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Spatial inequalities and the geography of discontent - a case study of Poland

In the space of every continent or country there are areas with varying levels of social and economic development characterized most generally by an unequal distribution of income and resources. These spatial inequalities, which continue to deepen, are the subject of multi-aspect research and analyses (Bański 2020; Rodriguez-Pose, Hardy 2015; Wei 2015; Israel, Frenkel 2018). The increase in interregional disparities has directed researchers' attention towards analyzing their social and political consequences.

Many studies show that spatial inequality is associated with growing populism and political disorder. (McCann, 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Broz et al., 2021). The voting behavior of residents of "left behind" regions has become a topic of analysis. A new research direction has emerged - the geography of discontent (Dijkstra et al., 2020), in which the attention of authors focuses, among other things, on finding and explaining the factors of the political choices of communities living in the regions left behind. The determinants identified are characterized by wide variation, and the conclusions of the research are sometimes contradictory.

The debate in the geography of discontent has focused on the situation in Western Europe and the United States. There are few studies dealing with this issue in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The need for such studies is justified by the fact that after the collapse of socialism, deep spatial polarization occurred there as a result of socio-economic and political transformation. This study explores specific forms of the geography of discontent in Poland. The analysis of election results in sample Polish municipalities affected by socio-economic problems (unemployment, agricultural crisis) shows that, depending on socio-economic and cultural conditions, local communities may express their dissatisfaction in different ways. A difficult economic situation caused by or associated with right-wing governments causes those dissatisfied with their living situation to vote for the left and its promises. In the opposite situation, where the left is blamed for the bad situation, the dissatisfied turn to parties with a right-wing tinge. Liberal parties are also involved in the political game. These are not necessarily populist parties, but parties that bring hope for an improvement in the situation or are considered to be the creators of such an improvement. Populism has been around since 1990, and one can see that its centrist undercurrent has given way in recent years to right-wing populism, which is adapting its narratives to new themes related primarily to the migrant crisis and the COVID pandemic.

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