europe the crisis of "left behind" regions was explained by post-industrialization, technological change and globalization (IAMMARINO et al., 2019), spatial inequalities in Central and Eastern Europe were shaped by other processes. They were strongly affected by economic shocks induced by the post-socialist transition, emigration to the West, development of low-wage sectors in the labor market, and the crisis in the agricultural economy caused by ownership changes and the collapse of food market networks (BAŃSKI, 2020; BAŃSKI & MAZUR, 2021; GORZELAK, 2020). The aforementioned processes have contributed to spatial polarization, i.e., the deepening of already existing spatial inequalities, including the peripheralization of many regions and social exclusion (LANG, 2015; LANG et al., 2015; GRABSKI-KIERON et al., 2016, TAGAI et al., 2018). This may have resulted in dissatisfaction of specific groups of residents, expressed, among other things, in the form of political choices.

This study explores specific forms of the geography of discontent in a post-socialist context. It describes the electoral implications of spatial polarization in Poland, the Czech Republic and eastern Germany (the former German Democratic Republic). Empirically, it highlights the voting behavior of residents from selected territories as examples of disadvantaged regions in these three countries, and the conditions that shape such behavior. The study was carried out within the framework of a research project entitled "Social and political consequences of spatial inequality: a case study of Central and Eastern Europe."

### Historical overview of populist movements in Central Europe

With the collapse of state socialism in 1989/1990 free elections were held in Poland, Czechia, and the eastern part of Germany (the former German Democratic Republic), and a transition from socialist planned economy to a market economy and integration into global markets began. However, the socio-economic transformation caused a wave of dissatisfaction. On the one hand, there was dissatisfaction with dynamic economic changes (collapse of state-sponsored industries and the state agri-food sector, high levels of unemployment). On the other hand, dissatisfaction with the cultural and moral changes (clash of conservative and liberal tendencies) that translated into dominant political cleavages.

In Poland in the 1990s, the primary political divide revolved around the left-right axis, shaped by historical and cultural factors (ZARYCKI, 1997; KOWALSKI, 2000). Post-communist left and post-Solidarity right were blamed alternatively for the challenges faced during the transition period (POWERS & COX, 1997). After 2005, these dynamics shifted as liberals of the PO<sup>7</sup> and conservatives of PiS dominated the political scene (WOŁEK, 2012; WIELGOSZ, 2019), yet some movements radically criticized the entire establishment regardless of ideological roots.

At the turn of the 21st century, notable populist forces included the centrist Samoobrona and the right-wing LPR, with strong Eurosceptic sentiments opposing European integration, which was perceived as threat to agriculture and national traditions or, to free-market economy. The elections of 2001 and 2005 saw an increase in populist support, especially in rural areas of central and eastern Poland where also opposition to Poland's accession the EU was the strongest. In the following years, the major parties, PO and PiS, adopted themselves populist rhetoric, diminishing the success of populist forces (WOŁEK, 2012), yet leading the country into a "Polish-Polish war" that stabilized the main axis of political conflict for nearly two decades (WIELGOSZ, 2019).

In the pivotal 2015 elections, PiS emerged victorious, which was accompanied by increased support for right-wing populists. By 2019, PiS's success was attributed to social policies implemented by PiS, since 2015 benefiting the communities affected by the post-1989 changes, particularly in rural areas, where the party increased its support and voter turnout was higher. The elections of 2023 marked a shift with generally higher voter turnout and a decline in PiS support. Centrist parties (PSL and Polska 2050) and liberal-left parties (KO), which together with the New Left received more votes than PiS, formed the new government.

In the Czech Republic, populist parties emerged shortly after the fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s, mainly centered around the right-wing SPR-RSČ. This party based its political rhetoric on a sharp critique of the "post-communist establishment," coupled with attacks on Roma and Vietnamese minorities, aiming to attract support from those considered losers of economic transformation (MAREŠ, 2000). Despite having entered the national parliament in 1992 and the peak

<sup>7</sup> The name and political classification of the party can be found in the appendix.

success in 1996 with 8% of the vote, internal divisions led to its decline, and it lost significance. In 2004, the more radical DSSS emerged (HÁKA, 2016), but it had to heavily struggle for substantial popular support, receiving only 1.1% of votes in the 2010 parliamentary election, falling short of the 5% legal threshold. The 2010 parliamentary elections also saw the rise of a new type of (moderate) populist party, Věci Veřejné (Public Affairs), critical of the political establishment. Financed by a single businessman the party gained around 11% of votes, entered the national parliament, but lost its anti-establishment appeal after the election, leading to its disintegration and loss of relevance.

The entrepreneurial party model inspired others, including agri-business owner Andrej Babiš, who established ANO in 2011, and Czech–Japanese entrepreneur Tomio Okamura, who founded Úsvit in 2013, later transformed into SPD. ANO, labeled a "technocratic populist" party, maneuvered pragmatically within the political program, emphasizing managerial competencies and attracting dissatisfied voters (HAVLIK, 2019; BUŠTÍKOVÁ & GUASTI, 2019). The SPD, more aligned with right-wing populist predecessors, focused on anti-establishment rhetoric, xenophobia, Euroscepticism, and direct democracy.

A left-wing populist current is also present in the form of KSČM, the direct successor of the Communist Party that ruled before 1989, criticizing post-1989 political development and emphasizing social security issues (HAVLÍK, 2012). The party maintains its totalitarian past but positions itself as the defender of ordinary working people against the political and business elite.

Czech populism gained prominence after 2006, causing a significant shift in the stable political scene, contrary to earlier perceptions of Czechia's relatively strong resistance to anti-liberal populism compared to other Central European countries (MAŠKARINEC, 2019; BUŠTÍKOVÁ & GUASTI, 2019). Spatially, right-wing-populist parties' support is concentrated in peripheral, less developed areas with poor economic conditions, echoing patterns observed in the 1990s. Recent populist parties gain traction in areas once supportive of right-wing SPR-RSČ and the broad left, indicating persistent electoral spatial arrangements despite changes in the political landscape (MAŠKARINEC, 2019; SUCHÁNEK & HASMAN, 2023).

The party system in Germany is relatively stable and there are only weak signs for political polarization and discontent. In the 1990s and 2000s there was widespread support for mainstream center-right parties CDU/CSU and FDP or center-left parties SPD and Grüne. Opposition to the mainstream parties in the 1990s/2000s came from the post-communist left represented by the PDS, successor to the GDR's ruling SED, and several parties of the extreme right.

The PDS, considered a manifestation of post-communist populism, expressed opposition to Western elites and advocated for East German identity, capitalizing on "Ostalgie" or nostalgia for certain aspects of life in the GDR (O'LOUGHLIN et al., 2002; OLSEN, 2019). Over the past 30 years, the PDS transformed into *Die Linke*, adopting a dual political profile: a pragmatic left focusing on social security and workers' rights and a populist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist wing with sympathies for Russia. In late 2023 members of the party's left populist wing split from *Die Linke* and announced to form a new party BSW.

In the 1990s, the extreme right, comprising parties like Die Republikaner, DVU, NPD, and militant neo-Nazis, engaged in violent attacks against perceived foreigners and Antifa (KLÄRNER, 2008). While these parties and movements of the extreme right contained some elements of populism, especially the division of a 'pure people' they can hardly be described as populist because contrary to a 'thin ideology' they clearly had strong ideological foundations in historic national socialism.

However, the situation changed in the last decade when several cultural conflicts emerged, mainly triggered by rising Euroscepticism, post-2015 asylum immigration crisis, controversies about

climate policy, and protest against anti-Covid measures. During this period, the newly established AfD seized the opportunity presented by these cultural conflicts, gaining support that eluded the party under its former market-radical profile. AfD, emerged in 2013 as a market radical Eurosceptic party but since then shifted to embrace right-wing authoritarianism, populism, and even extremism, gaining traction in both western and eastern Germany. This shift, particularly in the East, suggests a structural susceptibility to right-wing populism, contrasting with the left's dominance in the 1990s (HAWES, 2018; KOWALSKI, 2020; OLSEN, 2019).

Spatially, as in Czechia, the right-wing-populist parties' support is concentrated but not confined in peripheral, less developed areas with poor economic conditions (DEPPISCH, 2021; DEPPISCH et al., 2022). These areas are mostly to be found in eastern Germany where in some parts AfD is likely to become the leading party. In eastern Germany the AfD is even stronger in the south-western regions (Saxony, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt) where the industrial base collapsed after 1990. In the northern regions (Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) where state farms were more prominent the AfD gains relatively lower support but is still much stronger than in western Germany.

## Electoral consequences of spatial inequality – case studies

### *Case studies selection*

Polarization of electoral preferences is worth tracing through specific examples. For this purpose, an analysis of the results of the last three elections to the Polish, Czech and German parliament was used. In each country, we selected two territorial units representing less developed areas and contrasted them with a socioeconomically privileged area and the nationwide results.

In Poland, municipalities Korsze and Szydłowiec, were selected as representatives of disadvantaged places, and the suburban town of Lesznowola – inhabited by a wealthy and elite community to represent a privileged community. The first two areas represent negative socioeconomic characteristics associated with high unemployment that persists over a long period of time, the migratory outflow of young people and an aging population (BAŃSKI, 2010). Lesznowola, on the other hand, is a municipality located in the vicinity of Warsaw, which shapes its dynamic economic development and stimulates positive demographic phenomena (TABLE 1). In the Czech Republic, Varnsdorf and Toužim represent disadvantaged places. Varnsdorf, it has faced elevated levels of poverty and unemployment over the last three decades, resulting from rapid deindustrialization after the breakdown of communism. Toužim is a peripheral, sparsely populated part of the economically lagging Karlovy Vary region. The contrasting privileged case is represented by Černošice, a wealthy and growing Prague suburb. In Eastern Germany the municipalities Roßwein and Gerswalde represent disadvantaged regions. Both areas experienced severe population decline after 1990 but stabilized in the last decade. Kleinmachnow has profited from the unification and its close location to Berlin, which made it an attractive residential area for wealthy urban elites.



**Table 1** - Selected socio-economic characteristics of the study areas

Country	Study area	Socio-economic characteristics						
		GDP per capita, EUR*		Unemployment rate (percent)		Population 65+ (share in percent)		Migration balance
		2021**	2011-2021**	2021	2011-2021	2021	2011-2021	2011-2021
Poland	Szydłowiec	9,534	+1,288	26,3	-10.8	17.9	+4.5	-0.6
	Korsze	10,825	+1,398	19.8	-9.4	19.3	+6.5	-1.8
	Lesznowola	12,641	+4,388	3.1	-4.0	10.4	+2.4	+5.5
	Country	11,335	+2,897	3.9	-4.1	18.9	+5.1	-0.04
Czechia	Varnsdorf	15,640	+3,700	4,84	-8,94	22,7	+7,7	-4,2
	Toužim	13,510	+2,510	5,40	-9,19	22,1	+7,2	-6,1
	Černošice	19,290	+5,060	1,52	-3,12	18,5	+3,9	+12,6
	Country	22,460	+6,720	3,60	-3,10	20,6	+4,8	+1,9
Germany	Roßwein	22,655	+7,671	5.8	-5.7	29.8	+2.5	+14.7
	Gerswalde**	23,894	+3,834	8.9	-5.3	29.4	+5.4	+10.9
	Kleinmachnow	19,365	+7,830	2.0	0.0	23.9	+4,8	-12.9
	Country	33,532	+6,960	4.9	-0.7	22.1	+1.5	-2.8

\*Poland, data for counties LAU 1 level, where the selected areas are located; Czechia, GDP data for NUTS 3 regions, Germany, GDP and gross income data for NUTS 3 regions

\*\*Germany 2020 instead of 2021

Source: Poland: Central Statistical Office. Czechia: Czech Statistical Office, Germany: income data: The Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, [www.inkar.de](http://www.inkar.de); other data: Bertelsmann Stiftung, [www.wegweiser-kommune.de](http://www.wegweiser-kommune.de)

### Analysis and Discussion

In Poland, after 1989, as a result of the so-called "shock therapy" in the economy and the adoption of the polarization-diffusion concept, i.e., the spatial development of the country promoting socio-economic activity in places with the highest economic potential, regional poles of polarization and large peripheralized areas have developed (BAŃSKI, 2010). Korsze is an example of the latter. The communist system left a stronger imprint here due to the weak rootedness of the population and the introduction of state farms. The collapse of the socialist system led to a crisis in the local agricultural economy, resulting in high unemployment. Elections in the 1990s showed that the post-communist left (SLD) enjoyed the strongest support, with a lack of trust in liberal and right-wing parties, associated with negative change and a conservative worldview.

The 2000s brought a crisis for the left, and the next parliamentary elections focused on a highly polarized political scene – the conservative PiS and the liberal PO. For the inhabitants of Korsze, there was no attractive left-wing alternative, neither mainstream nor populist. However, against the background of Szydłowiec, Lesznowola or Poland as a whole, support for the traditional left (SLD) was

still highest here. Also, higher than in other areas was support for emerging new left-wing groupings characterized by more radical, often populist slogans, Ruch Palikota, Polska Partia Pracy and Partia Razem. The centrist and populist Kukiz'15 and even the right-wing predecessors of the Konfederacja also gained higher support here than elsewhere. However, these new parties were unable to capture more potential voters. It was only the change in the PiS narrative during the 2015 election campaign (to a more social and less patriotic/conservative one) and, above all, the social policies of this government from 2015-2019 that resulted in greater voter activation among local residents. Of the areas compared, it was here that the increase in turnout was the greatest (between 2015-2019 by 144%), and the increase in support for the PiS was also the greatest (by 129%), which took over the votes of a large group of Korsze residents who previously sympathized with populist parties. However, the last parliamentary elections in 2023 brought a clear increase in support for the liberal-left KO, although at the expense of support for the traditional left. There was also a decline in support for the ruling PiS, probably related to the growing economic crisis.

**Table 2** - Parliamentary election results in Poland (2015, 2019, 2023);  
**bold** – populist parties, underlined – partially populist parties managing the discontent

Party/ Committee	Korsze			Szydłowiec			Lesznowola			Poland		
	2015	2019	2023	2015	2019	2023	2015	2019	2023	2015	2019	2023
<u>PO/KO</u> <sup>1*</sup>	25.8	18.0	26.4	21.7	18.0	19.7	44.7	37.6	41.6	31.7	27.4	30.7
<u>PiS</u> <sup>*</sup>	36.4	47.0	41.8	54.0	62.6	52.8	29.4	29.3	21.0	37.6	43.6	35.4
<u>SLD</u> <sup>2</sup>	8.6	14.3	7.2	4.9	6.5	4.5	5.0	16.7	8.3	7.6	12.6	8.6
<b>Populist Left</b> <sup>3</sup>	<b>4.2</b>			<b>3.1</b>			<b>3.5</b>			<b>3.6</b>		
<u>PSL</u> <sup>4</sup>	7.9	13.1	13.7	3.9	5.9	11.5	5.5	7.6	17.9	5.1	8.6	14.4
<b>Konfederacja</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>7.0</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>7.0</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>7.2</b>
<b>Kukiz'15</b>	<b>11.7</b>			<b>7.9</b>			<b>6.3</b>			<b>8.8</b>		
Other	0.7	0.7	0.0	0.8	1.5	3.5	0.7	1.9	0.0	0.8	1	3.7
Turnout	29.0	41.8	54.5	47.6	57.1	69.4	67.8	77.5	87.4	50.1	61.7	74.4

Source: own research on the basis of data from National Electoral Commission

<sup>1</sup>2015 – PO and Nowoczesna; <sup>2</sup>2023 – as Nowa Lewica; <sup>3</sup>2011 – Ruch Palikota and PPP, 2015 – Partia Razem; <sup>4</sup>2023 – PSL and Polska 2050

The second of the analyzed areas – Szydłowiec, characterized by the historical continuity of its society, greater religiosity of inhabitants, and the preservation of individual farming even under the communist rule in Poland. The main cause of socio-economic problems is the peripheral location and the large number of small and subsistence farms. For a long time, the commune has had the highest unemployment rate in the country. At the time of the polarization of the political scene between PiS and PO after 2015, local residents identified themselves with the conservative ideas preached by the right-wing PiS. Support for the Left and Liberals was low here, and this was not changed even by the more populist ideas promoted by parties of this type. In relation to Korsze, support for the populist centre-right (*Kukiz'15*, *Konfederacja*) was also lower. In contrast, the pro-social policies of PiS from 2015-2019 resulted in a further increase in support for this grouping, although it was already the high. However, the economic crisis that has been growing since 2020 resulted in a weaker result for PiS in



2023 parliamentary election and an outflow of its voters to the centrist *PSL-Polska 2050* and the populist-right *Konfederacja*.

The commune of Lesznówola near Warsaw has stood out for years with high places in the rankings of wealth and entrepreneurship. These features are also reflected in the voting behavior of local residents. They are distinguished primarily by high voter turnout and great support for the *Koalicja Obywatelska*. *PiS* was second in the analyzed period, but its support was usually lower than in Korsz, known for its leftist tendencies. Compared to Korsz, Szydłowiec and the nationwide result, support for the left, including the populist left, was usually lower here. In a wealthy commune, social parties (*PiS*, left-wing) cannot apparently count on high support. What may be surprising, however, is the relatively high support for the populist-right *Konfederacja*, higher for the four elections analyzed than the results in Korsz and the nationwide result. This can be explained by the strong emphasis on economic freedom and the demand to limit social spending by this party, which could be appreciated by some voters of this commune known for its wealth and individual entrepreneurship.

The above cases clearly indicate that the exciting polarization of the political scene in the last two decades along the axis of the *PO-PiS* conflict has limited the possibilities of other parties in the fight for voters' votes. The left, discredited by the governments of 2001-2005, has not yet regained its position. Because of this polarization, also the new left-wing forces, often more populist than the SLD in the 1990s (*Ruch Palikota*, *Partia Razem*), could neither break through in less developed areas in the fight for votes. Even populist centrist (*Kukiz'15*) and right-wing forces (*Konfederacja*) have not become an alternative to mainstream parties. The rich social program of *PiS* in 2015, meant that it was this party that picked up additional votes in disadvantaged areas across the country (especially in 2019), taking potential voters away from typically populist parties.

The fall of communism in the Czech Republic introduced a significant shock to regional development. Accelerated post-industrialisation multiplied economic and social problems especially in regions oriented towards heavy and mining industries. The structural changes in the economy during the post-socialist transformation thus formed one dominant pattern of current regional inequalities. This has been complemented by long-term polarisation processes between regional centres and their peripheries, which have resulted in long-term depopulation and economic weakening of the inner peripheries located within the fringes of the catchment areas of large cities. The interplay of the two processes has resulted in the existence of two types of disadvantaged areas: areas affected by the structural economic changes of the last thirty years, and long-standing economically weak areas in the inner peripheries. On the other hand, thanks to the accelerated metropolization and suburbanisation starting in the last decade of the 20th century, one of the fastest growing areas is the Prague metropolitan area, and in general the hinterland of the major cities.

In both disadvantaged regions (Varnsdorf and Toužim), we observe increased support for right-wing (*Úsvit přímé demokracie*, *SPD*) as well as left-wing (*KSČM*) populist parties over the whole period. In contrast, in Černošice, which benefits from its privileged location near Prague, these parties had support well below the average (TABLE 3). In 2013, for the first time, the political movement *ANO* made the first significant impact on the parliamentary elections. During these elections, protest rhetoric of *ANO* leader Babiš, combined with his emphasis on managerial skills, appealed to voters across the Czech Republic, in rich and poor parts of the country.

Since the 1990s, socio-economic status has been a crucial cleavage in Czech elections, gaining expression in the distinction between economically right-wing and left-wing parties, especially with regard to the level of redistribution and taxation. In 2013, this was manifested in the privileged region

of Černošice by the strong support for the explicitly right-wing parties *ODS* and *TOP09*, and, on the contrary, low support for the left-wing *ČSSD*.

**Table 3** -Parliamentary election results in Czechia (2013, 2017, 2021); **bold** – populist parties

Party/ Committee	Varnsdorf			Toužim			Černošice			Czech Republic		
	2013	2017	2021	2013	2017	2021	2013	2017	2021	2013	2017	2021
<b>ANO</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>38.7</b>	<b>37.7</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>37.3</b>	<b>38.1</b>	<b>16.2</b>	<b>18.8</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>27.1</b>
<i>ODS</i>	6.1	8.1	15.6	5.3	7.5	19.8	15.2	18.4	42.3	7.7	11.3	27.8
<i>KDU-ČSL</i>	3.2	2.1		6.2	5.2		4.9	4.5		6.8	5.8	
<i>TOP09</i>	7.6	2.7		6.7	2.1		26.6	15.8		12.0	5.3	
<i>Piráti</i>	2.4	8.4	14.3	2.1	8.7	10.3	2.9	16.6	25.9	2.7	10.8	15.7
<i>Stan</i>		4.3			3.2			7.0			5.2	
<i>ČSSD</i>	21.1	6.4	2.8	21.2	7.3	3.6	10.9	4.0	2.7	20.5	7.3	4.7
<b>KSČM</b>	<b>18.6</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>3.6</b>
<b>Úsvit/SPD</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>13.0</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>9.6</b>
Other	12.0	7.1	12.1	7.5	6.2	10.0	12.9	6.4	8.6	9.8	6.3	11.5
Turnout	50.9	52.1	57.0	50.6	51.4	55.2	71.0	73.0	77.5	59.5	60.8	65.4

Source: own research on the basis of data from the Czech statistical office

In the 2017 elections the *ANO* movement tailored its rhetoric to garner support from the dissatisfied, poorer part of the population, and was able to attract a significant portion of the left-wing voters of the *ČSSD* and *KSČM*. The result was not only an overall increase in electoral support, but also its spatial differentiation. Thus, in both disadvantaged regions, the support for *ANO* movement has risen well above the national average, while in Černošice it has fallen far below it. Support for left-wing populism embodied by *KSČM* and right-wing populism in the form of *SPD* remained spatially distributed similarly as in 2013 – i.e., above average in both disadvantaged regions.

In the elections of 2021, two strong coalition blocs, *SPOLU* (*ODS*, *TOP09*, and *KDU-ČSL*) and *Piráti* + *STAN*, have been formed with the aim of defeating the strong Babiš's movement *ANO*. Both of these coalitions, which have presented themselves as a democratic alternative to Babiš's populist rule, experienced significant support especially in the socio-economically privileged parts of the country – and therefore also in Černošice. On the contrary, in disadvantaged areas, represented here by Varnsdorf and Toužim, their gains have been relatively low and *ANO* movement was able to maintain a strong electoral hegemony there. Similar spatial differences can again be observed for *KSČM* (which, however, has weakened significantly overall) and for *SPD*.

The collapse of the socialist political and economic system in the GDR had grave consequences and led to increased regional inequalities between urban centers and rural peripheries in eastern Germany. In the GDR, mining and manufacturing sectors were more dominant in the southern part and large farms were more dominant in the northern part (RUDOLPH, 1990). Mining and manufacturing sectors were not competitive in the 1990s. Many companies closed or were downgraded. Efforts to restructure the industrial base and establish new industries, such as solar cells, bioenergy, and computer chips, had only partial success. The farms, a product of agricultural collectivization during socialist times, played a pivotal role in organizing cultural and social life in villages and rural communities. They provided housing and stable employment for a significant portion of the rural population. Following the collapse of the socialist state, these farms underwent

privatization, resulting in job losses, significant emigration from rural areas, and a drastic decline in the proportion of workers in the primary sector.

The municipality of Roßwein is an example for a rural small town (ca. 7 300 inhabitants) in the southern part of eastern Germany, in a region that had jobs both in agriculture and in diversified industries, primarily in metal processing and textiles, during GDR times. After 1990 many of those jobs were lost and high levels of unemployment prevailed for nearly two decades. The economic situation stabilized around 2009 but outmigration to urban centers nearby (Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz) is still an issue and is expected to influence the future social and demographic situation (STADT ROßWEIN, 2016). The municipality of Gerswalde is an example for a rural area shaped by agriculture. After the closure of the large state farm in the early 1990s many jobs were lost. However, after nearly two decades of transformation new and innovative enterprises in the agricultural, bio energy and economy sector (bio gas, wind energy etc.) emerged and the economic situation stabilized.

**Table 4** - Parliamentary election results in Germany (2013, 2017, 2021);  
**bold** – populist parties, underlined – partially populist parties managing the discontent

Party/ Committee	Roßwein			Gerswalde			Kleinmachnow			Germany		
	2013	2017	2021	2013	2017	2021	2013	2017	2021	2013	2017	2021
<i>CDU</i>	46.3	29.6	17.8	42.2	32.3	16.7	36.7	29.9	20.6	41.5*	33.0*	24.1*
<i>SPD</i>	12.4	10.4	19.3	21.1	15.4	27.6	23.2	17.4	23.2	25.7	20.5	25.7
<b><i>AfD</i></b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>27.9</b>	<b>28.8</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>10.3</b>
<i>FDP</i>	2.6	7.8	10.8	2.0	5.8	8.3	6.9	15.6	16.1	4.8	10.7	11.5
<i>Grüne</i>	3.2	2.6	3.8	4.4	6.7	8.1	12.9	14.3	23.4	8.4	8.9	14.8
<u><i>Linke</i></u>	<u>22.4</u>	<u>14.9</u>	<u>9.3</u>	<u>20.7</u>	<u>17.1</u>	<u>9.8</u>	<u>11.6</u>	<u>10.8</u>	<u>5.7</u>	<u>8.6</u>	<u>9.2</u>	<u>4.9</u>
<u><i>Freie Wähler</i></u>	<u>1.3</u>	<u>1.0</u>	<u>1.6</u>	<u>0.8</u>	<u>0.5</u>	<u>2.6</u>	<u>0.3</u>	<u>0.4</u>	<u>0.9</u>	<u>1.0</u>	<u>1.0</u>	<u>2.4</u>
Other	2.8	4.3	8.0	4.3	3.5	7,4	2,4	2.8	4.6	6.3	5.0	8.7
Turnout	67.1	71.9	73.9	57.9	57.7	52.0	87.2	89.2	89.7	71.5	76.2	76.6

Source: own calculations on the basis of The Federal Returning Officer, [www.bundeswahlleiterin.de](http://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de)

\*Results for *CDU* in Germany contain the results for the regional party *CSU* which only competes in the state of Bavaria, where *CDU* does not compete. In the national parliament *CDU* and *CSU* form a joint parliamentary group.

The political situation in these disadvantaged communities and the respective regions is not so clear cut (see TABLE 4). In Roßwein, after 1990, the right-center *CDU*, the party of chancellor Helmut Kohl who promised "blooming landscapes" for eastern Germany in the 1990s, dominated. In 1998, when discontent with the economic situation and disappointment with the ruling parties *CDU* and *FDP* was growing, main opposition party *SPD* but also *LINKE* and parties of the extreme right wing gained. The *LINKE* became the strongest party gathering disappointed voters and gained up to one quarter of the votes in the elections from 2005 to 2013. Yet, the center-right *CDU* regained voters' trust and nearly gained half of the votes in 2013. Only with the elections 2017 and 2021 the situation changed dramatically. Nearly all parties lost significant amounts of votes and only the right-wing populists of *AfD* gained and with over 27 percent were the strongest party in 2021. This was clearly a sign of distrust to the political mainstream parties that can be attributed to discontent with the immigration policy of *CDU* and *SPD* and the influx of asylum seekers after 2015.

In Gerswalde, the center-left *SPD* was the strongest party from 1990 to 2002, since then their position declined and only in the most recent elections of 2021, they gained voters again. Extreme right-wing parties were nearly insignificant and compared to Roßwein gained less percentage even in their strongest election results 1998. From the parties managing discontent the Left slowly gained

with a peak in 2009. As in Roßwein, the right-wing populist *AfD* gained in the elections of 2017 and 2021 but on a much lower level than in Roßwein, and *CDU* in 2017 and *SPD* in 2021 were still stronger. Remarkable in Gerswalde is the very low turnout, which hints at an alienation of citizens from the democratic system in general.

In contrast to disadvantaged and peripheral regions in eastern Germany some of the more urban or centralized areas have successfully transitioned to a service sector-oriented economy. Cities with universities and suburbs close to administrative centers, such as Kleinmachnow exemplify this recovery. Formerly separated by the Wall from the western part of Berlin, Kleinmachnow faced property ownership uncertainties post-Wall, taking up to two decades to resolve. With Berlin's economic and urban growth, the introduction of knowledge-intensive and service-oriented companies, and many new jobs in government and administration, demand for upscale residential areas grew and Kleinmachnow experienced a doubling of the number of inhabitants from 1990 to 2022, peaking recently. Notably, Kleinmachnow is characterized by a high proportion of detached and semi-detached houses and the market seems to be saturated by now. The new residents, largely from a liberal, urban background, shifted political dynamics. While the left, a protest party, gained considerable support initially, the political landscape now leans towards center-left *SPD*, center-right *CDU*, and notably, market liberal *FDP* and left ecological *Greens*. This contrasts with the disadvantaged regions' support for *AfD*, emphasizing Kleinmachnow's liberal and affluent demographic.

## Conclusions

The core of the debate on the relationship between spatial inequality and the geography of discontent is primarily concerned with the voting behavior of residents and social groups from regions "left behind". Research indicates that regional economic stagnation or decline is perceived by residents as a lack of opportunities for individual development and a threat to the community, resulting in a sense of injustice and being "left behind" (e.g., RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, 2018). A reflection of social discontent is the rise of number and popularity of populist parties. This connection between spatial inequality and the support for populist parties has been partially evidenced by our studies conducted in three Central European countries.

In both Germany and the Czech Republic, support for populist parties is well above average in the peripheralized regions studied, and unusually low in the dynamically developing places. This concerns both the right-wing authoritarian *AfD* in Germany, and the whole spectrum of populist parties in Czechia. However, the situation in Poland is somewhat different. Support for clearly populist parties in disadvantaged regions reaches similar levels as in the rich community we investigated. Yet, Polish electoral maps show that voting behavior has distinct spatial patterns. At their base, however, are political differences on the conservatism/liberalism axis.

For the debate on the geography in Central and Eastern Europe it is important to note that the difficulties associated with the economic transition and later with the deep socio-economic polarization seem to have created and may still create fertile ground for movements of political discontent. They take on different ideological faces, depending on the socio-cultural circumstances of individual regions and communities. There is no single political force that exploits voter discontent in lagging areas. Depending on the prevailing cultural and socio-economic conditions, these forces may be more right-wing, more left-wing or even rather centrist. However, the mechanism of the effects seems to differ in each country.

A plausible explanation for regional differences in electoral outcomes in the Czech Republic is the long-prevailing socio-economic cleavage of the Czech party system. Since the 1990s, this has been projected into stable regional electoral patterns, with richer regions voting more strongly for right-wing parties and poorer regions supporting left-wing parties. Emerging populist subjects retrieved huge parts of former left-wing electoral base and thus gained the strongest support in the poorer regions.

The case study municipalities in Germany share a common post-socialist past but they differ in terms of demographic and economic performance. The regions that are well-off in international comparison, but structurally less well-off in terms of the national comparison, feature higher election results of populists, while the better performing municipality has lower populist election results. This could indicate that the social transformation after reunification has taken place differently in rural regions of eastern Germany and its mark persists to varying degrees till today. The high election results of populists in the less well-performing regions could indicate that the local population compares own development with other German regions rather than with other eastern central European ones, thus feels relatively deprived and dissatisfied with the mainstream and governing parties.

For Poland there are hints that the current socio-economic situation seems to contain a rather less important regional factor for different patterns of voting behaviors and in turn also for support of populist parties. Here, the main division seems to be along the conservatism/liberalism axis which is supposed to be the dominant current cleavage of the Polish party system. This is also reflected in long-term path dependent spatial patterns that are deeply shaped by the legacy of the three partitions of Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as well as different regional levels of Catholicism (JAŃCZAK, 2015; KOWALSKI, 2002).

All in all, the examined patterns of socioeconomic, demographic and political developments partly support the theory of geographies of discontent. At the same time, differences in political attitudes as well as differences in perceptions of the spatial situation could also explain the variation in election results. For future research, it is therefore promising to combine both structural and individual attitude data for the further investigation of the support for populism as well as examining the rationalities of feelings of discontent in peripheralized rural areas with the help of qualitative methods.

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## Appendix

Political parties in the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland participating in the parliamentary elections

Acronym	Name of Party or Coalition	Authors proposal for classification*
<b>CZECHIA</b>		
<b>ANO</b>	<b>Akce nespokojených občanů (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens)</b>	<b>Populist</b>
ČSSD	Česká strana sociálně demokratická (Czech Social Democratic Party)	Centre-left
DSSS	Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti (Workers' Party of Social Justice)	Far right
KDU-ČSL	Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová (Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party)	Centre
<b>KSČM</b>	<b>Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia)</b>	<b>Far left, Populist</b>
ODS	Občanská demokratická strana (Civic democratic party)	Centre right
<b>SPD</b>	<b>Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Freedom and Direct Democracy)</b>	<b>Far right, Populist</b>
SPR-RSČ	Sdružení pro republiku - Republikánská strana Československa (Association for the Republic-Republican Party of Czechoslovakia)	<b>Far right, Populist</b>
STAN	Starostové a nezávislí (Mayors and Independents)	Centre
TOP09	Tradice, Odpovědnost, Prosperita (Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity)	Centre right
<b>Úsvit</b>	<b>Úsvit přímé demokracie (Dawn of Direct Democracy)</b>	<b>Far right, Populist</b>
<b>Věci veřejné</b>	<b>Věci veřejné (Public Affairs)</b>	<b>Centre, Populist</b>
<b>Přísaha</b>	<b>Oath, founded in 2021 by Robert Šlachta</b>	<b>Centre, Populist</b>
<b>Svobodní</b>	<b>Freedomites, formerly known as the Party of Free Citizens, SSO</b>	<b>Centre right, Populist</b>

Volný Blok	Free Bloc, VB; formerly known as Czech Sovereignty	Centre, Populist
<b>GERMANY</b>		
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)	Far-right, populist
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)	Centre-right
CSU	Christlich Soziale Union (Christian Social Union) – CSU is a regional party which only competes in the state of Bavaria, where CDU does not compete. In the national parliament CDU and CSU form a joint parliamentary group	Centre-right
NPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany) – renamed Die Heimat (The Homeland) in 2023	Far-right, populist
Die Linke	Die Linke (The Left) – successor to PDS	Far left
Die Republikaner	Die Republikaner (The Republicans)	Far-right, populist
DVU	Deutsche Volkunion (German People’s Union)	Far-right, populist
FDP	Freiheitlich Demokratische Partei (Liberal Democratic Party)	Centre-right
Freie Wähler	Freie Wähler (Free Voters)	Right wing, populist
Grüne	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens)	Centre-left
PDS	Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (Party of Democratic Socialism) – successor to SED	Far left, populist
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)	State socialist party
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)	Centre left
<b>POLAND</b>		
KO	Koalicja Obywatelska (Civic Coalition) - consisting primarily of PO, Nowoczesna and other several minor parties	Centre
Konfederacja	Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (Confederation Freedom and Independence)	Far-right, populist
Kukiz 15	Kukiz 15	Centre-right, populist
LPR	Liga Polskich Rodzin (League of Polish Families)	Far-right, populist
NL	Nowa Lewica (New Left)	Far left
Nowoczesna	Nowoczesna (Modern) – part of KO	Centre, Centre-left
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice Party)	Centre-right
PJN	Polska Jest Najważniejsza (Poland Comes First)	Centre-right
PO	Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform)	Centre
Polska 2050	Polska 2050 (Poland 2050)	Centre or Centre-right
PPP	Polska Partia Pracy (Polish Labour Party)	Far left, populist
Prawica	Prawica (Right-wing)	Far-right
PSL	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish People’s Party)	Centre or Centre-right
Razem	Lewica Razem (Left Together)	Far left, populist
Ruch Palikota	Ruch Palikota (Palikot Movement)	Centre-left, Populist
Samobrona	Samobrona (Self-defense Party)	Centre, Populist
SLD	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (Democratic Left Alliance) – from 2021 Nowa Lewica	Centre-left or Far left
UPR	Unia Polityki Realnej (Real Politics Union)	Far-right, populist

\*Identification of populist parties based partly on The PopuList, <https://popu-list.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-PopuList-3.0-short-version.pdf>, see also: <https://popu-list.org/>