

## WORKING PAPERS OF TIPERICO PROJECT

Corresponding author: Czesław Adamiak [czeslaw.adamiak@umk.pl](mailto:czeslaw.adamiak@umk.pl)

# PLACES THAT MATTER AND PLACES THAT DON'T: TERRITORIAL REVENGE AND COUNTER-REVENGE IN POLAND



02/2024

*Adamiak C., Rodríguez-Pose A., Churski P., Dubownik A., Pietrzykowski M., Szyda B., Rosik P., 2024. PLACES THAT MATTER AND PLACES THAT DON'T: TERRITORIAL REVENGE AND COUNTER-REVENGE IN POLAND – Working Paper of TIPERICO Project. Faculty of Human Geography and Planning, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.13413.61926*

Czesław Adamiak,  
Andrés Rodríguez-Pose,  
Paweł Churski,  
Anna Dubownik,  
Maciej Pietrzykowski,  
Barbara Szyda,  
Piotr Rosik

**ABSTRACT:** Poland presents a compelling case study in the rise of right-wing populism. In 2023, after eight years at the helm, the anti-elitist and Eurosceptic PiS party lost the parliamentary elections. This paper explores the geography of this political shift, analysing election results from 2011 to 2023 against the backdrop of regional socio-economic divide. Our findings reveal that PiS's support base expanded in areas marked by multidimensional peripherality, while its recent loss is primarily attributed to the political mobilisation of prosperous core areas. The study underscores the perpetuation of territorial disparities, highlighting the challenges of the growing geographic political polarisation.

**KEYWORDS:** political geography; electoral geography; regional development; core-periphery pattern; right-wing populism; Europe; Poland

**Czesław Adamiak** – Faculty of Earth Sciences and Spatial Management, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, ul. Lwowska 1, 87-100 Toruń, Poland, [czeslaw.adamiak@umk.pl](mailto:czeslaw.adamiak@umk.pl), ORCID 0000-0003- 3307-5079

**Andrés Rodríguez-Pose** – Cañada Blanch Centre and Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK, [a.rodriguez-pose@lse.ac.uk](mailto:a.rodriguez-pose@lse.ac.uk), ORCID: 0000-0002-8041-0856

**Paweł Churski** - Faculty of Human Geography and Planning, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, ul. Krygowskiego 10, 61-680 Poznań, Poland, [chur@amu.edu.pl](mailto:chur@amu.edu.pl), ORCID: 0000-0002-4152- 1211

**Anna Dubownik** - Faculty of Earth Sciences and Spatial Management, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, ul. Lwowska 1, 87-100 Toruń, Poland, [a\\_dubownik@umk.pl](mailto:a_dubownik@umk.pl), ORCID 0000-0003-0313- 7961

**Maciej Pietrzykowski** - Department of International Competitiveness, Poznan University of Economics and Business, Al. Niepodległości 10, 61-875 Poznań, [maciej.pietrzykowski@ue.poznan.pl](mailto:maciej.pietrzykowski@ue.poznan.pl), ORCID 0000-24 0003-0802-6371

**Barbara Szyda** - Faculty of Earth Sciences and Spatial Management, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, ul. Lwowska 1, 87-100 Toruń, Poland, [bszyda@umk.pl](mailto:bszyda@umk.pl), ORCID 0000-0002-9221-6284

**Piotr Rosik** – Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, ul. Twarda 51/55, 00-818 Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: [rosik@twarda.pan.pl](mailto:rosik@twarda.pan.pl), ORCID 0000-0002-5317-4376

## 1. Introduction

Poland is often considered as a quintessential example of populism driven more by cultural dynamics than economic factors (Engler et al., 2019; Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016; Jasiewicz, 2009). From an external perspective, the country, which braved the 2007–2008 financial crisis with remarkable resilience and has seen consistent economic growth, made a surprising political shift in 2015. It elected the Eurosceptic Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), known for its cultural war rhetoric, seemingly contradicting research that emphasises economic decline as a primary source of discontent and supporting theories that pitch traditional views against progressive, cosmopolitan ones (Abreu & Öner, 2020; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Joppke, 2021).

This paper challenges this narrative. We argue that economic factors, especially the perceived economic divide between urban cores and more rural peripheries, are key in understanding Poland's gravitation towards populism. Later, we demonstrate how the PiS's recent fall from power reflects ongoing disparities between prosperous cores and struggling peripheries, which face reduced access to economic resources. This situation poses significant challenges to liberal politics in these disadvantaged regions.

Our analysis delves into Poland's journey through the rise of right-wing populism, a trend increasingly prominent in Western countries since the early 21st century. The PiS's unexpected triumph in the 2015 elections, with its anti-elitist, pro-social, and Eurosceptic stance, came as a surprise, given Poland's economic strength and political stability. The nation had outperformed other European countries economically, weathered the global financial crisis effectively (Adamowicz & Adamowicz, 2019; Filippov & Kalotay, 2011; Gorynia et al., 2018; Nijkamp, 2022), and witnessed its former Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, become the President of the European Council. All these factors pointed to an

increasing standing of the country in the European Union (EU) a mere decade after joining.

A closer examination of Poland's socio-political spectrum reveals that the roots of this populist surge stem from inequalities created by economic and socio-cultural transformations in the decades since the fall of communism. The rise of PiS is part of a larger trend that opposes 'double liberalism'—a blend of economic neoliberalism and social multiculturalism (Joppke, 2021). This trend has propelled figures like Donald Trump to power in the USA, led to Brexit, and fuelled extreme right-wing movements across Europe, weakening the traditional left-right political cleavage in favour of an open-closed one (The Economist, 2017). Geographically, populist support is strongest in the country's peripheries – areas disconnected from the dynamic growth of city centres, both physically and relationally, a phenomenon which has been dubbed 'the revenge of places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023a; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Kemeny and Storper, 2020; Rodrik, 2021; Pike et al., 2023). In Poland, the divide between PiS and other political parties follows a clear core-periphery pattern, which intersects with historical socio-cultural factors like ethnic composition, migration history, varieties of social capital, and the influence of the Catholic Church (Zarycki, 2015).

After securing a second term in 2019 with record-high support in Polish democratic history, PiS led a government that, despite pushing pro-social economic policies, faced and provoked constant conflict. Its frequent conflicts with EU institutions, anti-immigration propaganda, quasi-authoritarian media control, and use of state power against the opposition, contributed to it losing power in the 2023 elections. It garnered fewer votes than the broad opposition coalition, raising questions about the geographical

dimensions of this political shift. The 2023 Polish elections, marked by a historically high turnout (74.3%), require an analysis of voter mobilisation and shifts in political support.

To understand how cultural and economic divides have influenced this shift in power, we investigate the geographical dynamics of changes in political support. We aim to identify the geographic determinants of shifting political support during PiS's rise and tenure, spanning four parliamentary elections (2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023). We correlate election results at the local level with various factors, including cultural characteristics and measures of socio-economic centrality and peripherality, applying the synthetic core-periphery classification of Polish areas (Churski et al., 2024). Through regression models, we trace the evolving significance of geographic factors in political support, arguing for the increasing impact of core-periphery factors in creating spatial divergences over time.

## **2. The Politics and the Core-Periphery Divides**

Development inequalities in core-periphery systems are a staple feature of economic spaces, originating from the uneven distribution of resources and the impact of agglomeration economies (Duranton & Puga, 2004; Marshall, 1890; Porter, 1990). These disparities result in geographical socio-economic development differences, significantly affecting living conditions. The extent of these inequalities has intensified under the influence of neoliberal globalisation (Essletzbichler, 2018; Gordon, 2018; Horner et al., 2018; Rodrik, 2018, 2021). While inherent in modern capitalism (Harvey, 2016; Amin, 2004), persistent and escalating inequalities, especially at the subregional and local levels, are often perceived as a form of territorial injustice that is not socially acceptable (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020; McKay et al., 2022, 2023). Contemporary

economic geography acknowledges that development polarisation within core-periphery systems does not necessarily equate to the marginalisation of areas outside the influence of growth poles (Rosés and Wolf, 2021; Churski et al., 2021a), suggesting that attaining territorial justice is achievable (Soja, 2010). However, this requires targeted programming and the implementation of development interventions.

The concept of 'peripheries' is central to understanding spatial inequalities within socio-economic development. Defining 'peripherality' is challenging (Capello, 2022). Traditionally, peripherality refers to remote areas, often along national borders, developing slowly due to limited spatial access to growth centres. These peripheries often face economic marginalisation (Boschma, 2005). However, recent perspectives emphasise that geographical proximity is just one of the various forms of closeness, including non-spatial or institutional aspects such as social interaction and trust (Gregory, 1994; Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1996), shared knowledge and information (Copus, 2001; Copus et al., 2017), or institutional or governance structures (Torre & Rallet, 2005). Peripheries, defined by this broader understanding, are characterized by dormant or lost development potentials due to social or economic factors, including limited transport accessibility, narrow functional links, and difficulty in establishing them permanently. They typically exhibit low functional effectiveness of the territorial socio-economic system, restricted access to public goods and services, and consequently, reduced quality of life (well-being).

Recent crises have underscored the importance of peripheries, highlighting the stark development contrasts between Western and Eastern Europe and the disparities between economic growth centres and lagging areas. The growing frequency and depth of crises have magnified social resistance to widening development differences. Post-2008 financial crisis, 'left-behind' places have become a central theme in inequality

geography (Pike et al., 2023), identifying areas unable to adapt to new development conditions and sinking into deeper recession (Görmar et al., 2019; Hendrickson et al., 2018). The issues within these areas, stemming from their disconnection from growth poles (Kemeny & Storper, 2020), extend beyond economic underdevelopment to include disparities in service access (Martinelli et al., 2017) and meeting inhabitants' basic needs (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023a). This challenges the principle of territorial justice (Davies, 1968; Pirie, 1983; Rauhut, 2017; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009; Soja, 2010) and conflicts with sustainable development and cohesion policy goals, which focus on creating conditions for development convergence (Madanipour et al., 2021).

Social discontent due to territorial development disparities is evident globally in patterns of election behaviour (Zagórski et al., 2017) and shifts in political trust and preferences (McKay et al., 2023). Populations in economically disadvantaged areas with poor access to public services are more inclined towards pro-solidarity arguments and expanded public aid. Living below average standards leads to frustration and a shift away from incumbents towards alternatives in elections, a trend often seen in geographically and socio-economically peripheral areas. Growing development differences fuel social discontent and populist tendencies, further amplified by massive migration movements (Mitsch & Morrow, 2021; Rooduijn et al., 2021; Stroppe, 2023; Urso et al., 2023). The frequent consequence is the polarisation of both territorial development differences and political views (Storper, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023b). The Economist (2016) underscored this political danger, noting that 'regional inequality is proving too politically dangerous to ignore.' The rising importance of populist movements and their support concentration in peripheries, as evidenced in various elections, such as the 2016 Austrian presidential election (Essletzbichler, 2018), Brexit (Goodwin et al., 2016; Gordon, 2018;

Harris & Charlton, 2016; Los, 2017), the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; McCarty et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2021), and the 2017 German election (Dorn et al., 2017) has deep roots in regional polarisation. This phenomenon is epitomised in Rodríguez-Pose's (2018) concept of 'the revenge of the places that don't matter': a radical response at the ballot box to the consequences of socio-economic polarisation and ineffective development interventions.

In Poland, recent election results follow core-periphery patterns: urban cores have traditionally voted for economically liberal and culturally left-wing or centrist parties. Rural peripheries and smaller towns opt for pro-social and culturally conservative parties (Kowalski, 2000; Zarycki, 2015). In recent decades, the latter ideological perspective has been dominated by PiS, the Polish representative of the right-wing populist spectrum of European politics (Engler et al., 2019; Vaughan & Heft, 2023; Wike et al., 2022). However, this territorial political division overlaps with historical and cultural divides. Visible socio-cultural borders within Poland were shaped between 1795 and 1918 when the country was partitioned between three neighbouring empires (Churski et al., 2021b; Krzemiński, 2009; Raciborski, 1997), and after World War II, when Poland's political borders shifted, leading to massive forced migrations, including the expulsion of Germans and repatriation of Poles from territories annexed by the Soviet Union (Kowalski, 2000, 2015). Additional cultural factors include the varied presence of ethnic and religious minorities in a predominantly homogenous Polish society. Long-established national and religious minorities show lower support for conservative right-wing politics (Kowalski, 2000). Overlaying these historical and cultural zones is an urban-rural divide, with cities typically leaning towards left-wing and economically liberal views and rural areas favouring social conservatism (Herodowicz et al., 2021; Marcinkiewicz, 2018). The debate

over the influence of cultural versus economic factors in shaping political preferences continues (Herodowicz et al., 2021; Marcinkiewicz, 2018; Rykiel, 2011; Tworzecki, 2019; Zarycki, 2015).

### **3. The Rise of the Right-Wing Populism in Poland**

Poland's transition from an authoritarian communist regime to a democratic system started with the 1989 Round Table Agreements, igniting non-violent revolutions across the socialist bloc. Until 2005, Polish politics featured parties emerging from the former communist tradition and the Solidarity social movement. This party system was structured around cultural (traditionalist vs. progressive), economic (protectionist vs. free-market), and post-communist (defending vs. disregarding the communist heritage) cleavages (Grabowska, 2003; Kowalski, 2000). Despite their differences, these parties shared a commitment to democratic and meritocratic state institutions, a pro-Western stance, aspirations for EU integration, and a belief in the necessity of free-market reforms. However, the idealistic embrace of free-market ideals (Tomczak, 2023) and hasty economic reforms led to the collapse of entire economic sectors, a rapid rise in unemployment, an increase in international economic dependency, and the marginalisation of populations and regions. This resulted in widespread social discontent, political fragmentation, and a succession of short-lived governments (Herodowicz et al., 2021).

The dawn of the 21st century marked a significant reorientation and stabilisation of the Polish political scene. Disillusionment with both post-communist and post-Solidarity governments gave rise to new parties, farmers' Self-Defence and the nationalistic League of Polish Families, which garnered significant support and paved the way for



contemporary populism in Polish politics. This wave of populism was characterised by anti-elitist rhetoric and a denial of the successes of post-communist transformation (Moroska and Zuba, 2010). The new parties managed to gather support from voters sceptic or hostile towards European integration, a group previously unrepresented by legacy parties (Markowski and Tucker, 2010), thus joining the trend of the creation of new Eurosceptic parties across Europe (Hooghe and Marks, 2018).

Meanwhile, the current two main parties, the Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS)—both descendants of the Solidarity movement and initially espousing centre-right ideologies—began to dominate the parliamentary scene (Matykowski et al., 2011). Post-2005, despite initial intentions to form a joint government, PO and PiS became political adversaries. PiS formed a coalition government with Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families, but after the 2007 snap elections, power shifted to PO, which ruled for eight years in coalition with the centrist Polish People's Party (PSL). During PO's governance, PiS emerged as the primary opposition, with the political distance between the two parties continuing to expand (Antoszewski, 2008).

The political scene was increasingly characterised by the polarisation between the liberal (GAL<sup>1</sup>), market-oriented, and Euro-enthusiastic PO, on the one hand, and the culturally conservative (TAN<sup>2</sup>), economically interventionist, and Eurosceptic PiS, on the other (Zarycki, 2015). PiS adopted typical right-wing populist themes, such as anti-elitism, promotion of a strong nation-state, Euroscepticism (framed as opposition to the 'federalisation' of the EU), anti-immigration and anti-Islamic rhetoric, opposition to LGBTQ rights and gender education, disapproval of green transformation, collective

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<sup>1</sup> Green-Alternative-Libertarian in the Hooghe's et al., 2002, dichotomy.

<sup>2</sup> Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist in the Hooghe's et al., 2002, dichotomy.

narcissism and xenophobia, and propagating conspiracy theories, particularly regarding the 2010 Smolensk plane crash<sup>3</sup> (Brubaker, 2017; Engler et al., 2019; Golec de Zavala, 2020; Stanley, 2019; Szelewa, 2021; Yatsyk, 2020). A unique aspect in Poland was PiS's close association with conservative Catholic Church officials, leading to a political appropriation of the country's dominant religion (Chrostowski, 2023).

In the 2015 parliamentary elections, PiS achieved an absolute majority, a first for a democratic party in Poland. This outcome, unexpected to some observers given Poland's apparent stability and prosperity, was underpinned by economic inequalities, perceptions of uneven prosperity distribution, and still noticeable development gap between Poland and the most affluent countries of Western Europe (Kotnarowski and Markowski, 2014). It was a sort of 'revenge of the Polish places that don't matter'. Additionally, PiS used the 2015 European refugee crisis to stir Islamophobia, despite the negligible presence of Muslim populations in Poland (Pickel and Öztürk, 2018). Their combination of economic, cultural, and populist arguments led to electoral success. During their first four-year term, PiS oversaw continued economic growth, implemented pro-social reforms such as the '500+' child allowance and increased the minimum wage, visibly reducing poverty rates (Brzeziński & Sałach, 2023). Despite holding power, they managed to maintain the anti-elitist identity, largely by targeting supra-national, including European, elites (Vaughan & Heft, 2023), and benefitted from overt pro-government propaganda in state media. These factors led them to a second victory in

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<sup>3</sup> A crash of Polish presidential aircraft during a landing attempt at the Smoleńsk airport in Russia, resulting in the death of all 96 passengers and crewmembers, including president Lech Kaczyński, brother of PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński. According to investigations, a controlled flight into terrain was caused by pilot error in adverse weather conditions. However, some PiS politicians claim the crash was intentionally caused by Russians, possibly in cooperation with the PO-led Polish government, as an act of political assassination.

2019 despite anti-democratic institutional changes, conflicts with the EU, and urban protests (Tomczak, 2023).

In the most recent parliamentary elections on 15th October 2023, we have witnessed a ‘counter-revenge of the places that matter’. The opposition coalition—including the PO-led Citizens Coalition, the Left coalition, and the centrist Third Way coalition—secured the majority of votes and subsequently formed a new government. Commentators believe PiS’s election loss resulted from internal party conflicts, mistakes in political communication, resistance to PiS policy, external shocks, and an ill-targeted, antagonizing electoral campaign (Gałczyńska, 2023; Musiałek, 2023). For example, the judicial reform, which politicised the judiciary, sparked conflicts between the government and both the judicial system in Poland and the European Commission, raising fears of PiS’s intentions to lead Poland out of the EU. A poorly communicated tax reform, aimed at post-pandemic economic recovery, alienated entrepreneurs and local governments (Hajdys, 2021; UMP, 2021), while tightening of abortion laws led to widespread protests in Polish cities. External factors contributing to PiS’s fall include the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While the pandemic and associated lockdowns did not significantly harm the overall economy, they impacted certain sectors, such as accommodation and catering (Orzeszak, 2022). The pandemic also initiated a wave of high inflation, exacerbated by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, which led to soaring energy prices. The dissatisfaction with the government management of the pandemic crisis and the war in Ukraine (and subsequent refugee influx; Duszczyk et al., 2023) could strongly affect the election results.

Our study explores the geographic dynamics of electoral support, focusing on the right-wing populism represented by PiS. While aware of the importance of cultural

differences affecting election results, we focus on the differences across the multidimensional centre-periphery scale to explain the political divisions. We introduce two hypotheses on the general support pattern: that (H1a) after controlling for cultural differences, electoral support for the right-wing populist party (PiS) is higher in areas characterised by multidimensional peripherality, and that (H1b) after controlling for cultural differences, electoral support for parties opposing the right-wing populism party is higher in areas characterised by multidimensional centrality. We further suppose the political polarisation between core areas and peripheries in Poland has grown in recent years. To verify it, we formulate further pair of hypotheses that (H2a) after controlling for cultural geographic differences, over the recent four parliamentary elections, electoral support for the right-wing populist party (PiS) has grown in areas characterised by multidimensional peripherality and (H2b) after controlling for cultural geographic differences, over the recent four parliamentary elections, electoral support for parties opposing the right-wing populism party has grown in areas characterised by multidimensional centrality.

## **4. Data and Methods**

### ***4.1. Data on election results***

The Polish political system operates within a mixed presidential-parliamentary framework, with the parliament holding a dominant role. Alongside legislative responsibilities, the parliament is also tasked with endorsing the government. Our analysis therefore focuses on parliamentary election results to the *Sejm* (the lower chamber) as a measure of political support. In this context, our attention is centred on right-wing populism, specifically the support for PiS, its close allies, and non-party

members who collaborate in parliament. Other parties in the Sejm represent a range of political viewpoints. However, they uniformly critique PiS's populist and authoritarian tendencies. For our analytical purposes, we collectively consider these as opposing political blocs.

A significant aspect of recent parliamentary elections is the unprecedented voter turnout. Historically, Poland experienced low electoral engagement, with a notable peak of 62.7% turnout in 1989 during the first partially free elections. Subsequent interest in elections remained relatively muted, often involving less than half of eligible voters. However, under the PiS administration, voter turnout markedly increased to 61.7% in 2019 and reached a record high of 74.4% in 2023. Given this dramatic change, a comparison of voter ratios, while indicative of shifts in legislative power, offers limited insight into the nuances of voter flows and changing attitudes. Consequently, we calculated support ratios relative to the entire voter base, categorising eligible citizens into three groups: those voting for PiS, those voting for other parties or coalitions, and non-participants (either through abstention or invalid votes).

The election results data is sourced from the National Electoral Office's web service (Polish Parliamentary Elections, 2023). For compatibility with socio-economic data, we utilised data aggregated at the level of 2,477 communes (gmina), the smallest administrative division in Poland. Votes in a specific commune may not necessarily reflect the choices of its residents, as voters can cast their votes outside their residence using a certificate (they are then counted in the district of voting, not in the district of residence). This practice, prevalent among tourists or temporary residents, can significantly influence turnout and voting results, particularly in urban and touristic areas of the country. In our analysis, the percentage of certificate-using voters was accounted for in

our regression models. However, votes cast by Polish nationals abroad were excluded, as they do not correspond to any specific administrative unit.

#### ***4.2. Core-periphery factor***

To examine the differences and dynamics in voter behaviour across various locations within the core-periphery spectrum, we employ a comprehensive classification of cores and peripheries as described by Churski et al. (2024). Initially, communes were grouped into functional urban areas (FUAs) (Churski et al., 2023), each consisting of between 2 and 92 communes, linked by proximity, work commuting, and migration ties. Then, the identified FUAs were subject to the typology procedure by analysing the range of socio-economic diversity. For this purpose, 47 indicators from various sources were used, encompassing nine dimensions (accessibility, economy, finances, demographics, housing, health and security, education, leisure and social activity, and ecosystem services) crucial for understanding internal peripherality (Churski et al., 2024). The outcome of this typological procedure led to the distinction of three categories of areas: cores, intermediate areas, and peripheries (Figure 1). In the results section, we analyse the election results within these three groups of areas to explore their characteristic patterns of electoral behaviour. Apart from the composite classification, we add the absolute population of a commune to the regression model. This variable indicates its level of urbanisation and identifies the central and peripheral communes within the specific functional urban area.

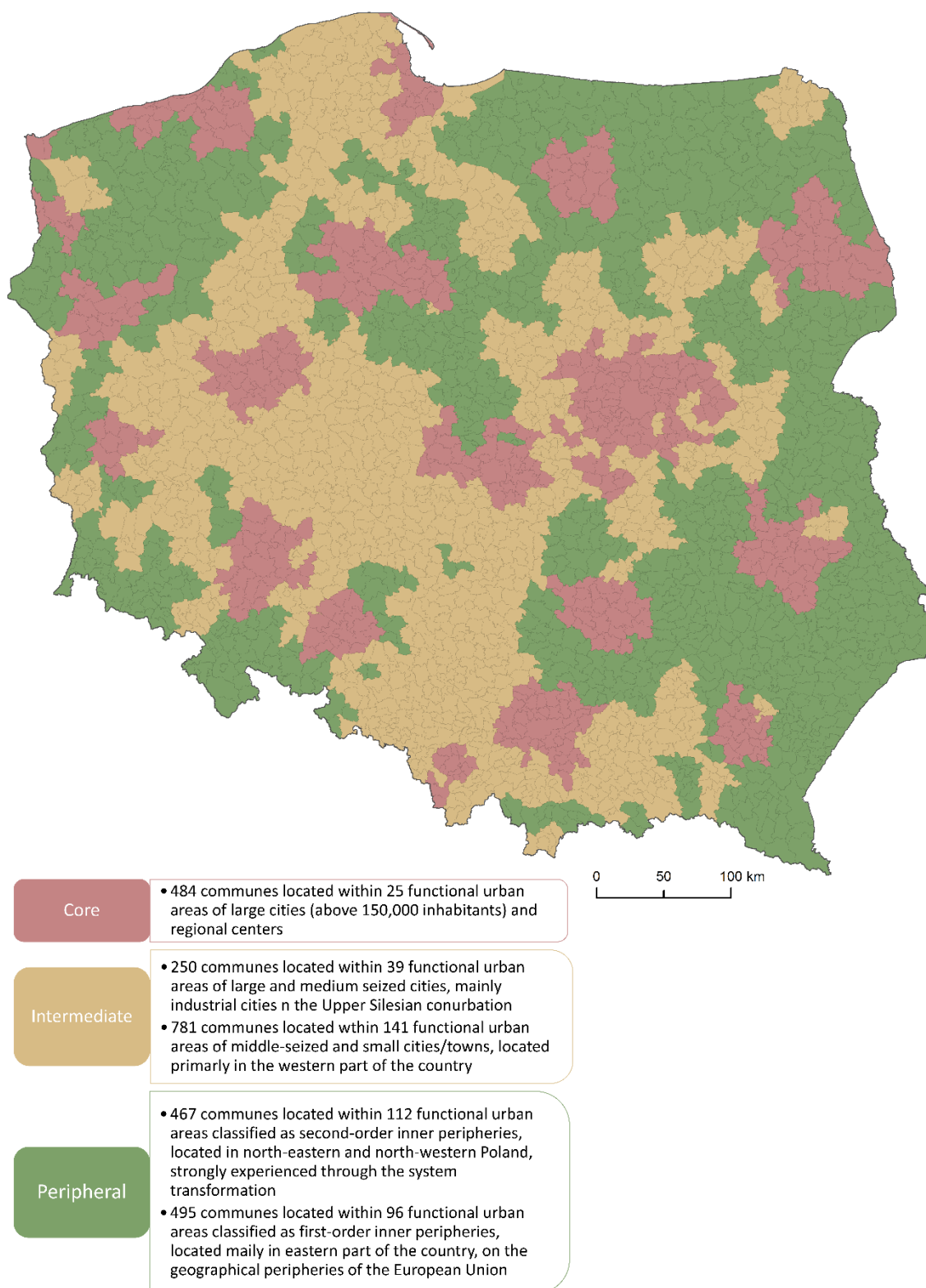


Figure 1. Core/periphery classification of communes (based on Churski et al., 2024)



#### **4.3. Variables explaining the cultural factors**

In terms of cultural characteristics, we include three continuous variables indicative of a commune's ethnic and religious structure, based on the assumption that support for right-wing parties typically correlates with the cultural uniformity of the social structure. These variables derive from national censuses in 2011 and 2021, with extrapolations for interim years. The first variable represents the presence of national minorities and strong specific regional identities in the commune: it calculates the proportion of the population not declaring Polish as one of their two ethnic identities in the census (1.6% across Poland in 2011, 1.1% in 2021). This figure, however, does not encompass foreigners who are temporary residents, even those residing for more than a year. They were included in the second factor, calculating the percentage of actual permanent residents (residing for at least one year) born outside Poland (1.8% in 2011, 2.5% in 2021). This figure still excludes temporary migrants and does not account for the significant influx of temporary migrants as refugees following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Another factor considered was the non-declaration of affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church (28.7% in Poland in 2021, up from 12.4% in 2011).

#### **4.4. Current issue factors**

Anti-incumbent political dynamics can reduce electoral support for the ruling parties. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian full-scale invasion on Ukraine were the most critical crises that the Polish government had to manage. While most impacts on the economy and the perception of security affected the entire country, some may have had a particular impact on specific areas. We tried to measure this impact using two current issue variables. First, we estimate the excess mortality during the



COVID-19 pandemic by comparing the numbers during the pandemic's three years with the preceding years. Second, we consider the number of Ukrainian refugees (Ukrainian nationals receiving "UKR" status in the population register according to special regulations introduced after the start of the war in Ukraine) per capita as a measure of the local severity of the effects of the Ukrainian crisis.

All variables utilised in the analysis are detailed in Table 1, while further information on data sources and summary statistics can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1. Variables used in the analysis

Variable name	Variable description
<b>Dependent variables</b>	
PIS	Share of eligible voters choosing PiS (%)
OTHERS	Share of eligible voters choosing parties other than PIS (%)
NONVOTERS	Share of eligible voters not participating in elections or giving invalid vote (%)
<b>Core-periphery factor</b>	
GROUP	(Categorical variable): Core Intermediate (ref. value) Periphery
POP	Permanent registered population
<b>Cultural factors</b>	
NONPOLIDENT	Share of permanent residents who declared national identity other than Polish (%)
NONPOLBORN	Share of residents (for at least 1 year) born outside of Poland (%)
NONCATHOLIC	Share of population not declaring participation in Roman Catholic Church (%)
<b>Current issue factors</b>	
EXCESSMORT	Rate of deaths in 2020–2022 compared to 2017–2019
REFUGEES	Number of applications for UKR foreigner status per thousand inhabitants
<b>Controlling variable</b>	
CERTIFICATES	Voters from other communes, taking part in election based on certificate as a ratio of local voters (%)

#### 4.5. Correlation and regression analysis

Our approach to analysing election results involves a three-step procedure. Initially, we examine choropleth maps of the results and aggregated outcomes for areas in three categories of the core-periphery classification. Subsequently, we assess the bivariate correlations between results and individual indicators using Pearson correlation

coefficients and graphic representations. The final step involves building regression models to ascertain the correlation between individual factors while controlling for all others. The construction of these models, incorporating interactions between time and individual factors, allows us to assess the significance of factors and observe changes in their impacts over time. For correlation and regression analysis, we transform the right-skewed distribution of all numeric explanatory variables into a distribution closer to normal using decimal logarithms, thereby reducing the disproportionate influence of communes with high values on the results.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Election results in 2011–2023

Figure 2 illustrates the change in election results across 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023. The first elections within our analysis saw the second consecutive win for the PO party, which garnered 39.2% of valid votes and subsequently formed a government in coalition with PSL. PiS, meanwhile, came in second with 29.9% of the votes. Due to rising support for PiS and declining trust in the PO-PSL government, in the 2015 elections, PiS achieved first place with 37.6% of the votes (with PO trailing at 24.1%). Thanks to the D'Hondt apportionment method favouring large parties and several parties not attaining the electoral threshold, PiS secured a majority in the *Sejm* after this election. In the 2019 elections, it even increased its share of the vote to 43.6%, maintaining its majority in the *Sejm*. However, in the most recent election, there was a slight decrease in PiS votes, coupled with a substantial increase in votes for opposition parties. Despite leading with 35.4%, PiS lost its *Sejm* majority, ceding power to a coalition of formerly opposition parties. A notable trend is the overall increase in election turnout during this period: from

48.9% in 2011 to 74.4% in 2023. This indicates that the share of those who abstained—who were the dominant political group in 2011—almost halved twelve years later. Moreover, the number of non-PiS supporters grew even during PiS’s peak success in 2019, while the absolute support for PiS only slightly reduced in 2023.

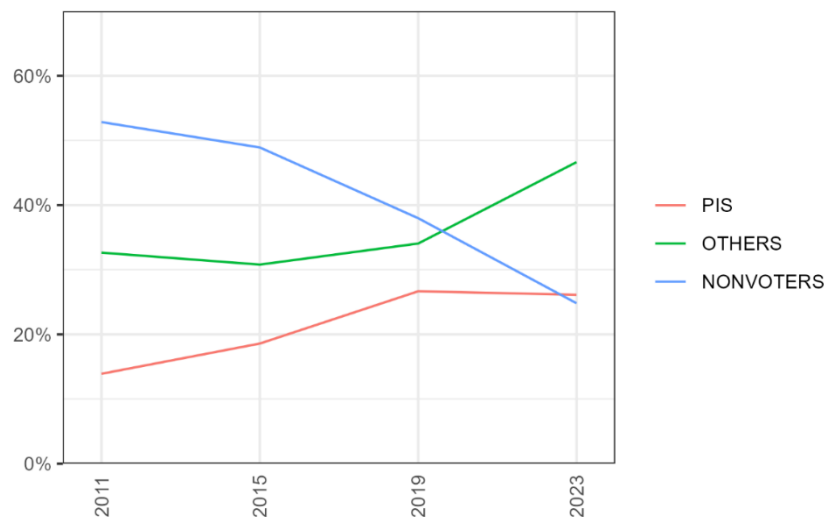


Figure 2. Results of *Sejm* elections 2011–2023 (100% – all eligible voters)

The maps presenting the results highlight the territorial disparities and dynamics in election outcomes (Figure 3). Firstly, the stable increase in election turnout has boosted results for both PiS and non-PiS voters. Major cities and suburban zones consistently exhibit high electoral participation. Furthermore, systematic and relatively constant geographic differences are evident between PiS and non-PiS support. The cartographic presentation reveals both core-periphery patterns, with core cities like Warsaw, Poznań, Gdańsk, and Katowice showing higher results for parties other than PiS, and historic patterns, with an east-west gradient and discernible traces of historical borders. Certain border areas, populated by national minorities, emerge as notable centres of non-PiS support.

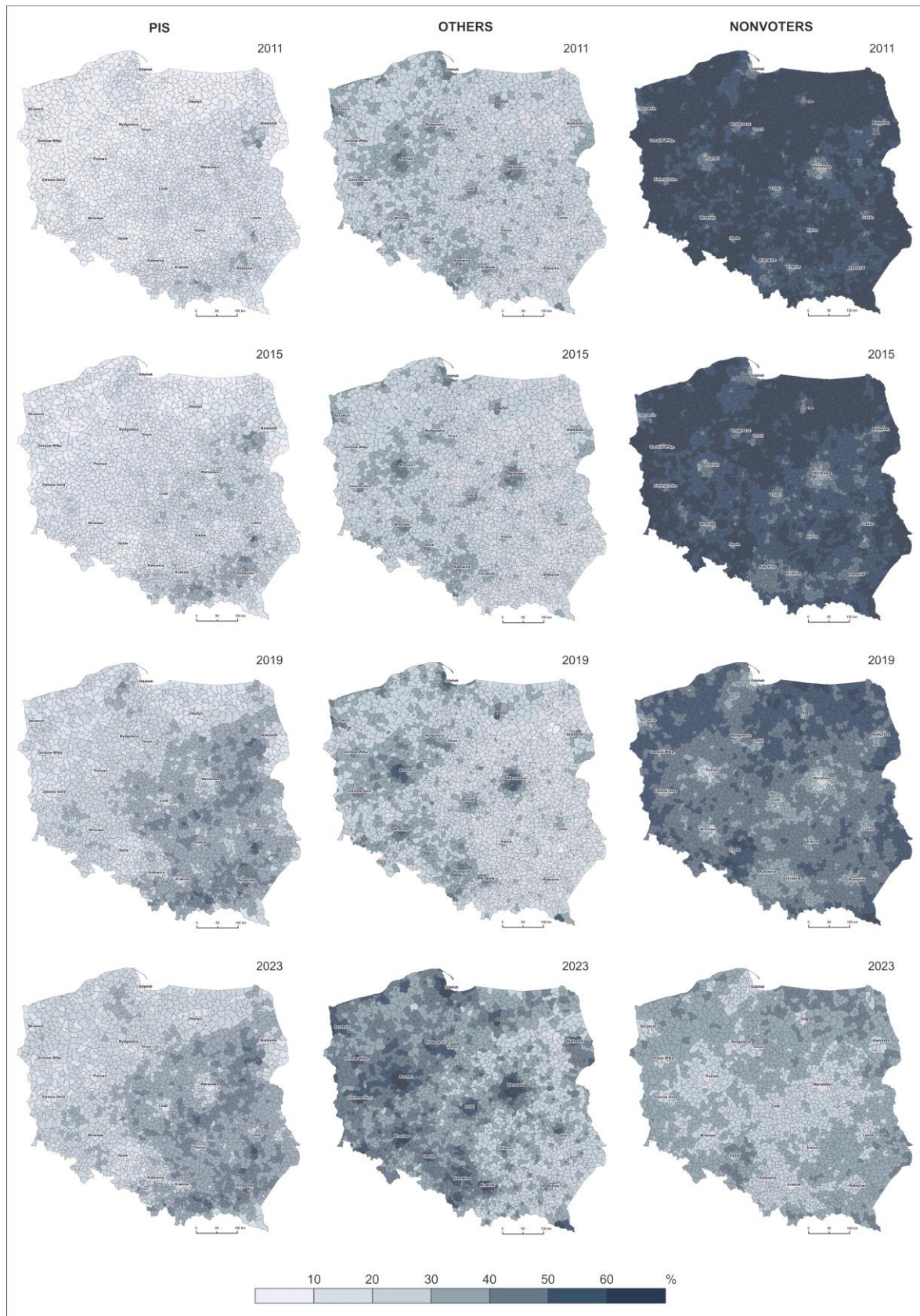


Figure 3. Maps of the results of *Sejm* elections 2011–2023 in communes (100% – all eligible voters)

The analysis of aggregated results in three categories of communes reveals varying levels of electoral activity, patterns of electoral choices, and dynamics of election results among each category's population (Figure 4). Cores display high election participation and strong support for parties other than PiS. Cores display high election participation and strong support for parties other than PiS. As one moves towards the periphery, non-participation increases and support for non-PiS parties decreases. PiS enjoys higher backing in both intermediate and peripheral areas. Overall, votes for PiS have been rising from 2011 to 2019 in all area categories. However, this increase was most pronounced in peripheral areas, supporting the assertion that residents of 'left-behind' places have predominantly propelled right-wing populists to power. Interestingly, the number of PiS supporters even rose in peripheral areas in the latest elections, while decreasing in all other types of areas. In contrast, support for other parties increased throughout PiS's tenure everywhere, particularly in cores. These results point to a growing polarisation of political views between cores and peripheries, concurrent with the increasing overall participation in elections.

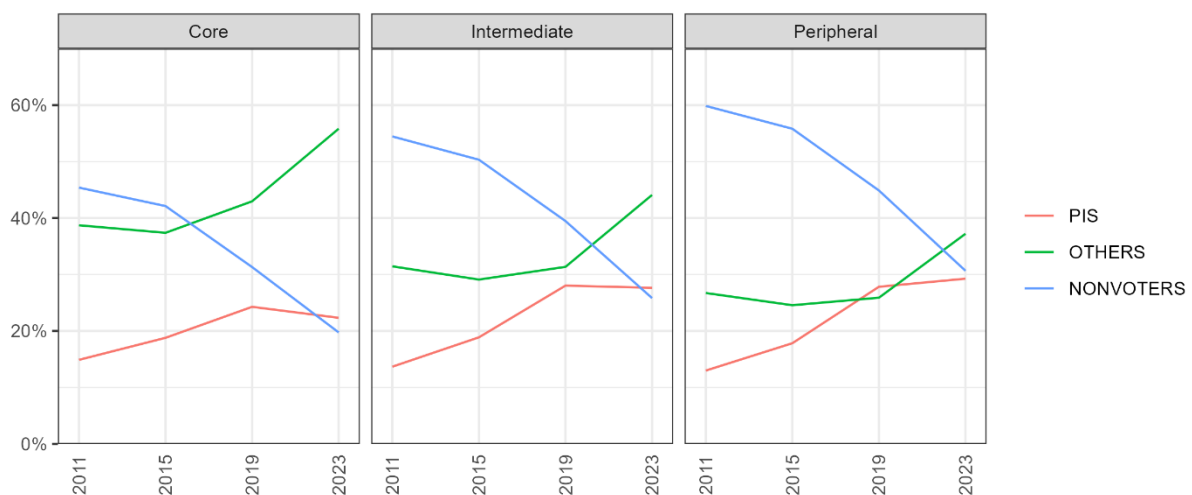


Figure 4. Results of *Sejm* elections 2011–2023 in three categories of areas (100% – all eligible voters)



## 5.2. Bivariate correlation analysis

Conducting a correlation analysis of the election results with the explanatory cultural and core-periphery indicators provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the significance of individual factors and observe their changes over time. The correlations for both the start (2011) and end (2023) of the study period are graphically represented and numerically detailed (for continuous variables) in Figure 5.

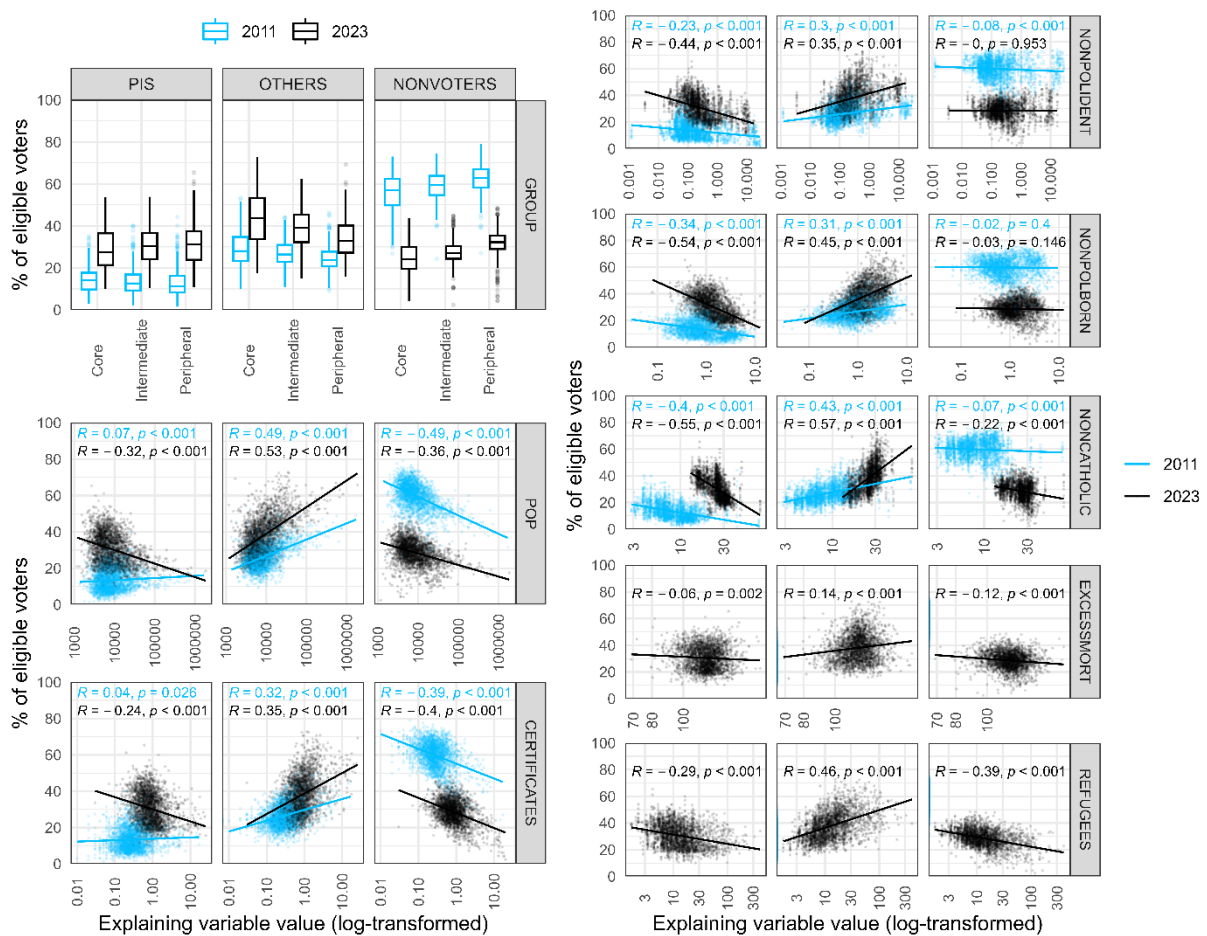


Figure 5. Correlation between explanatory variables and the results of *Sejm* elections in communes in 2011 and 2023

Top left plots confirm the existence of a correlation between the composite core-periphery cleavage and the election results: PiS support appears relatively uniform across the three groups of communes considered, while non-PiS parties receive notably higher

support in core areas, and the tendency to abstain from voting is most pronounced in the peripheries. Likewise, the population of a commune positively correlates with non-PiS parties results and negatively with election non-participation. The negative correlation between population size and PiS results only emerged towards the end of the study period. These results underscore that the typical political behaviour of residents in peripheral areas is not explicit support for any particular political option but rather low overall participation in elections. However, this trend of non-voting in these areas is increasingly challenged by the right-wing populist party, which claims these regions as its support base.

The national and religious uniformity within communes positively correlates with support for PiS and negatively for other parties, with a small correlation with non-participation. The absolute values of the correlation coefficients have increased over time, suggesting an escalation of territorial cultural polarisation. Excess mortality during the pandemic was very weakly correlated with the election results in 2023, indicating that the voters did not blame the government for the severity of the pandemic situation. While the number of Ukrainian refugees was significantly positively correlated with the support to the opposition and negatively with PiS support, this relation should be controlled for core-periphery factors, as a high number of Ukrainian (and international in general) residents is characteristic for big cities and economically high-performing areas.

### ***5.3. Regression models***

To assess the independent connection of each assumed explanatory variable on the election results in communes, we combine all variables to construct three regression models. These models—estimated using ordinary least-squares (OLS)—aim to

understand the support for PiS, support for other parties, and variations in electoral turnout in communes. Additionally, to identify temporal changes in the direction and magnitude of individual variables' effects, we include interactions between the year and the factor value in the model. We use log-transformed values in the analysis and standardise the explanatory variables due to their significant divergence in magnitudes. The model therefore adopts the following formula:

$$support_{i,t} = \alpha + \sum_{j=1}^3 \beta_j year_t + \sum_{k=1}^2 \beta_k GROUP_i + \sum_{m=1}^8 \beta_m \log(x_{m,i}) + \sum_{k=1}^2 \beta_{tk} year_t * GROUP_i + \sum_{m=1}^8 \beta_{tm} year_t * \log(x_{m,i}) + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

where the electoral support for one of three options in commune  $i$  in the year  $t$  is the sum of the model intercept  $\alpha$ , error term  $\varepsilon$ , and a set of products of coefficients  $\beta$  estimated for each individual variable (including year) and all combinations of years and variables. Two categorical variables (year and group of communes) are recoded into sets of dummy variables, where 1 indicates a given category, and 0 is the reference category. Seven remaining numeric variables are marked with  $x$ .

The complete estimation and evaluation of the model is available in Appendix B. A more accessible graphical interpretation is presented in Figure 6, where each graph illustrates coefficients for one explanatory variable across three colour-coded models. The vertical axis represents the standardised coefficient of each variable for the reference year (2011 or 2023 in the case of the current issue factors) and the augmented coefficient incorporating the variable's interaction with the year for subsequent elections.



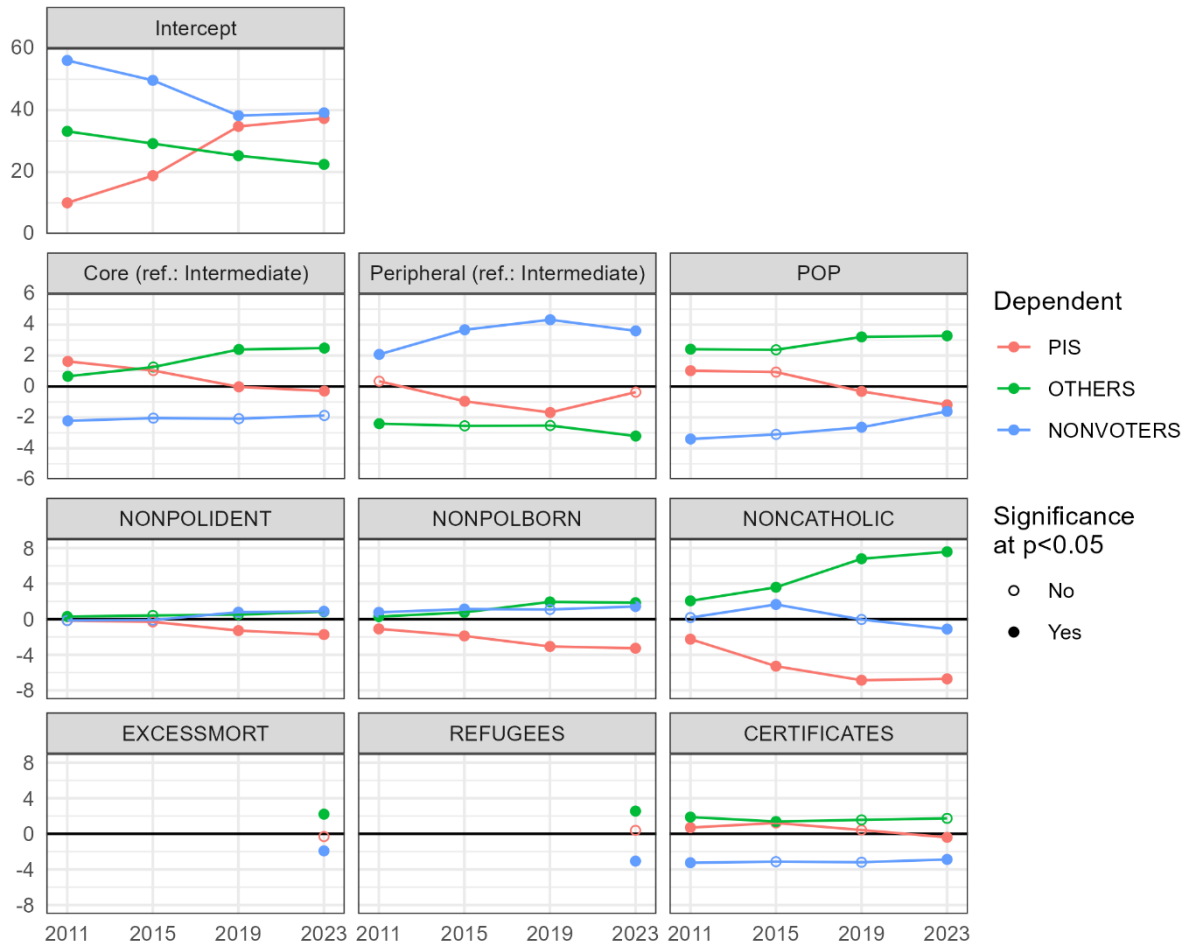


Figure 6. Standardised coefficients in the regression models explaining election results (reference year: 2011; for later elections interaction with year added to coefficient)

The model coefficients and their interactions with the time variable yield results analogous to those found in the bivariate correlation analysis. The variables indicative of a commune's position on the core-periphery spectrum display a typical pattern of influence on election results. Compared to intermediate areas, core functional urban areas have increasingly shifted away from PiS, favouring other parties. Conversely, peripheries in Poland maintain a relatively high index of non-participation and low support for non-PiS parties. The last election period witnessed a decisive divergence between PiS and other parties' support in peripheral areas, which was not explained by other factors. Core-periphery political cleavage is also apparent within functional urban areas, which can be

read in the coefficients for the population variable. The more populated the commune, the lower the support for PiS and the higher the support for other parties. This effect has been growing almost constantly for the last 12 years.

The regression outcomes also underscore cultural heterogeneity's strong and intensifying influence on the choice between PiS and other parties: national and religious heterogeneity has a growing negative impact on PiS support and a positive on other parties' support. Two current issue variables: excess mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic and the number of Ukrainian refugees favoured voting against the PiS government in 2023 after controlling for all other factors, indicating the strengthening of the anti-incumbent motivation with the higher severity of the public crises.

The regression results support hypothesis H2a on the independent positive impact of multidimensional peripherality on the support for parties other than PiS and H2b on the growth of the magnitude of this impact over time. The results for PiS are less unequivocal due to the presence of non-voting behaviour of the residents of peripheral areas and the little difference between the voting patterns of intermediate and peripheral regions. Even though the overall pattern of PiS support in (H1a) is contested, the analysis supports the growth of PiS support in these areas at the cost of non-voters (H1b), at least in the last election period.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusions**

This study has explored time changes in the territorial politics of Poland. We have uncovered that the election choices of Poles are deeply embedded in economic and cultural factors. The combination of these factors significantly influences people's voting decisions and choices. We paid particular attention to the core-periphery dichotomy,

assessed through a series of individual factors and a composite classification of communes. Our findings reveal distinct political support patterns within these categories. Similar to trends in other countries, right-wing populism has garnered strong support in Polish peripheries, as well as in many intermediate areas. Notably, we have identified an increasing geographic political polarisation over time, with a widening gap between PiS and non-PiS supporters across the core-periphery spectrum.

PiS's electoral victories in 2015 and 2019, culminating in eight years of power, were driven by rising support in Polish peripheries and intermediate areas. Interestingly, despite a decline in core areas, the relative preference for PiS in peripheral regions has not been dented by eight years in power and has recently intensified. Consequently, its recent electoral loss does not stem from a disenchantment of Polish peripheries with unfulfilled promises by the PiS. Polish peripheries—and, to a lesser extent, intermediate areas—had already exerted their 'revenge' when they first voted PiS into power in 2015. PiS's loss of power is fundamentally the result of a counter-revenge by the cores. Increased mobilisation in core areas was crucial for pushing PiS out of power. The recent political shift is the result of residents in core areas expressing strong disapproval of the ruling party's policies: a sort of counter-revenge. In other words, a 2023 'revenge of places that matter' to follow on the 2015 'revenge of places that don't matter' in Poland. This is happening in an increasingly divided country marked by an escalating core-periphery trend of political polarisation. Our findings suggest that, historically, the dominant political stance in Polish peripheries was not an alignment with a specific political ideology or party, but rather a tendency towards abstention in elections. Voters in Polish peripheries mostly felt disenfranchised. Over time, we have witnessed a shift from abstention to championing PiS in these peripheries.

This 'revenge of the places that matter' could pose a significant threat to political stability, exacerbating the deep socio-economic divides between cores and peripheries in an already highly polarised country. The patterns identified in Poland suggest that voter revolt, as expressed through ballot choices, extends beyond the 'places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The Polish case confirms that inequality is a key driver in the recent surge of populism in various countries (McKay et al., 2022). As seen in Poland, this leads not only to reduced social activity and increased support for populists in peripheral and marginalised areas but also to the mobilisation of residents in core regions. In this context, it becomes crucial to leverage this mobilisation to bridge the gap between core and peripheral areas, addressing geographical inequalities and promoting social and spatial justice (Madanipour et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2023). Inequalities are not exclusively financial but are often more critically about unmet expectations and lack of opportunities (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Wallman Lundåsen & Erlingsson, 2023). This requires a broader view of inequality, considering factors like unequal access to education and career opportunities (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023a). Additionally, peripheral areas might attract those pursuing alternative, 'post-growth' lifestyles (Lange et al., 2021). This underscores that place-based policy should be central to effective cohesion policy, with efforts to decentralise competences and finances, bolster functional relationships, and expand the spatial scope of functional urban areas (Churski et al., 2023), taking into account the multi-scalar character of peripheries which may be overlooked when approaching them from the administrative region perspective (Mattila et al., 2023). Interventions should be tailored to the diverse characteristics of territorial capital that shape the possibilities for inhabitants of different areas (McCann, 2023).

In our analysis, we have juxtaposed socio-economic factors defining cores and peripheries in Poland with cultural factors, such as population heterogeneity. We found that both sets of factors define political geography and contribute to a growing territorial political cleavage between supporters of right-wing populism and other political options. However, these factors are closely intertwined and their division is somewhat arbitrary. Indeed, the characteristics of cores and peripheries in Poland have been moulded through historical processes influenced by proximity to Europe's economic and cultural hubs, urbanisation and economic transformations.

One shortcoming in our analysis is the consideration of PiS as the epitome of right-wing populism and the rest of the Polish political scene. This perspective dramatically flattens the political landscape, supported by PiS's efforts to create a bipolar political environment where its conservative-social identity is contrasted with the double-liberalism attributed to all opponents. However, the anti-PiS opposition, including the current ruling coalition, is ideologically diverse. Populist and right-wing elements exist among parties other than PiS, not to mention the Eurosceptic and anti-immigration *Konfederacja* party or the left-wing populist *Razem* party (Engler et al., 2019). The inevitable evolution of the political scene, regardless of the direction it takes after the power shift, is likely to perpetuate, if not deepen, the core-periphery polarisation.

There is still a need for further research on the electoral dynamics in relation to regional development. Local elections in 2024 confirmed the trend of territorial polarisation even though local politics is partially detached from national politics. Despite having lost the central power, PiS secured control of five eastern and southeastern voivodeships of Poland, characterised by multidimensional peripherality. On the other hand, the party members and representatives became presidents in only 4 out of 107

major towns and cities, compared to 41 representatives of other parties (62 presidents are not associated with any national party). Election campaigns and the results of the coming European elections in June 2024, which often put the transnational cleavage (Hooghe and Marks, 2018) at the centre of the debate, may provide new insights into how local communities respond to the challenges of spatial inequalities and to the way the European and national regional policy addresses them.

### **Acknowledgments**

This work was funded by the National Science Centre in Poland under the project *The trajectories and challenges of the development of inner peripheries in the new conditions of cohesion post SARS-CoV-2*, no. 2020/37/B/HS4/01034.

### **Declaration of interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Data sources and actuality, and summary statistics of variables in the analysis (mean values and ranges in parenthesis)

Variable name	Data source	Data actuality	2011	2015	2019	2023
<b>Dependent variables</b>						
PIS	National Electoral Office	Election	13.4 (1.5–44.3)	18.8 (1.7–51.0)	29.6 (8.8–61.0)	30.5 (10.1–65.4)
OTHERS	National Electoral Office	Election	26.4 (9.1–53.4)	24.7 (7.3–52.7)	25.8 (6.9–60.4)	38.0 (15.1–72.8)
NONVOTERS	National Electoral Office	Election	59.7 (24.5–79.1)	54.6 (24.1–74.2)	43.2 (-15.1*–64.8)	28.6 (-11.2*–48.5)
<b>Core-periphery factor</b>						
GROUP	Churski et al. (2024)	2018–2022 (various data sources)	Core: 19.5%; Intermediate (ref. value): 41.6%; Periphery: 38.8%			
POP	Statistics Poland	End of the year preceding the election	15,555 (1,361–1,700,112)	15,534 (1,335–1,735,442)	15,507 (1,303–1,777,972)	15,247 (1,173–1,861,975)
<b>Cultural factors</b>						
NONPOLIDENT	Statistics Poland: National Censuses**	Year of election, extrapolated from censuses 2011 and 2021	1.3 (0.0–28.0)	1.1 (0.0–23.6)	1.0 (0.0–19.2)	0.9 (0.0–17.0)
NONPOLBORN	Statistics Poland: National Censuses **	Year of election, extrapolated from censuses 2011 and 2021	1.2 (0.0–9.7)	1.4 (0.0–9.6)	1.6 (0.1–11.6)	1.6 (0.1–12.7)
NONCATHOLIC	Statistics Poland: National Censuses **	Year of election, extrapolated from censuses 2011 and 2021	9.3 (2.9–73.7)	15.9 (7.7–74.7)	22.4 (11.2–75.6)	25.6 (13.0–76.1)
<b>Current issue factors</b>						
EXCESSMORT	Statistics Poland	Only for 2023 elections; data for 2017–2022				117.7 (69.1–172.7)
REFUGEES	Ministry of Digital Affairs; Statistics Poland***	10.10.2023 (last dataset before elections)				19.4 (1.7–401.7)
<b>Controlling variable</b>						
CERTIFICATES	National Electoral Office	Election	0.4 (0.0–17.0)	0.3 (0.0–11.1)	0.5 (0.0–38.0)	1.2 (0.0–25.4)

\*Negative number of non-voters is possible due to high numbers of certificate voters in lowly-populated second-home and resort areas.

\*\*Data for territorial units larger than communes (*voivodeships* or *poviats*) assumed constant within the unit.

\*\*\* Data for *poviats* disaggregated using change of the number of Ukrainina citizens in tourist accommodation between 2021 and 2022 as a proxy of refugees distribution.

Appendix B. Regression model

Variable	Dependent variable: PIS		Dependent variable: OTHERS		Dependent variable: NONVOTERS	
	Std. coef. est.	t	Std. coef. est.	t	Std. coef. est.	t
(Intercept)	12.935	69.853***	27.225	164.001***	59.373	351.699***
year2015	6.029	23.042***	-1.820	-7.759***	-5.802	-24.322***
year2019	17.342	66.204***	-0.907	-3.863***	-17.488	-73.229***
year2023	17.792	67.622***	11.508	48.789***	-31.817	-132.646***
GROUPCore	1.622	4.946***	0.658	2.236*	-2.222	-7.430***
GROUPPeripheral	0.339	1.246	-2.405	-9.858***	2.073	8.357***
POP	1.007	8.209***	2.377	21.614***	-3.350	-29.956***
NONPOLIDENT	-0.163	-1.187	0.332	2.690**	-0.155	-1.232
NONPOLBORN	-1.259	-8.609***	0.335	2.552*	0.891	6.680***
NONCATHOLIC	-1.963	-13.346***	1.806	13.697***	0.157	1.174
EXCESSMORT	-0.100	-0.840	0.525	4.927***	-0.430	-3.965***
REFUGEES	0.145	1.060	0.955	7.806***	-1.149	-9.230***
CERTIFICATES	0.573	4.781***	1.537	14.308***	-2.659	-24.343***
year2015:GROUPCore	-0.589	-1.272	0.600	1.444	0.175	0.415
year2019:GROUPCore	-1.645	-3.558***	1.736	4.189***	0.138	0.327
year2023:GROUPCore	-1.917	-4.131***	1.825	4.386***	0.346	0.818
year2015:GROUPPeripheral	-1.295	-3.368***	-0.141	-0.409	1.595	4.550***
year2019:GROUPPeripheral	-2.021	-5.240***	-0.121	-0.350	2.245	6.385***
year2023:GROUPPeripheral	-0.706	-1.809	-0.800	-2.286*	1.524	4.286***
year2015:POP	-0.082	-0.468	-0.022	-0.141	0.275	1.732
year2019:POP	-1.327	-7.577***	0.832	5.298***	0.711	4.453***
year2023:POP	-2.212	-12.438***	0.951	5.967***	1.715	10.578***
year2015:NONPOLIDENT	-0.135	-0.707	0.090	0.523	0.060	0.344
year2019:NONPOLIDENT	-1.035	-5.482***	0.150	0.886	0.893	5.186***
year2023:NONPOLIDENT	-1.403	-7.465***	0.435	2.580**	0.960	5.603***
year2015:NONPOLBORN	-0.591	-2.919**	0.420	2.316*	0.230	1.246
year2019:NONPOLBORN	-1.436	-7.167***	1.372	7.640***	0.067	0.368
year2023:NONPOLBORN	-1.488	-7.411***	1.225	6.807***	0.309	1.690
year2015:NONCATHOLIC	-1.073	-5.367***	0.255	1.423	0.794	4.352***
year2019:NONCATHOLIC	-1.455	-7.405***	1.577	8.957***	-0.174	-0.972
year2023:NONCATHOLIC	-1.265	-6.392***	1.841	10.381***	-0.689	-3.819***



This work was funded by the National Science Centre in Poland under the project  
*The trajectories and challenges of the development of inner peripheries in the new conditions of cohesion post SARS-CoV-2*  
 no. 2020/37/B/HS4/01034  
<http://tiperico.web.amu.edu.pl>

Variable	Dependent variable: PIS		Dependent variable: OTHERS		Dependent variable: NONVOTERS	
	Std. coef. est.	t	Std. coef. est.	t	Std. coef. est.	t
year2015:CERTIFICATES	0.328	1.923	-0.518	-3.389***	0.355	2.286*
year2019:CERTIFICATES	-0.187	-1.098	-0.116	-0.759	-0.237	-1.521
year2023:CERTIFICATES	-0.922	-5.230***	-0.003	-0.019	0.121	0.752
N	9908		9908		9908	
Degrees of freedom	9874		9874		9874	
Residual standard error	5.814		5.212		5.301	
R-squared	0.6936		0.7170		0.8556	
Adjusted R-squared	0.6926		0.7161		0.8551	
F-statistic	677.3***		758.2***		1772***	

\*\*\*p≤0.001; \*\*p≤0.01; \*p≤0.05