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WORKING PAPERS OF TIPERICO PROJECT

"We Don'T Matter": Affective Peripheralisation And The Relational Politics Of Feeling Left Behind In Polish Inner Peripheries

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ABSTRACT: Across Europe, persistent socio-spatial inequalities have produced a 'geography of discontent', in which residents of disadvantaged regions display rising distrust towards political institutions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020). Accounts of 'inner peripheries', areas defined less by physical distance than by relational disconnection from metropolitan cores, have mapped this condition primarily through structural indicators of territorial capital (Churski et al., 2025). What remains underexplored is how it is narrated and politically articulated. Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted in four Polish functional urban areas classified as inner peripheries, Włocławek, Drawsko Pomorskie, Przasnysz and Sandomierz, we analyse qualitative material through a narrative and affective lens. We develop the concept of affective peripheralisation: the process through which structurally produced peripherality is publicly articulated by local actors as a collective condition of 'not mattering', and through that articulation acquires political force. Our respondents are local institutional and civic leaders, so we reconstruct how marginalisation is voiced, framed and mobilised rather than how widely it is felt. Across very different contexts these actors converge on a vocabulary of exclusion from networks of recognition, representation and agency, and on a register of procedural cynicism and exhausted agency rather than of electoral mobilisation. We argue that affect is not a by-product of the regulatory production of peripherality but a mechanism of its reproduction, and that models of discontent calibrated on Western experience miss this dynamic. The article carries implications for cohesion policy and territorially just service provision.

KEY WORDS: affective peripheralisation, geography of discontent, left-behind places, post-socialist peripheries, territorial justice, cohesion policy.

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1. Introduction

Successive crises since 2008, the global financial crash, the ensuing decade of austerity, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have exposed and deepened territorial inequalities across Europe that the logic of regional convergence had once promised to dissolve (MacKinnon et al., 2025). This unevenness has acquired an unmistakably political dimension: voters in lagging regions have increasingly turned towards anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties, a pattern widely discussed under the heading of the 'geography of discontent' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020). Yet the label 'left-behind places' itself remains notoriously under-specified, frequently deployed as a catch-all signifier for highly differentiated conditions, geographies and temporalities (Pike et al., 2024).

The analysis is framed by the following premise: the spatial polarisation that produces inner peripheries is not a market anomaly or a residue of incomplete transformation, but a systemic effect of the prevailing mode of regulation, that is, of the configuration of institutions, investment flows and policy priorities through which capital, recognition and agency are concentrated in metropolitan cores and withdrawn from medium-sized centres (Aglietta, 1979; Boyer, 1990; Harvey, 2005). Read through regulation theory, peripheralisation is not an incidental gap to be closed by growth alone but a condition systemically produced and reproduced through regulatory choices at national and European scales. Treating it as regulatory rather than residual carries a theoretical claim that this article develops against the largely Western-European canon on left-behind places: Poland's post-socialist trajectory is not merely another empirical case but a distinct analytical vantage point, in which transformation itself operated as the founding peripheralising event and continues to supply the narrative repertoire through which today's marginalisation is felt and voiced.

Poland offers a particularly instructive post-socialist variant of this dynamic. The post-1989 transformation produced one of Europe's most rapid yet most spatially uneven growth

trajectories, concentrating institutional capacity and investment in a handful of metropolitan centres while many medium-sized cities and their functional hinterlands were progressively stripped of administrative functions and productive capacity. Building on a nationwide delimitation of 413 functional urban areas and a five-component typology of territorial capital, our earlier work identified Włocławek, Drawsko Pomorskie, Przasnysz and Sandomierz as theoretically informative cases of Polish inner peripheries and traced how each weathered the SARS-CoV-2 shock across every capital dimension (Churski et al., 2025). That account established where Poland's inner peripheries are located and how they differ structurally, but not how that polarisation is narrated and politically articulated by those who speak for these places.

This is a significant gap. Research on inner peripheries and ‘left-behind’ places alike has concentrated overwhelmingly on objective socio-economic indicators (accessibility, demographic decline, weak institutions), while paying comparatively little attention to how peripherality is perceived, narrated and publicly articulated within these communities, and by whom (Martin et al., 2021). Yet a growing body of work suggests that political discontent is driven less by objective deprivation than by perceived injustice and felt abandonment (Martin et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), and that such feelings develop gradually as a collective emotional process, rooted in local histories and trigger events, that can diverge sharply from ‘hard’ indicators while still shaping political behaviour over the long term (Hannemann et al., 2024). Without attending to this affective and perceptual register, a structural account alone cannot explain why some peripheralised communities mobilise politically while others withdraw, or why ostensibly similar objective conditions are narrated, and politicised, so differently across places.

This article investigates these dynamics through a qualitative study of the same four Polish functional urban areas. We ask:

- How do local actors in Polish inner peripheries describe and interpret their region's developmental position?
- How do local actors translate relational disconnection from metropolitan centres into emotional and narrative registers of being left behind?
- How do local actors link perceived marginalisation to trust, agency and relations with public institutions, and how do they mobilise that link in dealings with higher tiers of government?

In answering these questions, the article makes three contributions. Its central theoretical contribution is the concept of affective peripheralisation: the process through which structurally produced peripherality is publicly articulated by local actors as a collective condition of not mattering, and through that articulation acquires political force. We treat this affective register as the thread that binds the article's other analytical moves (relational disconnection as its structural precondition, the violation of a spatial social minimum as its material trigger, and exhausted agency as its political consequence), and we argue that it is this register, rather than distance or deprivation alone, that produces the political sense of being left behind. Empirically, the article offers one of the first qualitative analyses of how peripherality is lived and politically articulated across Polish inner peripheries, extending our own structural and typological account of the four case studies described above, into the affective and discursive register that a territorial-capital framework cannot, by design, capture. Methodologically, it contributes a triangulated approach to the study of marginalisation, combining in-depth interviews, focus groups and document analysis to reconstruct how peripherality is narrated, felt and politically inflected.

This argument speaks well beyond the Polish case. Recent work shows the same dynamic at Europe's edges: (Leetmaa et al., 2026) trace how the closure of local anchor institutions produces a 'double exclusion' of ageing rural communities in digitally advanced

Estonia, while Langguth (2025) shows how large-scale green investment can deepen peripheralisation where it fails to generate local decision-making capacity. Read alongside our material, these cases suggest that affective peripheralisation is not an East-European peculiarity but a mechanism a reader in the United Kingdom or Italy may recognise closer to home. What the post-socialist context adds is analytical leverage rather than exotic difference. Where Western-calibrated accounts of the 'geography of discontent' (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) read spatial resentment largely off electoral behaviour, we reconstruct the register in which it is articulated by those who speak for these communities: procedural cynicism and exhausted agency rather than mobilisation. A rapid, institutionally engineered regime change supplies the founding grammar of that register. Poland here is less a laboratory of transformation than a corrective to the Western-centric blind spots of prevailing models. It is this analytical lens that the article sets out to develop.

2. Conceptual Framework: From Relational Disconnection to Affective Peripheralisation

This section is organised around a single conceptual axis: relational disconnection, that is, the progressive severing of the economic, institutional, communicative and affective ties through which places and their residents access the resources, recognition and agency that constitute development. Rather than presenting regulatory production, organised proximity, foundational economy and territorial justice as four parallel frameworks, we treat them as one analytical sequence in which each step specifies the one before it. It is relational disconnection, we argue, that distinguishes inner peripheries from merely 'less developed' regions, and that links macro-structural processes to everyday experience, political affect and institutional withdrawal.

The concept of inner peripherality departs from spatial understandings of peripherality as physical remoteness. As Churski et al. (2025, p.19) put it, peripherality here follows from the loss of, or inability to establish, connections rather than from a region's location. This

relational turn draws on Boschma (2005) distinction between geographical proximity and its cognitive, organisational, social and institutional counterparts: what defines an inner periphery is not distance from a metropolitan centre but the absence of the organised proximity through which development impulses travel. Crucially, disconnection operates not only through missing investment or absent infrastructure, but through the erosion of institutional and narrative recognition, that is, the capacity to have one's place, its needs and its voice acknowledged within governance networks (Lister, 2008). Left-behind places, as Pike et al. (2024) show, are not simply lagging; they have been left behind by identifiable decisions, which implies both accountability and the possibility of remediation. MacKinnon et al. (2024) link their consolidation to the post-2008 austerity settlement, while Diemer et al's. (2022) regional development trap adds that escape requires a qualitative transformation of the relational environment, not resources alone.

Relational disconnection becomes materially legible in the domain of everyday reproduction. Schools, health care, public transport, administrative offices and libraries are not merely services but the foundational-economy infrastructures through which communities remain socially anchored and politically included (Bowman et al., 2014; Arcidiacono et al., 2022;). Their withdrawal is therefore not simply a decline in service quality but a reorganisation of the conditions under which everyday life can be sustained and a place recognised as a legitimate site of public concern. We develop this empirically in Section 4.2 (Sissons & Green, 2025). The withdrawal of these infrastructures is experienced less as isolated service loss than as collective dislocation. The notion of root shock (Fullilove, 2016) captures why objectively modest changes, can carry disproportionate symbolic and political weight: they touch the texture of belonging, signalling implicitly but repeatedly that the place itself has diminished in value and no longer counts as a proper site of organised public presence. It is through this

affective register, rather than through indicators of decline alone, that structural disconnection is converted into a shared, personalised sense of not mattering.

This relational deficit is, finally, a question of territorial justice. Churski et al. (2025) frame it through the notion of a spatial social minimum, a normative threshold below which access to basic services violates residents' developmental rights, grounded in Rawlsian and capability-based accounts of justice as the guarantee of minimum conditions for human development (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1999). Read spatially, the disconnection of inner peripheries is not an inefficiency to be corrected by growth-oriented cohesion policy but a structural injustice requiring deliberate redistributive intervention (Rodríguez-Pose, 2026). Our central claim, however, is that the neoliberal mode of regulation does not merely distribute capital unevenly: it actively produces affective peripheralisation (Willett & Lang, 2018). Following Rodríguez-Pose (2018) account of 'the revenge of the places that don't matter', we read the political effects of peripheralisation not as irrational backlash but as a coherent response to felt abandonment.

Peripherality on this account is produced by identifiable institutional forms rather than by distance: administrative reform, agrarian restructuring and the deregulation of public transport, each taken at national scale and each withdrawing a specific institutional capacity from medium-sized centres. Where their effects become politically visible, they are addressed by spatially targeted flanking mechanisms (MacKinnon et al., 2022) that mitigate symptoms without altering the settlement itself. Section 4.1 sets out the Polish instances.

This yields the single theoretical claim the article advances. Regulation theory accounts for the durability of a spatial settlement through its institutional forms, the legal, fiscal and organisational arrangements that stabilise an accumulation regime (Aglietta, 1979; Boyer, 1990), supplemented in peripheral settings by flanking mechanisms that absorb its most visible costs (MacKinnon et al., 2022). What this literature leaves unspecified is what stabilises the

settlement where flanking mechanisms visibly fail, as they do in the cases examined here. We argue that affect performs that stabilising work. The narrative registers reconstructed in Section 4, root shock at the withdrawal of anchor institutions (4.2), shame and its rhetorical management (4.3), defiant localism as compensatory identity work (4.3) and exhausted agency (4.4), are not by-products of the regulatory order but a further institutional form through which it reproduces itself: they convert a distributional arrangement into a personalised sense of not mattering, and in doing so deplete precisely the political capacity that contesting the arrangement would require. Affective peripheralisation names this mechanism. Section 4 follows the three levels in turn: 4.1 the regulatory decisions themselves and the flanking mechanisms that fail to offset them, 4.2 the provisioning layer in which their costs land, and 4.3 and 4.4 the affective register through which that failure is narrated and, we argue, stabilised.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

The aim of the study was to capture institutional and social perspectives on processes of peripheralisation and to identify barriers to the governance of local development, with particular attention to their affective and narrative dimensions. The article draws on qualitative material gathered in a project whose findings, previously set alongside quantitative analyses, were published in a monograph on inner peripheries in Poland (Churski et al., 2025). For the purposes of the present study, however, this material has been subjected to a separate qualitative analysis: instead of reconstructing variation in territorial capital, we focus on affective narratives, on the sense of non-recognition and on the subjectively perceived agency of local actors. A qualitative approach was warranted because these dimensions remain difficult to capture in quantitative research, even though they are central to understanding the political articulation of peripheralisation.

Case selection was purposive and theoretically driven. The four functional urban areas (FUAs) were chosen not as a statistically representative sample but as theoretically informative cases, each instantiating a distinct pathway into inner peripherality within the national typology of 413 FUAs developed in Churski et al. (2025): post-industrial decline compounded by administrative downgrading (Włocławek), state agriculture collapse (Drawsko Pomorskie), the metropolitan shadow (Przasnysz), and heritage-based specialisation under infrastructural isolation (Sandomierz) (Fig. 1).

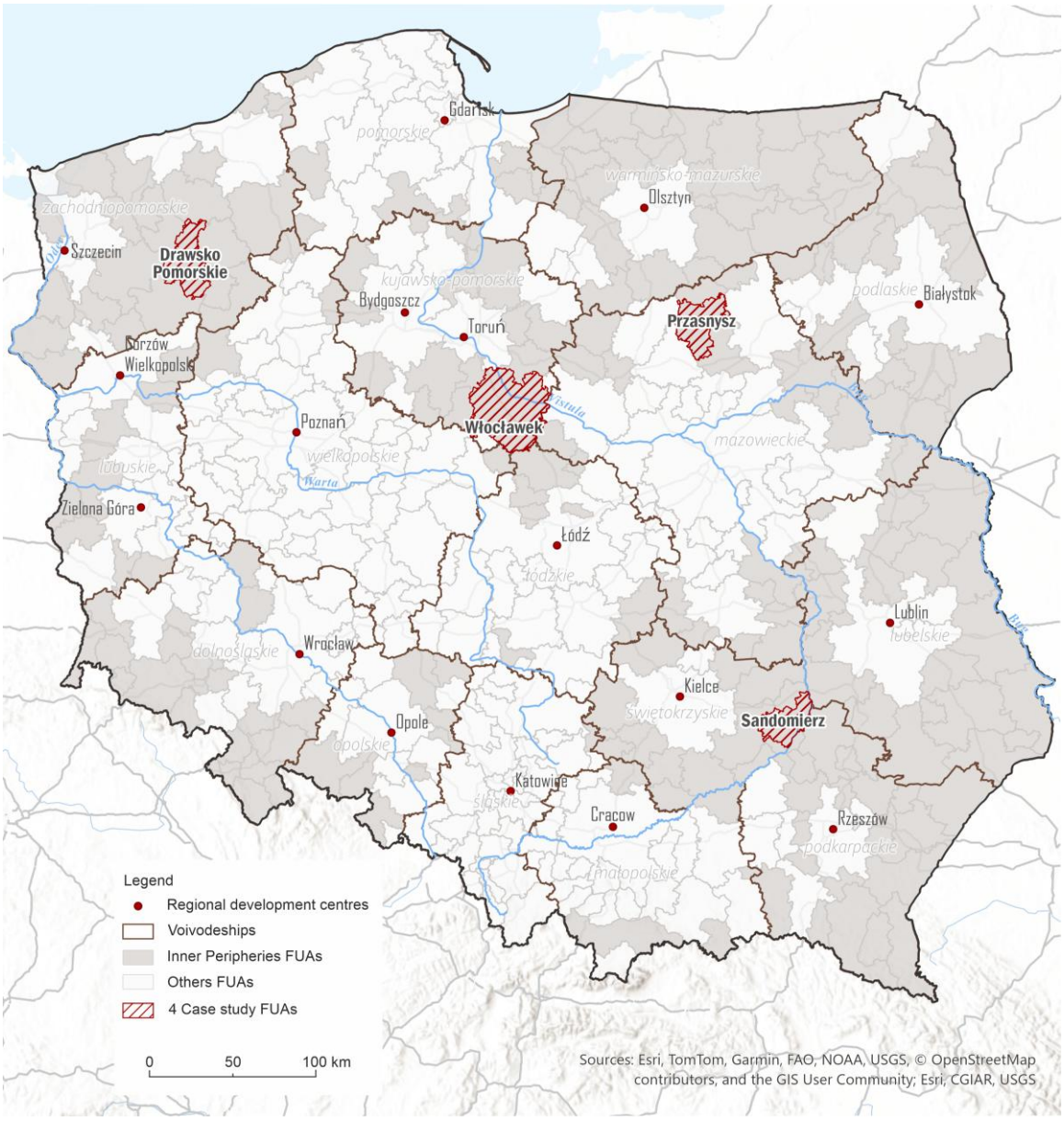

Fig. 1. Location of the four case studies

Source: own elaboration

These areas share a number of features characteristic of inner peripheries. Chief among them are limited functional integration with the main growth centres, a demographic crisis manifested in depopulation and progressive population ageing, and infrastructural deficits, particularly low transport accessibility. At the same time, the processes that produced their peripheral character followed divergent trajectories, shaped by specific developmental factors, which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the functional urban areas (FUAs) under analysis

FUA	Characteristics of the area	Socio-economic profile	Distinctive mechanisms of peripheralisation
Włocławek	Population: 210,000. The largest core in the inner-periphery group (100,000). Central location within Poland.	Traditional industrial character (an important element of local identity), with the dominant employer being a company belonging to the ORLEN multi-energy group.	Degradation following the loss of voivodeship capital status in 1999. Weakening economic significance despite a favourable location. Effects of institutional change and systemic transformation.
Drawsko Pomorskie	Population: 23,000 (core 16,000). Very low level of urbanisation.	Economy based on the timber industry and on the presence of the military, a key employer.	Regression after the transformation of the 1990s. The collapse of the State Agricultural Farms (PGR) as the main driver of peripheralisation. Lasting effects of systemic change.
Przasnysz	Population: 40,000 (core 16,000) Relatively close to the capital city, Warsaw.	Economy based on the public sector. Weak integration with the metropolitan labour market.	Peripherality conditioned by location. An exemplification of the 'metropolitan shadow', in which geographical proximity to the capital does not translate into developmental benefits.
Sandomierz	Population: 69,000 (core 21,000) Relatively large distance from development centres.	Economy based on agriculture, food processing and tourism supported by territorial marketing.	Legacy of the Russian and Austrian partitions. Delayed modernisation of agriculture. Weak infrastructural provision.

Source: own elaboration

3.2. Data Collection

The analysis is based on transcripts of in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with local politicians from the core cities of the four FUAs under study, who together constitute the group of local government leaders (type 1). This material was complemented by twelve focus group interviews (FGIs) carried out in 2023 separately with two further categories of respondents: local government officials and councillors (type 2), and, separately, entrepreneurs and leaders

of non-governmental organisations (type 3). Seventy-four respondents took part in the FGIs in total. Respondents were selected purposively, on the assumption that they are actors who combine practical knowledge of local development processes with the capacity to interpret those processes publicly.

Fieldwork was conducted in situ, following a common scenario developed by the authors. The material was collected in 2023 within the TIPERICO project and first reported in Churski et al. (2025); case selection, recruitment and the interview instrument therefore predate the questions pursued here, and the corpus has been re-coded from the beginning for this article. Because the instrument did not ask about emotion, the affective register reconstructed below surfaced unprompted, which limits claims about its distribution but strengthens those about its salience.

3.3. Ethical considerations and data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. Participants gave informed consent to take part in the study, to the recording of the conversation and to the use of anonymised quotations in academic publications. Because some respondents hold public office, quotations are identified only by the type of interview, the category of respondent and the name of the FUA, and the specific offices held by respondents are not disclosed, which minimises the possibility of identifying particular individuals while preserving the analytical context.

The analysis followed a hybrid deductive-inductive strategy combining directed and conventional content analysis. Initial codes were derived from the article's theoretical framework, namely relational disconnection, the degradation of social infrastructure, and territorial and procedural injustice, and were then supplemented by emergent codes arising from the material itself, particularly those relating to affect, non-recognition, resignation, institutional cynicism and political disillusionment. Coding was iterative: preliminary categories were

ordered, merged and ranked as the analysis progressed. Coding and the organisation of the material were carried out manually, using a word processor and a spreadsheet rather than dedicated qualitative data analysis software. This was an analytical choice rather than a concession to corpus size: the features at issue here, hyperbole, reported speech, self-correction and irony, are carried by the texture of whole passages rather than by segmentable units, and are best identified through close textual interpretation. All interview excerpts cited in the paper were translated from Polish into English by the authors.

3.4. Research rigour, positionality and limitations

The credibility of the analysis rests on two procedures: triangulation with the earlier quantitative and typological diagnosis of the four areas studied, and collective code reconciliation, in which divergent readings of the same passage were compared in joint sessions and resolved by agreement. Together these served as the study's principal check on interpretive arbitrariness.

At the same time, the study has significant limitations that are not external to the argument but constitutive of the way the material should be read. The sample comprises local institutional and civic leaders only: local government leaders, councillors, officials, entrepreneurs and representatives of non-governmental organisations, who should not be treated as a transparent representation of residents. They are better understood as a lens through which local moods are articulated, filtered and at times strategically mobilised. Their accounts combine insider knowledge with institutional interests, symbolic capital and political positioning. The material is therefore analysed not as an unmediated 'voice of the people' but as a situated reconstruction of local meanings and tensions produced by actors speaking from relatively privileged positions within their own communities. This limitation narrows the reach of the conclusions we draw, yet it also opens a distinct analytical perspective. It allows us to trace how local elites speak on behalf of peripheralised communities, how they translate

inarticulate grievance into politically legible narratives, and how the invocation of abandonment can itself become a strategic resource in negotiations with higher-level authorities.

The material is also a temporal snapshot. All interviews were conducted in 2023, in the overlapping shadow of the pandemic, inflationary pressure and the war in Ukraine. These conjunctural conditions may have heightened both the salience and the emotional intensity of some narratives. In addition, the corpus was coded manually, without dedicated software. As set out in Section 3.3, this was an analytical choice suited to the interpretive task, but it limits the procedural scalability and the replicability of coding practices in a larger comparative corpus.

Researcher positionality requires equally explicit acknowledgement. Awareness of this positionality is especially important in a study that treats nostalgia, loss, anger and local pride as politically significant affects rather than as transparent reflections of structural reality.

4. Findings

4.1 Structural Disconnection: Mobility and the Regulatory Production of Peripherality

This subsection works at the first of the three levels distinguished above: the regulatory decisions themselves, and the flanking mechanisms through which the state has since attempted, without success, to offset them. Across all four functional urban areas, interviewees articulated peripherality above all through the prism of mobility, or its absence. Public transport, expressways and rail connections appeared not as technical matters but as metaphors of relational distance: distance from the places where decisions are taken, where resources are distributed and where, as respondents put it, things happen. Transport isolation and institutional isolation proved to be two sides of the same process, described in the literature as the regulatory production of peripherality (Kühn, 2015): a condition in which the disadvantageous positioning of a territory follows from accumulated institutional decisions taken beyond the reach of local actors.

Four sets of nationally made decisions form the immediate background to the grievances reported below. First, Poland's 1998 administrative reform, implemented on 1 January 1999, reduced the number of voivodeships from 49 to 16, depriving Włocławek of voivodeship capital status and of the administrative resources concentrated with it (Table 1). Second, the Act of 19 October 1991 on State Treasury agricultural property provided the legal framework for liquidating the State Agricultural Farms (PGRs), with far-reaching consequences for employment and locally embedded welfare provision (Table 1). Third, the restructuring and deregulation of local road passenger transport, together with changes in the financing of statutory fare reductions, contributed to the erosion of the public bus network and shifted responsibility for local provision onto local governments. Fourth, from 2019 the state introduced territorially targeted instruments, among them the Bus Transport Development Fund (2019), the Kolej Plus railway programme (first call 2020) and the Government Fund for Local Investment (2020). Addressing deficits in accessibility and investment capacity, these nonetheless allocate through mechanisms controlled at the centre; we read them as flanking measures (MacKinnon et al., 2022). It is this dependence on centrally mediated access to resources that provides the material referent for the 'chicken feed politics' described by our respondents (see 4.4; cf. Adamiak et al., 2026).

In work on the accessibility of the Drawsko Pomorskie functional urban area, transport infrastructure appears not only as a functional barrier but above all as a heavily charged symbol of territorial neglect. The relational character of this isolation is best conveyed by the account of a local government leader, which captures the tension between geographical and relational proximity that is central to Boschma (2005) notion of organised proximity:

"The location of Drawsko [...] in terms of the Expy. [expressway] network is astronomically terrible – because the nearest Expy. [...] is 70 kilometers away. This causes some sort of disruptions." (Drawsko Pomorskie, type 1). The metaphor is worth pausing on,

though its evidential status should be stated precisely. What it demonstrates is a shift of register: a measurable parameter, 70 kilometres to the nearest expressway, is rendered in an idiom of cosmic distance. That tells us how the speaker frames the deficit rather than how severe the deficit objectively is, and it does not by itself demonstrate an emotional experience of the regulatory production of peripherality. That production is documented separately, by the sequence of national road-programme decisions set out at the start of this subsection. What the quotation adds is the idiom in which that history is recounted by the actor who has to represent its consequences locally.

In Przasnysz, the same mechanism of relational exclusion is framed above all in temporal terms. A local government leader's account of the restoration of rail services and of the planned construction of a new line under the Kolej Plus programme reveals a phenomenon of anticipatory peripheralisation: "*After 22 years, rail service has returned to the Przasnysz County. Last weekend, the first train ran [...] Our application in the 'Kolej Plus' [Railway Plus] program was approved, and a technical design along with a building permit is to be completed by 2028.*" (Przasnysz, type 1). The number of years invoked in this quotation functions as a measure of historical absence, one that durably shaped the local economy and inscribed it in a pattern of dependent development in which resources remained latent. The Kolej Plus programme itself, however, is best read as a flanking mechanism in the sense proposed by MacKinnon et al. (2022): a spatially targeted intervention that alleviates the most acute symptoms of relational disconnection without removing its structural causes.

Transport isolation proves inseparable from a sense of powerlessness in the face of decisions taken at the centre. The relational dimension of structural disconnection thus extends beyond infrastructure into the sphere of institutional power, presented by local leaders as top-down and indifferent to local needs. A councillor from the Włocławek region, drawing on his experience of advocacy over a new bridge on the Vistula and the S10 road, names this

experience directly: “Włocławek is treated as a marginalized city that has lost its functions, rather than as a city that can still reclaim them. [...] I am pessimistic about this.” (Włocławek, type 2). This statement frames territorial marginalisation not as a statistical indicator but as a collective experience, which the speaker links to the trauma of deindustrialisation and to the loss of administrative rank. His declared pessimism, grounded in repeated encounters with the ritual character of promises that do not translate into actual investment, illustrates a state of exhausted agency (Hannemann et al., 2024), in which the capacity of local representatives themselves to act is systematically depleted by the gap between promise and outcome. This mechanism belongs to the frame of the regulatory production of peripherality: peripheral status is here a product of institutional categorisation rather than of geographical location.

A complementary dimension of the process emerges in Włocławek in the field of the energy transition. A local government leader’s account of the hydrogen initiatives of the ORLEN Group is analytically interesting less for what it reports than for the position from which it is uttered: *“...they are trying out these hydrogen solutions in Włocławek. Hence the idea of ORLEN building this small modular reactor, because, obviously, you need electricity for hydrogen — that’s quite basic physics.”* (Włocławek, type 1). Włocławek appears in the sentence as a locative rather than as an agent: it is where solutions are tried out, and the grammatical subjects of investment are the corporation and its engineering rationale. The quotation does not demonstrate an absence of local agency, and we do not read it as evidence of that. What it shows is how the city’s own leadership narrates a major investment in its territory, in a reporting rather than a first-person register. Read against the regulatory background set out above, this indicates peripheralisation without a visible agent: dependence reproduced through corporate and legislative frameworks that afford local actors approval but not initiation.

The common denominator across all four areas is a systemic deficit of external transport accessibility, manifested in a negligible number of connections to regional metropolises and in dependence on private cars. The withdrawal of long-distance bus services such as PKS [*State Bus Transport]*, accelerated after 2020, although in some cases degradation had occurred earlier: "*The PKS bus used to run here five times a day; currently, we don't have a single connection."* (Drawsko Pomorskie, type 3).

In Sandomierz, the high recognisability of the city's tourism capital coexists with severe transport disconnection, which one entrepreneur illustrated by describing an absurdly long rail journey to Kraków: *"A 3.5-hour drive vs a 16-hour train ride [...] with an overnight transfer."* (Sandomierz, type 3). This paradox of heritage and connectivity is a stark illustration of territorial justice: an uneven distribution of infrastructural investment that prevents the effective use of existing assets.

Relational disconnection from external networks does not remain impersonal; its everyday vehicle is the degradation of social infrastructure, described in subsection 4.2.

4.2 The Erosion of Social Infrastructure: Everyday Peripheralisation

The everyday experience of relational disconnection is rooted in the availability, or unavailability, of the foundational-economy infrastructures set out in Section 2: schools, health care, public transport, libraries and spaces of community life (Bowman et al., 2014; Arcidiacono et al., 2022. This subsection works at the second of the three levels distinguished above: the provisioning layer in which the costs of those regulatory decisions land, and in which flanking mechanisms are largely absent.

Accounts gathered in all four functional urban areas converge on a shared diagnosis: the gradual withdrawal of public services from peripheral towns generates a self-reinforcing cycle of marginalisation that degrades both the objective quality of life and the subjective sense of

belonging to a political community that guarantees basic goods. School closures, the relocation of public offices, the reduction of clinic services and the dismantling of public transport are concrete, countable losses, corresponding to what Fullilove (2016) defines as root shock: the cumulative trauma of being cut off from the infrastructure that roots people in place. The process is most evident in the case of institutions whose presence in the town centre symbolised full membership of the civic community. In Włocławek, an NGO activist describes the relocation of the Social Insurance Institution office from the main square to the outskirts: *"The ZUS [Social Insurance Institution] office had always been in the city on Wolności Square. [...] in-person customer service [...] was moved outside the city, far on the outskirts — 'by the dam'. That's also where disabled people have to travel for their disability assessments."* (Włocławek, type 3).

The relocation of the ZUS office is not merely a local inconvenience: it shows how a micro-level root shock, the loss of an institution anchored in the town centre, calls for a systemic response. When access to disability assessment or to social insurance services is pushed out to the outskirts, beyond the reach of people with limited mobility, the threshold of the spatial social minimum is breached (cf. Dudek et al., 2024): the guaranteed level of access to basic services below which cohesion policy ceases to equalise conditions for development and begins instead to reproduce exclusion.

Education emerges as a further sphere in which degradation is both a symptom and a driver of peripheralisation. In Drawsko Pomorskie and Przasnysz, local government representatives point to demography as the force behind school closures: *"We are even struggling with the problem of a lack of children in schools."* (Drawsko Pomorskie, type 2). *"Only 60 children were born in Przasnysz. I mean, what is that for a town of this size? [...] back when I went to elementary school, there were about 200 children."* (Przasnysz, type 2). A decline to 60 births a year signals to the local education system that further schools will be

closed, which accelerates the out-migration of families with children and closes the negative loop between population loss and the disappearance of institutions: a classic example of degradation as an accelerator of peripherality.

Health care is described as a structural barrier rather than as a temporary inconvenience. In Drawsko Pomorskie, councillors characterise primary health care as chronically dysfunctional: *"GP services [...] are a disaster. [...] it was hopeless, and during COVID it got even worse [...] now it's back [...] to being hopeless."* (Drawsko Pomorskie, type 3). *"When someone gets sick and wants to book an appointment, the first thing they're offered is a telehealth consultation. It's what's left over from COVID."* (Drawsko Pomorskie, type 2). Teleconsultation as the post-pandemic default symbolises the normalisation of inaccessibility, a downward shift in the standard of care and the acceptance of a chronic gap. In Sandomierz, FGI participants describe an informal hierarchy of health care providers in which a private facility takes over the functions of the public hospital, while in Włocławek NGO representatives speak of appalling access to specialists. In Fullilove (2016) terms, each such closure or degradation is a micro-level root shock that cumulatively undermines residents' trust in the state's capacity to care for its citizens.

The organisation of public transport is the most tangible expression of the degradation of social infrastructure, since its effects bear directly on educational, health-related and occupational opportunities. In Przasnysz, a local government representative explains how the privatisation of bus services makes their operation dependent on contracts with municipalities: *"A private company [...] if municipalities contract school transport and tickets for them, they have a guaranteed income all year round [...] whereas with monthly or single tickets, kids will buy them one time and not the next."* (Przasnysz, type 2). In Włocławek, a transport official sums the situation up: *"All the municipalities [...] are transport-deprived when it comes to public transit, because, basically, you could say it doesn't even exist."* (Włocławek, type 2).

Both quotations reveal the same mechanism: when the profitability of transport depends on municipal orders, residents who lack stable institutional ties (children without guaranteed school transport, older people without a car) become invisible to the system, even though their needs are known.

Comparatively, each of the four FUAs reveals a specific configuration of everyday peripheralisation. In Drawsko Pomorskie, the military partly substitutes for absent civilian institutions; in Włocławek, demographic scale alone makes institutional losses particularly acute and resonant with the history of deindustrialisation. In Przasnysz, proximity to Warsaw intensifies the sense of being cut off from metropolitan benefits: the centre is visible, yet in infrastructural terms it remains out of reach. At first sight Sandomierz looks like a counter-example; analytically, it is the case that tests our argument most directly. A local government leader describes the active expansion of social infrastructure, including new municipal housing, nurseries and low-emission buses, while stressing that "*the problem is with jobs and earnings",* so that improved services do not halt the outflow of young people (Sandomierz, type 1). The city experiences a heritage trap and a frozen foundational economy: services exist and are expanding, but locational constraints (Natura 2000 sites, the conservation zone) and a weak labour market limit their capacity to retain residents. Sandomierz therefore rules out the simplest rival account of our findings: if the sense of not mattering were merely a function of service decline, the one area in which provision is improving should not display it, and it does.

Taken together, these patterns illustrate a paradoxical loop of everyday peripheralisation: the less social infrastructure a territory retains, the weaker its capacity to rebuild it, since population loss, a shrinking tax base and institutional outflow reinforce one another. The institutional withdrawal of services from a community does not go unnoticed: in the FGI narratives, the erosion of services is consistently translated into a diffuse yet pervasive affective register of non-recognition and abandonment, developed in the next section.

4.3 “We Don’t Matter”: Affective Narratives and the Discursive Work of Local Actors

With this subsection the analysis moves to the third level, the affective register in which these failures are narrated by the actors who have to account for them locally. The register reconstructed here is not a raw record of residents’ moods but an articulation produced by local leaders, who select which grievances to make visible, to whom responsibility is attributed, and how diffuse discontent can be converted into political capital in relations with ‘the centre’ (see 3.4). What we analyse, therefore, is not emotion but the strategies through which local elites give emotion a public form, organised around a dominant register of non-recognition.

The most direct articulations of non-recognition appeared in Włocławek, where FGI participants constructed a tension between the city’s objective economic potential and its weak visibility in public debate: *“After all, we have production that is famous all over Poland, but nobody talks about it […] people from Włocławek don’t like their city and don’t know how to brag about it to the outside world.*” (Włocławek, type 3). The statement is telling not only as a diagnosis but as a rhetorical move: the speaker locates the deficit both outside the community (nobody talks about it) and within it (people from Włocławek do not like their city), preparing the ground for the leader’s role as the one who is able to recognise the city where others have failed. This logic can be linked to what Rodríguez-Pose (2018) calls the revenge of the places that don’t matter: non-recognition is not a simple lack of attention but an expression of the selective attribution of significance to territories, which local actors attempt to turn to their own advantage.

An analogous voice, though differently addressed, emerges in Drawsko Pomorskie, where a local government representative describes systemic omission: “*We are not invited to the table when these decisions are made. Nobody talks to us about it — neither the county nor the voivodeship [regional government]. We find out from the press.*” (Drawsko Pomorskie, type 2). Both quotations, one from a larger centre and one from a smaller town, show that the

experience of invisibility is constructed at different territorial scales, yet in both cases it is the leader who names it and locates the agent responsible for it.

The attribution of blame is most clearly visible in the narrative of a local government leader from Drawsko Pomorskie, who presents the town's astronomically terrible position in relation to the expressway network (see 4.1) as the source of its developmental difficulties. To treat this statement as a literal voice of the community would be an analytical error. Attribution directed outwards, towards decisions taken at the centre, towards the network, towards the government, performs two functions at once. On the one hand, it authentically conveys the real, structural disconnection that residents experience on a daily basis and that we documented in Section 4.1. On the other, by shifting the burden of responsibility onto extra-local factors, it defers the question of the agency and inventiveness of local government itself, offering a convenient frame in which local difficulties are always the effect of neglect by the centre and never of the limitations of local leadership. This is precisely the value of reading leaders as a lens: it allows us to grasp how local elites simultaneously represent the community's grievance and instrumentalise it, building political capital upon the sense of non-recognition in negotiations with higher-level authorities.

A different strategy consists in the work performed with shame, an affect that arises when a community internalises the devaluation of its own place (Lister, 2008). In the Przasnysz material, a participant confronts the absence of cultural infrastructure with an external judgement: *"I have an employee from Ukraine, and his wife said there's nothing to do in Przasnysz — no cinema, no nothing. And she refused to stay. The employee left.*" (Przasnysz, type 3). It is telling that the speaker reaches for someone else's voice rather than formulating his own, a typical technique of distancing oneself from internalised stigma. An immediate correction follows, however, in which the leader recaptures the narrative and turns it into a story of development: "*But things are developing. There was no cinema, but there will be — we're*

getting a wonderful community center." (Przasnysz, type 3). By treating peripherality as a stage rather than as a destiny, the speaker enacts the mechanism of embitterment described by Hannemann et al. (2024): the conversion of shame into an announcement of renewal is at once affective resistance and an act of local leadership.

A third strategy operates in the register of resignation and bitter irony, revealing a tension between the official discourse of agency, dominant in the interviews with local government leaders, and the pessimism of FGI participants. A councillor from the Włocławek region, commenting on the ritual character of promises concerning key infrastructure, remarked: "*I'm a pessimist. I've been in this for too long to be an optimist.*" (Włocławek, type 2). Such statements confirm the claim of Hannemann et al. (2024) that the principal trigger of the sense of being left behind is a negative assessment of governance rather than a lack of resources as such, a state close to emotional lock-in, in which accumulated negative institutional experiences prevent the constructive use of new opportunities. In the mouths of leaders, however, this register also performs a self-authenticating function: pessimism can serve as proof of experience, and irony as a way of saving face where agency has proved limited.

Alongside shame and resignation, the opposite register resounds in leaders' accounts: defiant localism, best read as compensatory identity work rather than as spontaneous local pride. Leaders mobilise symbolic resources precisely in the register where hard resources from the centre are unavailable to them: soft assets are cheap to activate, fall within municipal competence and yield visible results within an electoral cycle, whereas infrastructural investment does not depend on local decision at all. In Przasnysz, a local government leader translates heritage into concrete practices: "*We leaned heavily into our founding story […] we set up an urban apiary, we organize honey festivals, and we created our first local product — Przaśnik bread. […] We want to both promote the city and build an identity: I'm from here, I have my own product, I have something to be proud of.*" (Przasnysz, type 1). In Włocławek, the

same mechanism rests on the material culture of production, faience and Włocławek ketchup, and one local leader, calling the city the capital of the universe, appeals for heritage to be promoted with passion in order to overcome residents' inferiority complexes: "*This faience pottery is making a comeback, you hear about Włocławek ketchup everywhere […] there are so many things we could use to build 'our brand'.*" (Włocławek, type 3). Both narratives convert the sense of non-recognition into a claim for recognition, turning local identity, Przasnysz honey and Włocławek faience, not into folklore but into a developmental resource. On this reading defiant localism is not a counterweight to peripheralisation but one of its effects: it substitutes symbolic recognition for the material recognition that local leadership cannot secure.

4.4 Political Articulations: From Discontent to Institutional Cynicism

This subsection remains at the third level and asks what that register does: how it feeds back into the settlement that produced it. The registers reconstructed in 4.1 to 4.3 and the institutional cynicism examined here are related in the accounts we analysed, though not as a causal sequence our design could establish. The relocation of the Włocławek ZUS office illustrates the connection as a configuration: the degradation of an institution anchored in the town centre is narrated as a loss of rank; that loss is reworked by leaders into a claim for recognition built on endogenous symbolic resources; the claim meets a logic of distribution organised by loyalty rather than need; and the encounter settles into the conviction, among the elites themselves, that the local voice counts for nothing.

Affective narratives of non-recognition do not translate automatically into electoral behaviour; their political efficacy is mediated by mechanisms of responsibility attribution and by a sense of procedural injustice. The first mediating link is the politicisation of peripherality through partisan resource allocation. This was expressed most emphatically by a local government leader in Włocławek, who identified territorial injustice as the effect of a deliberate strategy pursued by the centre: *"The money is scattered around like [...] 'chicken feed' politics.*

[...] cities like Włocławek, which don't vote for PiS [Law and Justice party; eurosceptic & populist], lose out because there's no voter here they [need] to fight for." (Włocławek, type 1). As Dijkstra et al. (2020) and Adamiak et al. (2026) suggest, such selective distribution of funds, motivated by electoral loyalty rather than by objective need, cements the status of these areas as places that don't matter (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and entrenches the conviction that resource allocation is systemically biased.

The cynicism is the product of a particular architecture of distribution rather than an individual attitude: where funds are allocated by a key of electoral loyalty, the mechanism itself produces the conviction that the game is rigged. We return to its implications for the design of cohesion policy in Section 5.

The second link in this process is procedural injustice, the deep conviction that local knowledge and agency are systematically ignored by 'Warsaw'. In Rawls's (1971) framework, territorial justice requires not only the distribution of goods but, above all, fair decision-making procedures. Their absence builds institutional cynicism, as the account of an entrepreneur from Przasnysz describing arbitrary changes to road plans vividly illustrates: *"The beltway that was in his plans, but the plan was scrapped and traffic was routed through the city — where the thinking was that routing traffic through the city would bring in money because people would stop [...], which is total nonsense."* (Przasnysz, type 3). In this context, McKay et al. (2021) identify the structure of social ties as a key mediator: when local planning mechanisms are perceived as rituals devoid of influence, withdrawal from participation and an erosion of political trust follow.

The final link is the sedimentation of accumulated bitterness into durable institutional cynicism. In inner peripheries, repeated promises that do not translate into action cease to be perceived as a real development plan and become instead a measure of systemic incoherence. A councillor from Przasnysz notes the cyclical character of ritual declarations that are never

acted upon: "*The previous county commissioner had this vision, and the current one also talked about developing this zone [Przasnysz Economic Zone] in his campaign slogans. But let's be honest, it has slumped a bit."* (Przasnysz, type 2). This is the pattern of disillusionment described by Hannemann et al. (2024), which leads to a state of exhausted agency. We do not, however, record here the attitudes of residents at large: it is local leaders who diagnose exhausted agency in their communities, that is, the conviction that participation in procedures such as consultations, planning or voting changes nothing, and who turn that diagnosis into an argument in their dispute with the centre. In Drawsko Pomorskie, this negative attribution of responsibility closes the loop of marginalisation, linking global factors with government decisions: *"[It depends] on the situation in the country, on the PiS government, on Covid, on inflation. A lot of businesses in Drawsko simply shut down."* (Drawsko Pomorskie, type 3). Adamiak et al. (2026) stress that such central attribution is particularly strong where weak institutional capital prevents local structures from effectively filtering the effects of national decisions. The same register surfaces in Sandomierz, where an entrepreneur recounts a subsidy returned for want of matching funds in a tone of laughing through tears: "*The paradox of it — and it's a case of laughing through the tears — is that […] the lowest bidder offered to complete the investment for 34 million PLN. Ergo, the city didn't have that extra 22 million to add, so the 12 million [external subsidies] was returned.*" (Sandomierz, type 3).

In sum, the findings suggest that it is not objective scarcity but the subjective sense of having been cheated by procedures and passed over in the political allocation of resources that constitutes the real link between the infrastructure of everyday life and the geography of discontent and political withdrawal.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show that the experience of inner peripherality in the four functional urban areas studied does not take the form of a linear transition from structural deficit to political

reaction, nor do our data establish a causal sequence. What they support is a configuration: four registers that co-occur across the accounts we analysed and that our respondents themselves relate to one another, namely relational disconnection from development networks (4.1), degradation of the foundational economy (4.2), narratives of non-recognition (4.3) and muted political articulation (4.4). We present this as a heuristic, a way of organising co-occurrence and mutual reinforcement, rather than as a chain that a design of this kind could establish. The affects composing it are reconstructed as they are named and mobilised by local leaders, not as directly measured attitudes of the population at large. The key conclusion, however, concerns the form that discontent takes. The dominant form of discontent in the communities studied proved to be withdrawal, institutional cynicism and what we term exhausted agency: a condition that local leaders diagnose in their communities, describing residents as losing faith that protest, consultation or electoral participation will change anything.

Western accounts of the geography of discontent read spatial resentment largely off electoral behaviour (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020; McCann, 2020), and Poland is not an exception at that level: in a companion quantitative study we have ourselves mapped the territorial patterns of revenge and counter-revenge in Polish voting (Adamiak et al., 2026). The present article takes the argument one step upstream, and the two are designed to be read together. Among the actors who mediate between these communities and the state, the revenge of the places that don't matter is articulated in a register of procedural cynicism and exhausted agency rather than of mobilisation, and it is this formation that precedes and outlasts any single electoral expression of it. Where the companion study establishes where territorial revenge registers electorally, the present one reconstructs the register in which it is voiced before it does.

This has a direct implication for how relational peripheralisation is to be understood. Existing relational accounts describe peripherality as produced through the severing of economic, institutional and communicative ties (Kühn, 2015; Leibert & Golinski, 2017), and

our earlier structural study traced how those ties were cut across five dimensions of territorial capital (Churski et al., 2025). What the present analysis adds is the claim that relational disconnection is not only reproduced structurally but is also internalised affectively, creating a feedback loop in which the sense of not being recognised erodes precisely the political capacity that would be required to contest the conditions producing it. Affect, on this account, is not a reflection of structure but a mechanism of its reproduction. The regulation-theoretical frame outlined in Section 2 (Aglietta, 1979; Boyer, 1990) is thereby extended in one specific respect: affect operates as an institutional form in its own right, stabilising the spatial mode of regulation at the point where its flanking mechanisms fail. The spatial mode of regulation is stabilised not only through institutions, capital flows and flanking mechanisms (MacKinnon et al., 2022), but also through everyday narratives in which local actors in inner peripheries name, and gradually take for granted, their own exclusion from the circulation of resources and of decision-makers' attention. The remarks of local government leaders about the astronomically terrible location of Drawsko Pomorskie and about chicken feed politics in Włocławek, show that these mechanisms are experienced not as an abstract institutional configuration but as personalised grievance; it is precisely this shift from the structural to the lived that lends the mode of regulation its durability.

Empirically, the article fills a gap in the literature on left-behind places, which has developed predominantly on the basis of objective indicators and in Western European contexts (Martin et al., 2021; MacKinnon et al.,; 2024; Pike et al., 2024). Reading the same four cases through a narrative and affective prism makes it possible to capture the divergence between hard indicators and subjective experience that a typology of territorial capital cannot, by design, register, and it is precisely this divergence that explains why structurally similar areas are narrated and politicised so differently. Sandomierz, endowed with strong tourism capital yet severely disconnected in transport terms, and Włocławek, economically significant thanks to a

developed industrial base yet symbolically invisible, show that the sense of not mattering follows recognition rather than the scale of production. Sandomierz is decisive here: because its social infrastructure is expanding, it isolates recognition rather than provision as the operative variable. The Central European context adds a further specificity absent from Western studies: post-socialist transformation itself functions as the original peripheralising event, and its consequences, including the collapse of State Agricultural Farms and of state industry, the loss of voivodeship capital status and the reinforced legacy of the partitions, supply a distinct narrative repertoire through which present-day marginalisation is understood (Hardy, 2004; Churski et al., 2025).

Our findings deepen the dialogue with the work already invoked in the introduction. The convergence with Leetmaa et al. (2026) is the most concrete: it is the closure of local anchor institutions, rather than infrastructural deficit as such, that generates the deepest sense of exclusion, which corresponds directly to our analysis of the relocation of the ZUS office in Włocławek and of school closures in Drawsko Pomorskie and Przasnysz (4.2).

Our findings, situated within the frameworks of the foundational economy (Arcidiacono et al., 2022) and of territorial justice, point to the need for a reform of EU cohesion policy after 2027 resting on three interlinked pillars (Fraser et al., 2004). The first is redistribution freed from the partisan allocation that our interviewees read as proof that they do not matter, and calibrated to specific deficits of organised proximity rather than to macroeconomic indicators alone. The second is recognition. In material terms this means guaranteeing a spatial social minimum, a threshold of access to basic services treated as a floor for eligibility for support programmes rather than as their expected outcome; Sandomierz, a city with strong tourism capital cut off by a sixteen-hour rail journey against a three-and-a-half-hour drive (4.1), is the clearest violation in our material. In symbolic terms it means valorising the local identities that our interviewees convert into a developmental resource (4.3). The third is representation, that

is, participatory parity in decisions about the allocation of funds, without which transfers may improve incomes while leaving the experience of procedural exclusion intact. Implementing these pillars finally requires that the tools for monitoring cohesion policy be supplemented. A system based mainly on quantitative indicators such as GDP and unemployment cannot capture the relational and affective dimensions of exclusion that we have documented, and least of all exhausted agency (4.3 and 4.4), where it is the subjective sense of being passed over, rather than resource scarcity as such, that generates withdrawal and the delegitimation of institutions. We therefore propose that affective monitoring, that is, periodic studies combining quantitative data with the knowledge of residents and local actors as experts by experience, should become part of an early-warning system capable of identifying a growing sense of grievance before it translates into lasting withdrawal from public life.

The limitations set out in Section 3.4 qualify these conclusions and should be read alongside them: our respondents are local institutional and civic leaders with their own symbolic capital and motives, the material is a snapshot taken in 2023, and the analysis rests on four functional urban areas coded manually by the team.

A final qualification concerns timing. The interviews were conducted in 2023, before the parliamentary election of October that year and the change of government that followed. Two considerations bear on how far this dates the analysis. Theoretically, affective peripheralisation is a sedimented formation, accumulating through repeated institutional encounters over decades (Hannemann et al., 2024), and there is no reason to expect it to dissolve with a single electoral alternation where the underlying settlement remains intact. Empirically, our account renders this testable rather than assumed: if the mechanism is partisan allocation rather than peripherality as such, alternation should redirect the bias rather than remove it. This is precisely the territorial counter-revenge we document in our companion quantitative study of Polish voting (Adamiak et al., 2026), and the qualitative material presented here supplies the register

in which that redirection is experienced locally. Whether the register of exhausted agency has shifted since 2023 our design cannot settle.

Ultimately, the article shows that the political sense of marginalisation is not a simple consequence of peripheral location or of unfavourable socio-economic indicators, but a manifestation of affective peripheralisation: a collective condition of not mattering, publicly articulated by local actors and grounded in relational exclusion from networks of recognition, representation and agency.

The Polish case thereby offers a corrective to the Western European canon on left-behind places: the revenge of the places that don't matter is not, here, an irrational revolt against objective deprivation, but a coherent response to an affectively lived mode of regulation, in which the post-1989 transformation itself acted as the founding peripheralising event and continues to supply the repertoire through which present-day marginalisation is felt and voiced. A model of the geography of discontent calibrated on Western experience fails to capture this dynamic, and recognising it leads to an important implication for cohesion policy: unless its interventions simultaneously strengthen residents' sense of political agency and social recognition, they risk reproducing the very mechanisms of exclusion that the policy is intended to reduce.

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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Due to the sensitive nature of the questions asked in this study, respondents were assured that raw data would remain confidential and would not be shared.

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