The Regional Development Trap and Populist Discontent in Poland

- A Case Study of the Polish 2023 Elections

Abstract

The topic of unequal regional development is well-studied, and evening those inequalities out has long been a core priority for the European Union, deemed necessary for sustainable long-term growth across the EU. Even so, many regions seem to be 'left behind' or treated as though they 'don't matter', and the 'populist vote' for Euroskeptic, 'anti-systemic' parties has grown steadily throughout the 21st century. According to a recently created conceptual framework by Diemer et al. (2022), being caught in a 'regional development trap' correlates with the degree of 'populist' voting.

Poland is a country with deeply entrenched spatial divisions of socio-economic development, and has one of the EU:s highest shares of populist voting. To test the 'regional development trap' and explore the relationship between spatial inequalities and 'populist' discontent, this thesis includes a case study of Poland's historical, political, and economic geography to analyze the 2023 Polish parliamentary election results. Primary and secondary empirical data is analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, as well as exploratory data analysis. The results indicate that the 'populist vote' in Poland does not exhibit stronger covariance with 'regional development trap' indicators than indicators of income level or urban-rural typology.

Keywords

Spatial inequalities, Regional development, Regional development trap, Poland, Populism

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Maps, Figures, and Tables

1. Introduction

1.1. Spatial Inequalities and Populist Discontent

It is well established that spatial inequalities drive *populist* discontent, defined as anti-systemic, anti-globalization, often nationalist political movements which seek to radically change the established political and economic order (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, A., Dijkstra, L., & Poelman, H., 2023). When harnessed by 'populist' parties at the ballot box, this discontent risks creating a self-reinforcing erosion of trust in institutions, government, and international integration (Anderson, 2021; Bailey et al., 2020; R. Martin, et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Consequently, the political fallout of uneven regional development remains a hot topic within contemporary Economic Geography. The trend of growing spatial inequality ongoing since the 1980's (R. Martin, et al., 2021) has been exacerbated by the many international crises of the turbulent 21st century, from the Global War on Terror to the Global Financial Crisis [henceforth: GFC], via the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailey et al., 2020; Diemer et al., 2022; Dodds et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, A., Terrero-Dávila, J., & Lee, N., 2023) to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (European Council, 2023). The future looks set to bring further systemic challenges as the consequences of intensifying climate change and artificial intelligence develop (R. Martin, et al., 2021).

For the European Union, evening out regional inequalities has been a core focus since its inception in 1957, through programs such as the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Policy (European Commission, 2024). Even so, 'populist' discontent expressed as Euroskeptic voting has grown steadily over the last two decades, indicating a persistent failure to address the problem of uneven regional development (Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman, 2023). The authors suggest there exists a gap in regional research, and in policy at both the national and EU levels to address a particular type of long-term stagnation particularly prone to foster discontent, which they term the *regional development trap*. Figure 1 from Rodríguez-Pose, A., Dijkstra, L., & Poelman, H., (2023) shows the growth of "soft" and "hard" Euroskepticism in the 21st century, the former defined as heavy criticism and calls for significant reduction of EU influence over national matters, and the latter for full withdrawal from the EU.
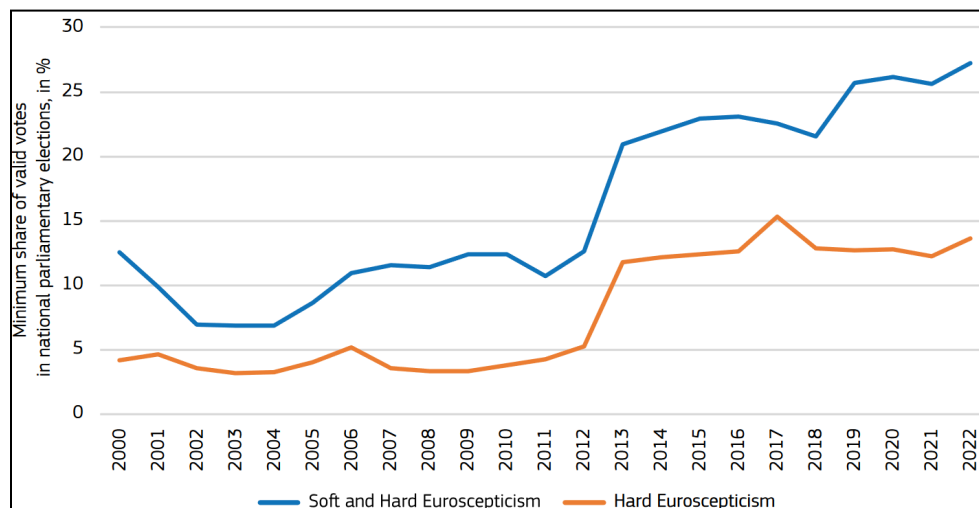
Figure 1. *Votes for Euroskeptic Parties in National Parliamentary Elections, 2000-2022.*

Adapted from *The Geography of EU Discontent and the Regional Development Trap* by A. Rodríguez-Pose, L. Dijkstra, & H. Poelman, 2023, p. 7. (https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/164290). CC BY 4.0 DEED.

1.2. The Polish Elections in the European Union Context

When writing began on this thesis in the late autumn of 2023, European unity seemed at stake as Poland held parliamentary elections on October 15. The two-term incumbent conservative, 'populist', Euroskeptic Polish government led by Jarosław Kaczyński faced off against a liberal coalition led by Donald Tusk, former Prime Minister of Poland and former President of the European Council.

The conservative government had long been on a collision course with the EU alongside Viktor Orbán's Hungary on human rights issues and the co-opting of democratic institutions, causing the EU to withhold billions of euros in structural support (Dudik et al., 2023). Just two weeks before the Polish elections, Slovakia looked set to become another thorn in the EU:s side with the election victory of a similarly-minded Euroskeptic 'populist' party with almost 23% of the vote (Henley, 2023). Therefore, the parliamentary majority won by Tusk's liberal coalition, was widely considered a victory for European cohesion and democracy itself. But while the conservative coalition was defeated, its leading party Law and Justice remained the largest party following a polarizing campaign, in which the EU was characterized as a major antagonist

(Dudik et al., 2023). The Polish-EU conflict is particularly noteworthy as Poland has been considered a model example of successful post-Soviet EU integration, strongly benefitting from the Union's structural development programs (Churski & Perdał, 2016; Churski & Kaczmarek, 2022; Jagódka & Snarska, 2023). Furthermore, post-Soviet Polish electoral geography has exhibited consistent spatial patterns not only along the urban-rural divide, but as seen in Figure 2, also along the over two-centuries-old former imperial Partition borders of Poland, when the country was divided between Austria-Hungary, Prussia (later German Empire), and Russia. Economic Geographers such as Churski (2014), Gajewski and Tchorek (2017) Herodowicz et al. (2021) agree that those Partitions have lasting effects on Polish regional development.

In conclusion, this thesis will tie together Polish historical, economic, and political geography using the 'regional development trap' framework to analyze the Polish 2023 parliamentary election result.
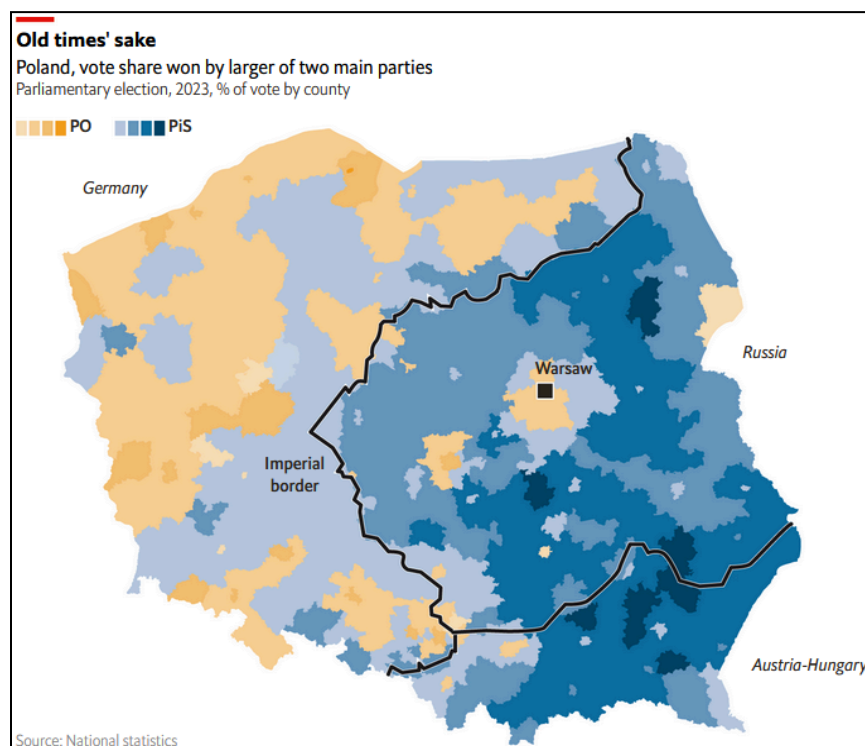
Figure 2. *18th Century Partition Borders Superimposed over Polish 2023 Election Results*

From *Imperial borders still shape politics in Poland* (2023) © The Economist Group Limited, London (Dec 21, 2023). Reprinted with permission.

2. Aim and Research Questions

2.1. Aim

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the relationship between spatial inequalities and 'populist' discontent by examining the 2023 Polish parliamentary election results, using an analytical framework built on contemporary Economic Geography, including the conceptual framework of the 'regional development trap'. This thesis combines exploratory analysis of the principally interesting case study subject of Poland, with the novel theoretical approach of the 'regional development trap', which is tested with a follow-up of its 2018-2022 voting data into 2023.

2.2. Research Questions

- *To what extent did being caught in a 'regional development trap' covary with the vote for 'populist' parties in the Polish 2023 Sejm elections?*
- *To what extent did spatial inequalities resulting from historical patterns of development covary with the vote for 'populist' parties in the Polish 2023 Sejm elections?*

2.3. Delimitations

The primary focus of this thesis is the Polish 2023 parliamentary elections, analyzing its results at the *Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics* [henceforth: NUTS] 3 level, which was considered the best compromise between sufficient granularity for analysis, and practical concerns of time and scope available. Furthermore, using NUTS 3 as the main spatial unit for this thesis is practical, as it is equivalent to the Polish territorial subdivision *subregion*, and EU statistics as well as relevant previous research have often made use of it. This allows for simple and time efficient adaptations of statistics and variables elaborated in previous studies, a method which was chosen over requesting access to full datasets due to uncertainty about permission and time constraints.

Temporally, the thesis touches on events spanning over 300 years for relevant context, but only the last two last decades and particularly the year of 2023 are explored in depth. As for the thesis' section on theory, the literature review outlines a broad theoretical foundation of spatial

inequalities and 'populist' discontent, with the primary focus on the conceptual framework built around the 'regional development trap'.

Finally, the Polish 2023 elections included votes for two separate parliamentary chambers, the *Sejm* and the *Senat*, as well as several referendums. Results for the two chambers were similar, and for the purposes of this thesis, the 'Polish 2023 elections' are delimited to the vote for the Sejm, as it's the larger chamber and unlike the Senat, its representatives are elected by proportional representation in multi-seat constituencies (Civil Service, 2023).

2.4. Key Concepts and Definitions

Before going into detail about the theoretical foundations in the subsequent Theory section, the key concepts used in this thesis are briefly presented here.

Convergence and *divergence* refer to the reduction and increase of spatial inequalities, in this thesis typically in the context of European regional development, which trended towards convergence in the post-war era, until the transformational changes to the world economy following innovations associated with globalization (R. Martin, et al., 2021).

Regional *resilience*, as in resistance and recoverability to shock, became a hot topic in the context of the 21st century global crises, as spatial inequalities were further exacerbated according to ability to adapt to these shocks (Bristow & Healy 2020; R. L. Martin., 2018).

Places left behind, places that don't matter, and *geographies of discontent* are concepts dealing with the socio-economic outcomes of places suffering from long-term decline and stagnation, resulting in spatial patterns of 'populist' discontent (R. Martin, et al. 2021; Pike et al.; Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman, 2023).

Populist discontent, parties, voting, and similar concepts refer to diverse blends of anti-systemic, anti-globalization, often nationalist political movements, which come in different stripes and colors from left to right. The common denominator is the general opposition to a system of governance and an economy considered dysfunctional and unfair, which in the European context often manifests as Euroskepticism (R. Martin, et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, Terrero-Dávila, & Lee, 2023; Van Vulpen et al., 2023).

The 'regional development trap' is a conceptual framework developed to analyze the effects of long-term decline and stagnation in European regions, capturing decline happening at all levels of income. Research using the framework has indicated the existence of clear spatial patterns connecting long-term decline and stagnation with 'populist' discontent in Europe (Diemer et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman, 2023).

2.5. Reflexivity and Positionality

The author's personal interest in the topic shaped the design choices made for this thesis, but the ambition is to remain as unbiased and neutral as possible in literature, theory, empiric data, and analysis. This thesis builds on previous research within the broad mainstream of Economic Geography, wherein it's held for granted that international integration and cooperation is beneficial for the prosperity and equitable socio-economic development. In Europe, the European Union's cohesion policy is central to this, and relevant research on regional development and Euroskepticism, which is central to this thesis, was performed on request and funded by the European Commission which could indicate bias.

3. Theory

3.1. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

This section describes how research of spatial inequalities and 'populist' discontent has evolved over the last two decades, beginning with the broad, general theoretical background, leading into the narrow, specific conceptual framework around the 'regional development trap' as applied to Poland for the purposes of this thesis. The narrative starts out with a brief outline of mainstream Economic Geography research into the origins and growth of spatial inequalities, continues with research on how such inequalities drive 'populist' discontent, and finally describes how the conceptual framework around regional development traps tie spatial inequality and discontent together.

3.1.1. Convergence, Divergence, and Economic Resilience

According to R. Martin, et al. (2021), during the early post-war decades, regional development in advanced economies within and beyond Europe was trending towards *convergence*, as in the reduction of spatial inequalities, but began *diverging* during the 1980's. As technological innovation and diffusion drove the global transition from an industrial to a high-tech and knowledge-based economy, the economic landscape began to reshape rapidly. Existing spatial inequalities and imbalances widened further, depending on ability to adapt. Subsequently, the two 'once-in-a-lifetime' crises of the GFC and COVID-19 and their aftershocks further exacerbated the spatial divergence due to the varying ability to resist and recover from these shocks, a phenomenon known as economic *resilience*.

According to R. L. Martin. (2018), 'resilience' as a concept has been used widely across a multitude of disciplines from natural ecology to urban planning, and subsequently economic 'resilience' took off within Economic Geography after the 2008 GFC, with interest renewed with the outbreak of COVID-19. The concept is particularly suitable for regional economic analysis in a crisis as it deals with the ability to resist and recover from shock, whether global as in the cases above, or local, as in a dominant employer or industry moving out or fundamentally changing.

Due to its use across time and academic disciplines, many definitions of 'resilience' exist, but Bristow and Healy (2020) distinguishes different strands of conceptual application, including *engineering* and *evolutionary* 'resilience' within Economic Geography. The engineering perspective refers to an imagined economic steady-state which can be disrupted by a shock, and resilience is the ability to "bounce back" or "return to equilibrium". The evolutionary perspective however instead imagines an economy constantly in flux, where the post-shock outcome is determined by the ability to adapt and transform the economy in response not just to shocks but to changes in general.

3.1.2. Places Left Behind, Places that don't Matter, and Geographies of Discontent

Divergent development would inevitably proceed slower, decline, or stagnate more in some places than elsewhere, and where neither national governments nor supranational organizations sought to or succeeded in evening out the resulting disparities, some places seem to have been 'left behind'. According to R. Martin, et al. (2021) and Pike et al. (2023), the concept of 'left

behind places' gained much traction in both academia and political discourse following the trend of increasing spatial divergence, further reinforced by the crises of the new millennium. But R. Martin, et al. (2021) and Pike et al. (2023) warn of the risk of creating a binary oversimplification to the detriment of developing and implementing policy to address the problem at hand. For one thing, differing characteristics of different left-behind places imply different causes and trajectories of their problems, thus requiring policy solutions tailored to their specificities. For another, the scale of potential for growth could falsely be reduced to "growth in larger cities and derived spillovers and other compensations elsewhere" (R. Martin, et al., 2021, p. 7) in the eyes of policymakers.

Going further into the socio-political ramifications resulting from spatial inequalities, Rodríguez-Pose (2018) echoes the notion of 'places left behind' with 'places that don't matter'. These places, experiencing long-term decline compared to other ones, self-identify as underprivileged and are characterized by outside observers as backwards and obsolete, thus reinforcing the notion of being unfairly treated by a dysfunctional system. The inhabitants of those places "...are becoming tired of being told that they don't matter and are exercising a subtle revenge" (p. 199) by voting for parties opposing that which has driven the rapid growth they've not been part of. Even realizing that liberal international markets, migration, economic integration, and globalization might be good for the overall economy, as long as the places that 'don't matter' aren't benefiting it's as though they were saying "if we are being told that we no longer matter and that we are going down, the whole ship will sink with us" (p. 199). According to Anderson (2021), academic research going deeper into the origins and drivers of 'populist' discontent has typically either identified structural or economic drivers, or cultural identity drivers, but argues that both sources are likely important factors between which there might exist a causal relationship.

The concepts of 'places that don't matter' and 'geographies of discontent' in Europe have been further explored in research from different perspectives and places. Regional decline and discontent has been examined in single-case studies of Germany (Greve et al., 2023), Italy (Urso et al., 2023), and the Netherlands (Van Vulpen et al., 2023). Furthermore, additional perspectives have been added, including subjective social status in France and Germany (Vigna, 2023);

interpersonal inequality in the USA and Europe (Rodríguez-Pose, Terrero-Dávila, et al., 2023); emotions and regional embitterment in East Thuringia, Germany (Hannemann et al., 2023).

3.1.3. The Regional Development Trap

Rodríguez-Pose (2018) argued that the 'populist' discontent outlined above is the result of mainstream academic and political disinterest in middle-income places in decline, focusing instead on the most successful places where the maximum growth potential is, and the worst-off where urgent support is needed. This is reminiscent of the faulty binary distinction in the eyes of academia and policy which R. Martin (2021) described, and Rodriguez-Pose returned to this idea as a co-author when introducing the 'regional development trap' (Diemer et al., 2022).

Co-authors Diemer, Iammarino, Rodríguez-Pose and Storper identified a gap in research on regions caught in a state of long-term term decline and stagnation, and as a result, a gap in regional, national, and EU-level policies addressing such issues. While national policy tends to favor the already well-performing regions, and EU funding programmes focus on the worst-performing regions, medium-income regions are particularly neglected, but long-term decline and stagnation can happen at any income level (Diemer et al., 2022). To raise awareness about this issue, the authors introduced the 'regional development trap', defined as "...a region unable to retain its economic dynamism in terms of income, productivity, and employment, while also underperforming its national and European peers on these same dimensions." (Diemer et al., 2022, pp. 489–490). The authors then measured and identified regions within the European Union and the United Kingdom caught in or at risk of getting caught in a development trap.

The concept was inspired by the *middle-income trap*, originally used in international Development Studies, which describes states that are neither at the top nor bottom but stuck in the middle of economic development, as exemplified by Gajewski & Tchorek (2017) in a three-stage model. According to this model, a state or region starts out at a low-income stage, typically dominated by low-output agriculture, but eventually accumulates enough capital to industrialize and effectivize, allowing progression to a second, middle-income stage. Finally, if successful in accumulating enough material, human, and social capital, it can move on to the third stage where the economy is based on technology and innovation. However, the requirements for progression are steep, and failing the final transition, the state or region is

trapped at the middle-income stage where they neither possess the advantages of low-income countries such as low costs and untapped potential, nor the large amounts of accumulated wealth, stability, or technological advantages which help high-income countries stay at the forefront of economic development.

In their adaptation of the 'middle-income trap' to the 'regional development trap', Diemer et al. (2022) acknowledged that adapting analysis from national-level to subnational-level must be accounted for conceptually and statistically. Regions not only have to contend with other regions within their own state, but also with regions which are part of other states, with different socio-economic, legal, and other circumstances. Another important difference is that while middle-income states by definition excludes low- and high-income ones, and follow a linear path of progression as outlined above, regional trajectories leading into a trap can differ substantially. Decline and stagnation can begin at any income level, even high-income regions within high-income states (Diemer et al., 2022).

3.1.4. Regional Development Traps and EU Discontent

Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman (2023) further applied the concept in a report for the European Commission entitled *The Geography of EU Discontent and the Regional Development Trap*, in which they found a robust correlation between being stuck in a 'regional development trap' and discontent, expressed as vote shares for Euroskeptic parties. The correlation strengthens with time spent trapped as well as the intensity of the trap. A notable caveat is that while hard and soft Euroskepticism combined is more common in less developed regions, when isolated, hard Euroscepticism tends to be more popular in well developed regions.

Echoing R. Martin, et al., (2021)'s sentiment that characterizations such as 'winners and losers of globalization' are a detrimental oversimplification, Vasilopoulou & Talving (2023) built on the 'regional development trap' concept and analyzed three dimensions of regional inequality: regional wealth status, regional wealth growth, and regional wealth growth trajectories at different levels of wealth status. Their findings indicated, the authors argued, that individuals tend to compare their region's economic performance to how it's been in the past and the perceived future potential, thus reaffirming that it's not objective economic hardship, but stagnation and a real or perceived lack of opportunities that drive discontent. Another finding

was that low- and high-income regions tend to trust the EU more than middle–income regions do, as the high-income regions tend to associate their success with being well-integrated into its structures and institutions, while low-income regions realize and appreciate the impact EU funding programs have. As a consequence though, with middle-income regions feeling left out, improper allocation of EU support may risk widening regional inequalities (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2023).

The framework was developed for and has primarily been used to study spatial divergence in Europe and the US.
The Development Trap Index considers regional GDP per capita, productivity, and employment per capita growth.
The "trap" consists of long-term decline and stagnation relative to its own past and other regions, the country in which it is located, and the average performance of the EU.
A region can be trapped at low, medium, or high income levels.
Traps are measured in terms of intensity and time spent trapped.
Strong correlations have been found between trap intensity, time trapped, and votes for Euroskeptic parties.

Table 1. *Conceptual Summary of the 'Regional Development Trap'*

3.1.5. The Regional Development Trap in Europe and Poland

Figure 3, adapted from Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman (2023) shows the Regional Development Trap across the European Union NUTS 3 level regions. Several states demonstrate a large range between the least and most affected regions, while France, Italy and many parts of southern Europe stand out as the most affected by the 'regional development trap'. In contrast, many countries in Eastern Europe are less affected overall, including Poland [indicated by a black square], all the regions of which belong to one of the three lowest classes of the 'development trap'.
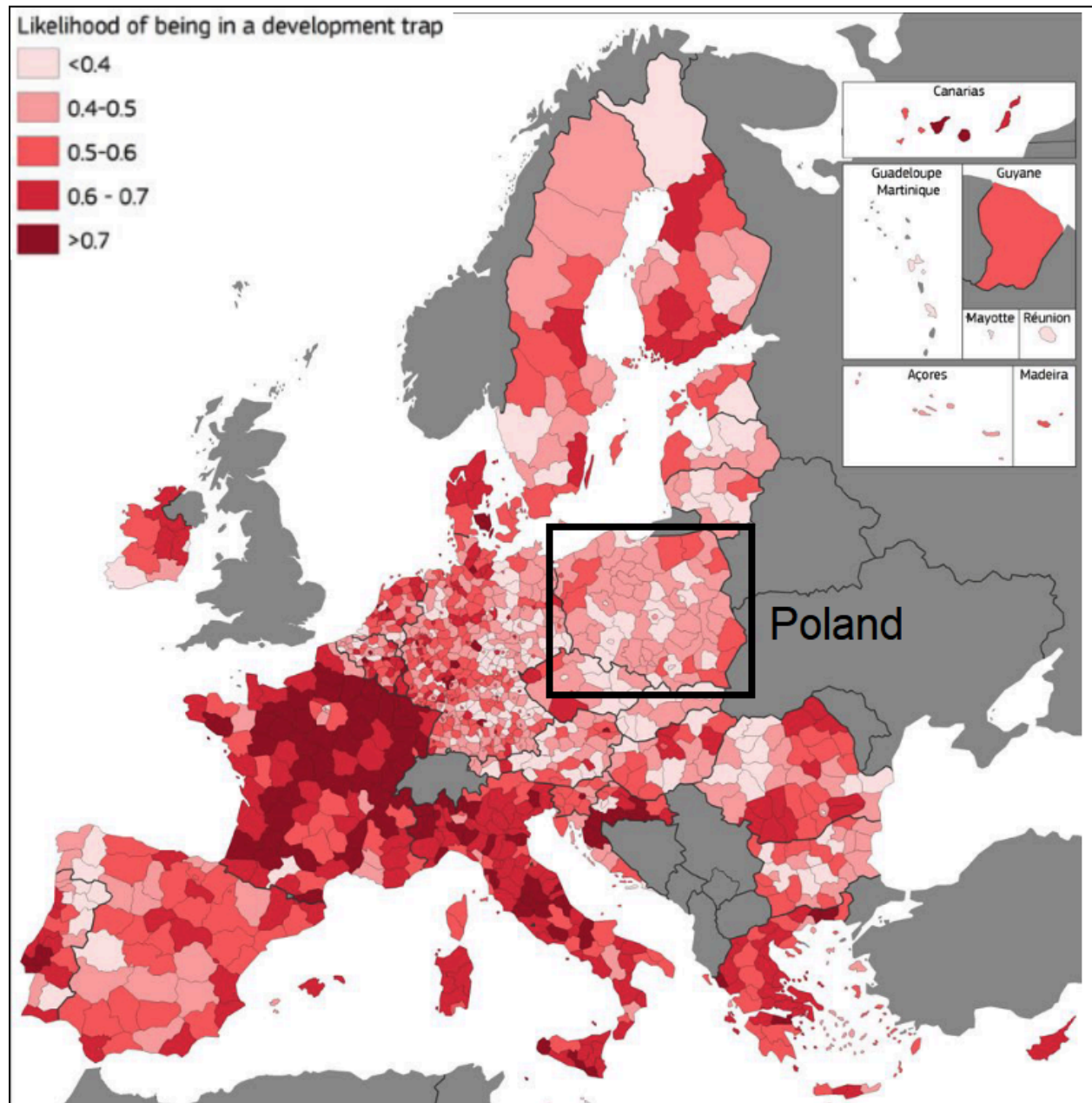
Figure 3. *The Regional Development Trap in Europe*

Adapted from *The Geography of EU Discontent and the Regional Development Trap* by A. Rodríguez-Pose, L. Dijkstra, & H. Poelman, 2023, p. 16. (https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/164290). CC BY 4.0 DEED.
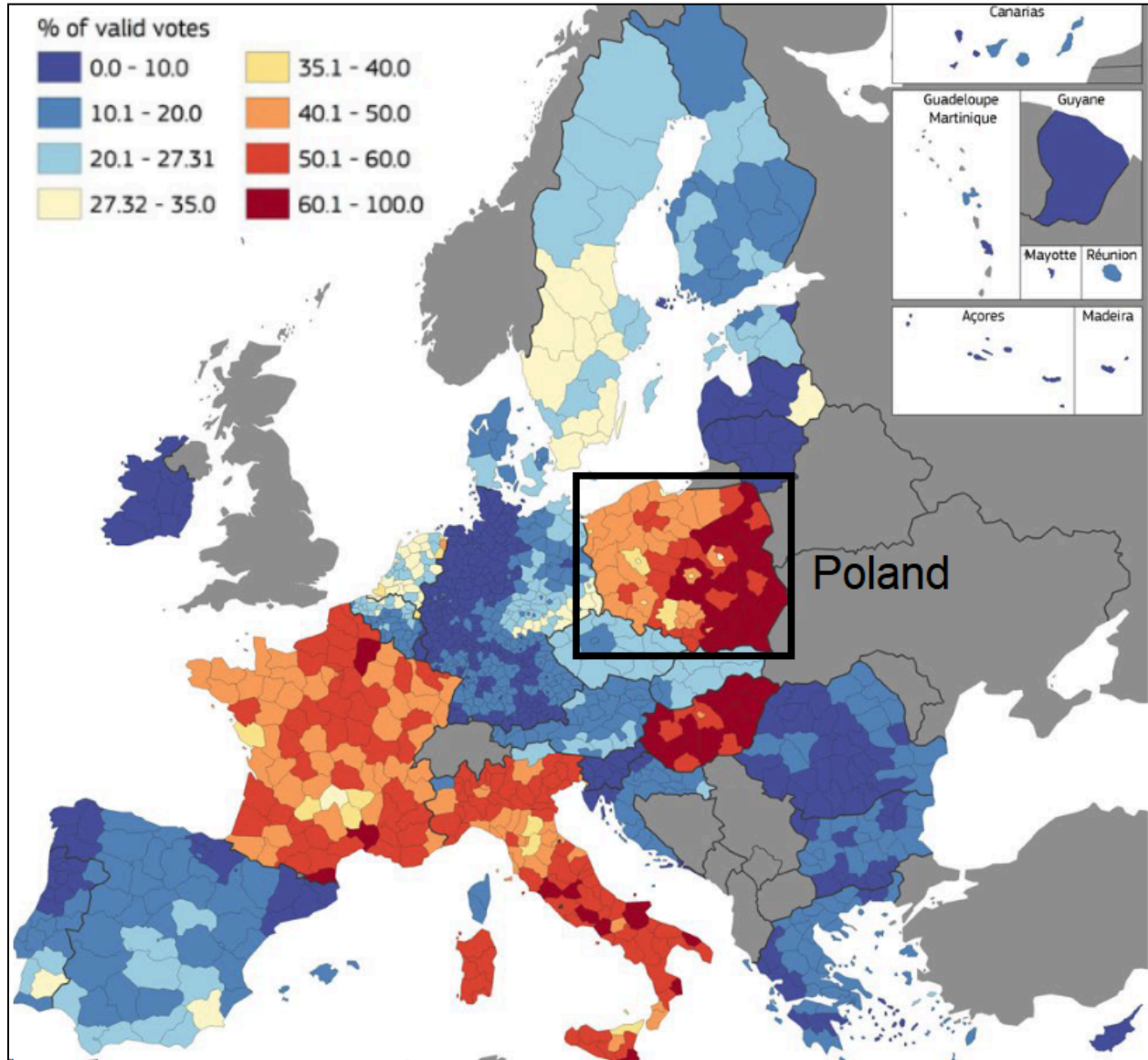
Figure 4. *Votes for Euroskeptic Parties in Parliamentary Elections, 2018-2022.*

Adapted from *The Geography of EU Discontent and the Regional Development Trap* by A. Rodríguez-Pose, L. Dijkstra, & H. Poelman, 2023, p. 12. (https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/164290). CC BY 4.0 DEED.

3.1.6. Polish Spatial Patterns of History and Economy

Poland's sharp spatial divisions have been hinted at throughout this thesis, and will be explored in-depth in the following Case Description section. As seen in Figure 4, Poland [indicated by a black square], particularly the southeastern, eastern, and central regions, stand out

along with Hungary, France, and Italy with significant amounts of votes for Euroskeptic parties between 2018-2022.

Economic Geographers who study Poland have tended to include a section on the country's historical geography due to its long and particularly turbulent history of territorial redefinition by outside forces, which has created socio-economic patterns which remain clearly visible to this day (Churski, 2014; Churski & Kaczmarek 2022; Gajewski & Tchorek 2017; Herodowicz et al. 2021). During the last century, Poland underwent radically disparate socio-economic developments under the control of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent reshaping into an open market economy integrated into the EU. However, the spatial patterns observed clearly correspond closely to the 18th century Partitions and the barely two decades as a sovereign state in the 20th century inter-war period. The different and changing socio-economic, political, and cultural systems set development of infrastructure, agriculture, and even the "socio-cultural characteristics of inhabitants" (Churski et al., 2021, p. 14) on diverging paths which were further consolidated in the post-war era. As seen in Figure 5, the area around Warsaw, and areas previously controlled by Prussia/Germany still perform better in various socio-economic indicators than do the southern former Austro-Hungarian areas, while east-central former Russian areas suffer from compounding issues of poor infrastructure, connectedness, depopulation, and stagnation (Churski et al., 2021).
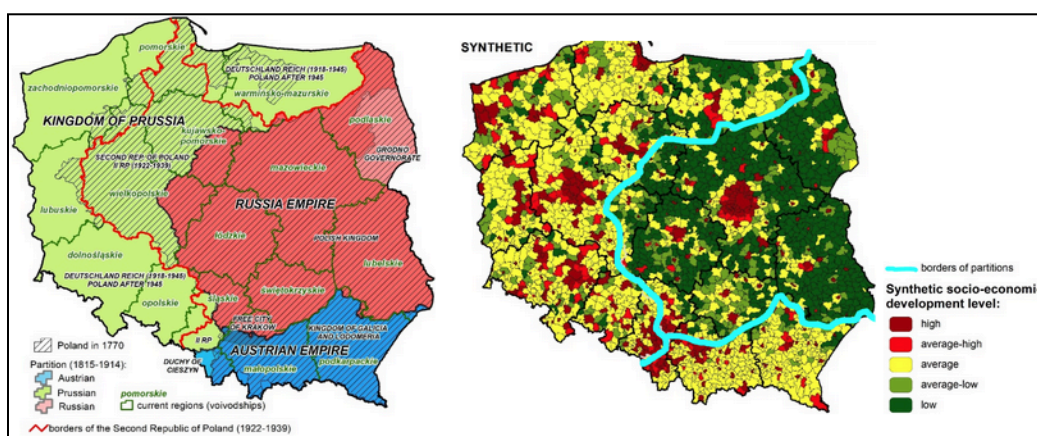
Figure 5. *18th century Partition borders and level of socio-economic development 2004-2018*

Adapted from Churski et al., 2021 p. 4 and p. 10. CC BY 4.0 DEED.

3.2. Analytical Framework

In this section, a conceptual thread was drawn through a theoretical foundation establishing the ongoing trend of divergence in European regional development, that crises typically further exacerbate regional inequalities depending on regional 'resilience', and that as a result, spatial patterns of 'populist' discontent appear and intensify. While not unique to Europe, the trend of growing 'populist' discontent manifesting as opposition and mistrust of essential growth factors, European integration, and both national and supranational institutions make the issue one of critical importance for the European Union. Reducing regional inequalities has been one of the EU:s core goals ever since its inception in 1957 through development funds and cohesion policy, as mentioned before. While undoubtedly successful in stimulating overall growth, the apparent failure in combating the rise in spatial inequality and 'populist' discontent calls for a reevaluation of European regional policy.

As described in this thesis, recent research has indicated that established explanations of spatial inequalities and 'populist' discontent tended to oversimplify and overstate the impact of overall economic growth and understate that of historical and cultural factors. For instance, the popular concept of 'places left behind' fails to take into account structural factors resulting from events shaping historical geography or the perceptions of those drawn to parties harnessing 'populist' discontent. People tend to evaluate regional performance in relation to its own past and that of other regions nationally and EU-wide, and middle-income regions in particular feel unfairly treated as national investment typically targets high-income regions, and EU support is typically directed at uplifting low-income regions.

Furthermore, the conceptual framework built around the 'regional development trap' has indicated that regional patterns of 'populist' discontent have stronger links to stagnation than regional income level, as stagnation can occur and a region can be developmentally trapped at any income level. People in developmentally trapped regions have their real or perceived sense of being treated as though they do not matter reinforced; they feel they are in a corrupt system that is better destroyed and rebuilt into something else.

In conclusion, this analytical framework combining historical geography with the conceptual framework of the 'regional development trap' could allow for new insights to be gained via in-depth explorative case study research.

3.3. Analytical Assumptions

Based on the above theoretical framework, a number of analytical assumptions can be made to guide the analysis:

- *Assumption 1: There exists a correlation between intensity of and time spent in a 'regional development trap' with the amount of votes for 'populist' parties in the 2023 elections.*
- *Assumption 2: Polish middle-income regions had a higher share of votes for 'populist' parties in the 2023 elections.*
- *Assumption 3: The historical geography of Polish sovereignty and development reinforced patterns of electoral geography in 2023.*

4. Case Description: Poland

In this section, further context will be provided in order to better understand the complex relation between regional inequality and 'populist' discontent in Poland. First, a brief overview of the major historical events and developments over the last three centuries which have shaped Poland's economic and political geography, followed by snapshots of the contemporary economic and political situations. Finally, this is tied together and connected with the Theory section by referring back to the conceptual framework outlined there, citing examples of research into Polish spatial inequalities and their consequences.

4.1. Modern Historical Geography Outline
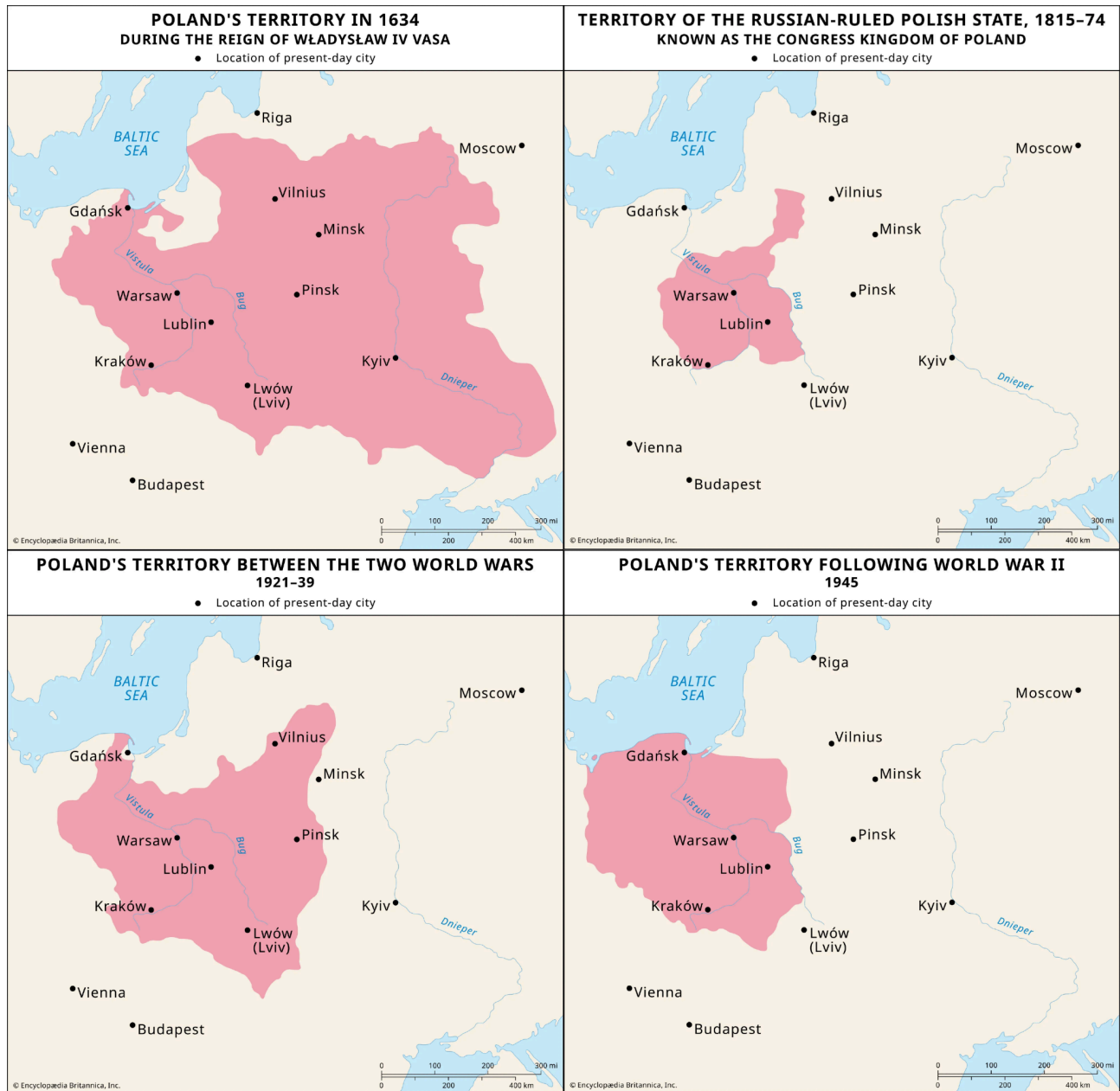
Figure 6: *Polish Sovereign Territorial Evolution from 1634 to 1945-Present*

Adapted from *Poland : History.* (n.d.) Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved December 7, 2023
(https://www.britannica.com/place/Poland/History). By permission as stated in the Terms of Use.

4.1.1. Partitions, Wars, and Sovereignty

Between the the 17th and 18th century, the vast territory of the *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* [Figure 6, top left] went through multiple wars and internal armed conflicts, as it was stuck in the middle between the warring ascending powers of Austria-Hungary, Prussia, and Russia, who eventually settled by partitioning Polish territory between them in the 18th century, which would have long lasting effects ("Poland—Crisis, partitions, reunification", n.d.). The former Polish-Lithuanian territories were once again the scene of battles and redrawn borders during the Napoleonic Wars between 1799–1815, during which the small and short-lived but sovereign Duchy of Warsaw including important cities such as Krákow and Poznan was created. But as a consequence of Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia and the ultimate defeat of France, Polish territory was divided once again, with most of it falling under Russian rule as the *Congress Kingdom of Poland* [Figure 6, top right] ("Poland—Partition, sovereignty, revolution", n.d.).

Following several Polish uprisings, Russia gradually abolished Polish autonomy and formally incorporated the territory into the Russian Empire, until the territory was lost during the course of World War One and the Russian revolutions. An independent *Republic of Poland* [Figure 6, bottom left] was restored in 1921, but only lasted until the outbreak of World War Two in 1939 when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded and divided Polish territory yet again. After the war, the victorious Soviet Union established the *Polish People's Republic* along the borders which have lasted until today [Figure 6, bottom right] ("Poland—Communism, Solidarity, WWII", n.d.).

The consequence of these centuries of war and territorial divisions was that major 19th century developments such as modernization, industrialization, and urbanization spread unevenly across the territory of modern Poland. According to Churski et al., (2021) and Perdał (2022), a consistent pattern was that the Prussian Partition being comparatively highly urbanized and industrialized, with good infrastructure and agriculture compared to the Austro-Hungarian and especially the Russian Partition, which was consistently the least developed in those aspects. Another consequential 19th century phenomenon was the rise of nationalism across Europe, which spawned a strong Polish national identity across national borders, encouraged and

strengthened by the Catholic Church. While brief, the periods of relative independence allowed areas around cities like Warsaw and Krakow to become centers for Polish cultural and economic revival, and galvanized Polish identity, transcending national borders and sovereignty ("Poland—Partitioned Poland", n.d.).

4.1.2. From the Soviet Union to the European Union

Following World War Two, major cities like Warsaw, Wrocław, and Gdańsk were laid in ruins, and the population was decimated by war, mass emigration, and the Holocaust. But through the expulsion of Germans and other population transfers engineered by the Soviet Union, the population soon started growing again. The post-war Polish territory had a long coast with good harbors and infrastructure, and was rich in natural resources such as coal and various minerals, but development suffered from inefficient state control. Agriculture and industry were collectivized and nationalized, and the Polish economy was subordinated to serve the needs of the Soviet Union through integration with the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance ("Poland—Communism, Solidarity, WWII", n.d.). According to Churski et al., (2021), Perdał (2022) and Mikuła (2022), the imposed spatial planning in this era further entrenched spatial patterns established during the 18th century Partitions, with consequences for regional, socio-economics, industry, urbanization, and infrastructure that have lasted into the present.

However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Poland started to democratize and embarked on a program of rapid economic liberalization and integration with Europe termed 'shock therapy', and eventually joined the European Union. As seen in Figure 7, Polish GDP per capita saw higher growth than the EU average nearly every year between 1990 and 2022, and proved more resilient to the GFC beginning in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.
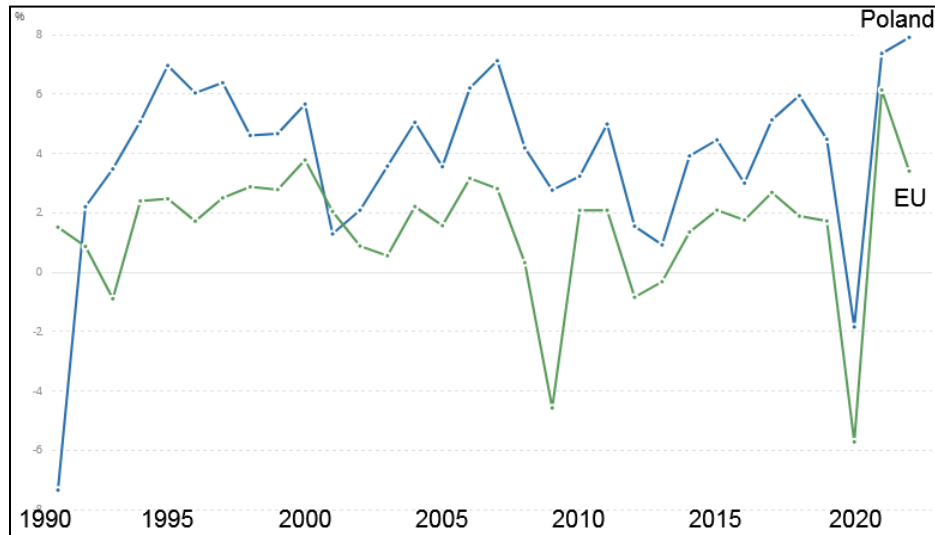
Figure 7. *GDP per Capita Growth (Annual %) - Poland, European Union Average 1990-2022*

Note: Compiled and adapted from two graphs available on the World Bank website (2023), selecting "GDP growth (annual %) - European Union" and "GDP growth (annual %) - Poland", 1990-2022. The World Bank graphs are based on World Bank national accounts data and OECD National Accounts data files. CC-BY-4.0.

4.2. Contemporary Economic Outline

According to the *World Bank in Poland* (2023)'s Overview, the Polish economy is described as robust and well-diversified with good potential in large part due to sound macroeconomic fundamentals, efficient use of EU structural support, and access to and integration with the European market. However, it faces long-term challenges including demographic changes, adopting environmentally-friendly practices, and addressing unequal regional development.

4.2.1. Spatial Inequalities of Socio-Economic Growth in Poland

The subject of Poland's spatial inequalities has been extensively studied by Economic Geographers, for example Churski (2014), who analyzed data from between 2000-2010 at different territorial levels. The author created a three-step classification of regional development areas and divided them into the classes *stagnation areas*, *transition areas*, and *growth areas*, as

well as an eight-step classification running from *steady growth areas* to *permanent stagnation areas*, as seen in Figure 8.
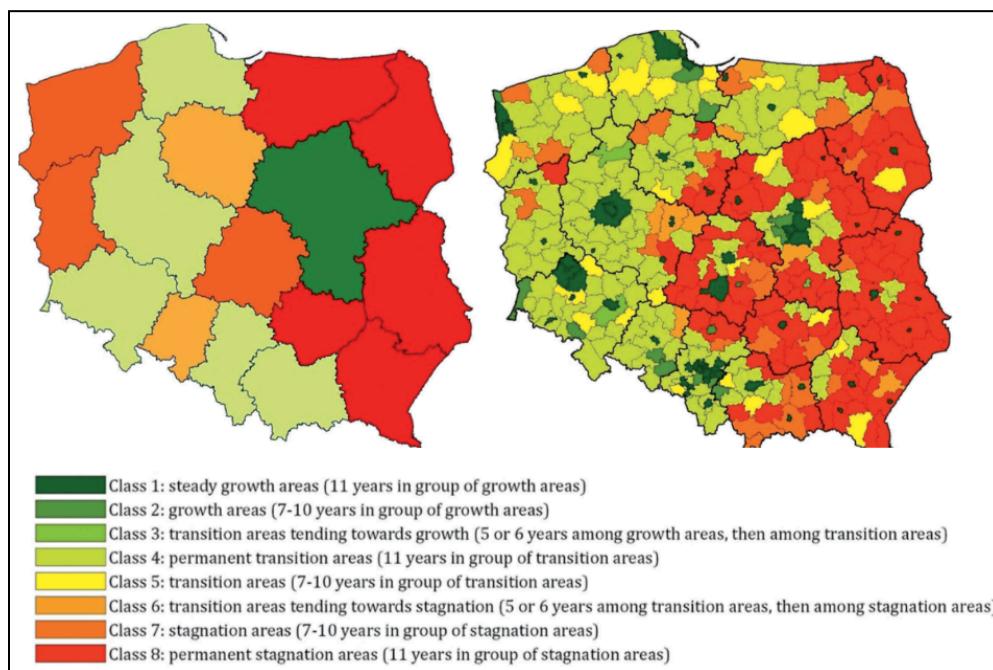
Figure 8. *Spatial Distribution of Classes of Growth, 2000-2010. Voivodeships Left, Powiats Right.*

Adapted from Churski 2014, pages 69 and 74. CC BY 4.0 DEED.

Looking at the province or *voivodeship* level, Churski (2014) notes the apparent East-West divide, and identifies an "Eastern Wall" of permanent stagnation areas, with most central and western ones somewhere between transition and low to moderate growth or stagnation. The lone Class 1 area of steady growth is the Mazowieckie voivodeship in which the capital Warsaw is located, but the modifiable areal unit problem [MAUP] becomes apparent when looking at the powiat level, wherein it becomes apparent that Warsaw skews the result of the voivodeship.

   At the county or *powiat* level, it becomes apparent that while the East-West divide remains, islands of high growth primarily around urban powiats exist all across the country. The author finds three types of growth areas, namely powiats home to large and thriving enterprises; powiats with large extraction industries such as raw materials or power generation; and powiat-ranking

cities. The latter category was found to be the most prosperous, with diffusion of growth to surrounding peripheral areas. As for areas of stagnation, Churski (2014) found that they're typically non-municipal and dominated by large formerly state controlled farms, or a homogenous industry sector such as textile or coal. In a later study, Gajewski & Tchorek (2017) found similar patterns, but cautioned against statistical biases such as the MAUP demonstrated by Churski (2014) risks obscuring the performance of central regions, and miss subtleties unique to particular territorial subdivisions. Referring to the 'middle-income trap' from international Development Studies, the authors suggest that while most agriculture of the eastern regions is characterized by labor intensity and low productivity, there is also a group of small-scale, family-run agricultural enterprises competing through high technology and innovation. This, the authors suggest, could indicate the potential for these regions to skip the second/middle stage, and go straight from agriculture to tech and innovation.

As outlined in the section on historical geography, Poland's frequent territorial reshaping has had a lasting impact on its economic and societal structures. Gorzelak (2021) argues that the impact of regional policies tends to diminish or disappear entirely in times of crisis and other deep economic and structural changes. Poland and other East- or Central European states exemplified this in the 20th century with their newly formed statehood after World War One, the Great Depression of the interwar period, the rebuilding post-World War Two, and finally the post-Soviet transformations.

Given the persistence of this unequal regional development despite Poland's economic growth following its successful EU integration and structural support, Churski et al., (2021) and Jagódka and Snarska (2023) examined European Cohesion Policy (ECP). Both studies found that the ECP had contributed to Polish economic growth, but had not managed to reduce regional inequality of human capital and innovativeness. Churski et al. (2021) refer to these persistent patterns of spatial inequalities mirroring historical borders as Poland's "invisible heritage", wherein chronic deficiencies in infrastructure and economic development prevents the creation and diffusion of growth. Figure 9 is an excerpt of twenty-two maps elaborated by Churski et al. (2021) displaying various socio-economic indicators, in many cases aligning to some extent with the overlaid historical borders of the 18th century Partitions, and the 1921-1939 Polish Republic.
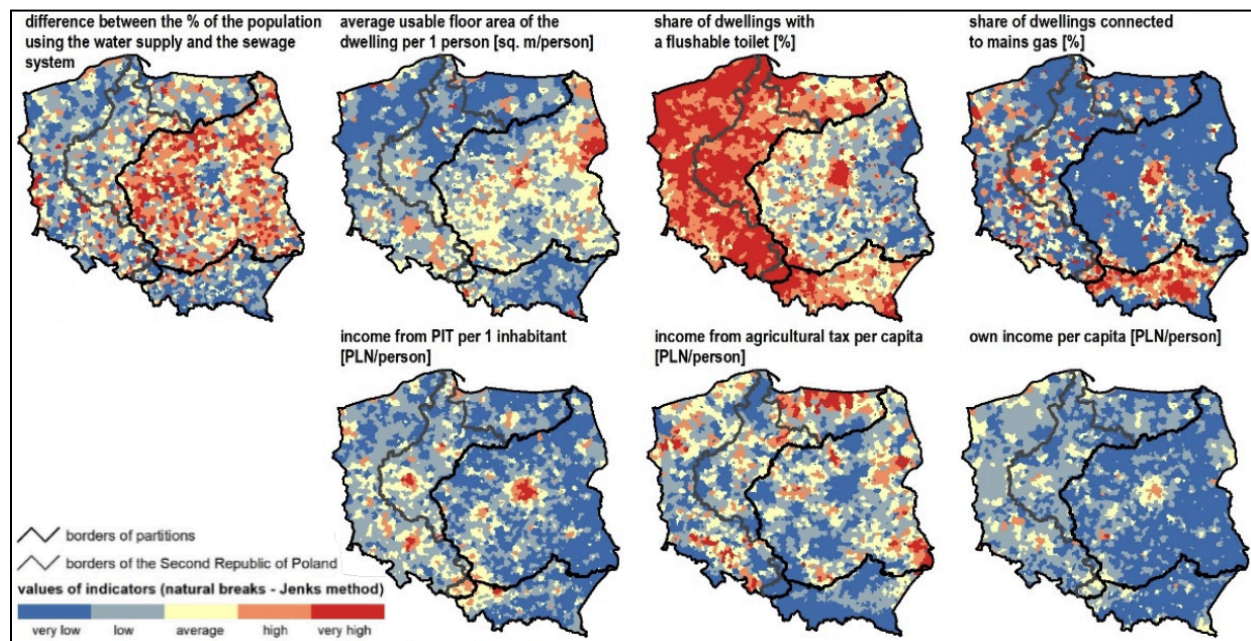
Figure 9. *Examples of Divergent Socio-Economic Development Indicators in 2018*

Adapted from Churski et al., 2021 p. 13. CC BY 4.0 DEED.

Furthermore, Jagódka and Snarska (2023) find that the general pattern of large metropolitan areas being better at attracting funds, support, and attention from policymakers both national and supranational as noted by Diemer et al. (2022) holds true for Poland as well. According to Jagódka and Snarska, the 2015-2023 conservative government prioritized the reduction of spatial inequalities and poverty reduction for smaller towns and socio-economically weak areas, although it was too early to see whether the policies would prove effective, or enough.

The Polish economy proved resilient to the COVID-19 pandemic, which only caused a minor recession (*The World Bank in Poland*, 2023). Gajewski (2022) analyzed Polish regional resilience to the GFC compared to the COVID-19 pandemic, and found that despite the fundamental differences between the crises, the regions that proved most resilient to the impact of the GFC were also more resilient to the impact of the pandemic. Another notable finding was that regions with higher production per capita were less resistant, which the authors suggest could be due to their higher degree of international connectedness.

4.3. Contemporary Political Scene Outline

The contemporary Polish political scene was shaped by its turbulent history, initially coalescing around the anti-Communist trade union and later political movement Solidarity, which united many disparate groups. These ranged from reform-minded leftists, West-leaning liberals, and conservative Christian nationalists, and these groups became the foundation of Poland's budding democratic post-Soviet politics. The liberal, pro-European Civic Platform [Polish: *Platforma Obywatelska*, henceforth: PO] and the conservative, Eurosceptic Law and Justice [Polish: *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, henceforth: PiS] became dominant parties ("Poland—Politics, democracy, EU", n.d.).

4.3.1. Spatial Inequalities and Electoral Geography in Poland

In their introduction to their book on Poland's socio-economic development, Churski and Kaczmarek (2022) also identify two different Polands: "A Poland that is dynamic and open to the world and a Poland that feels that it no longer matters and that its needs and plights have been ignored by an elite that, in the name of progress and European integration, overlooked their needs and potential." (p. viii). The authors compare the socio-economic situation and polarized Polish politics to that of the United Kingdom in the years leading up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, "with wealth increasingly concentrated in the capital and a handful of relatively dynamic cities, and with large shares of the population living in territories whose economic dynamism had been hugely undermined in recent decades." (p. ix).

Herodowicz et al. (2021) connect to conceptual terminology described in the Theory section of this thesis, from 'convergence' and 'divergence' to 'places that don't matter' and 'geographies of discontent' in their article exploring Polish electoral geography between 2005-2019. The authors find persistent spatial patterns of votes during the period, running along a urban–rural axis or a metropolitan–extra-metropolitan line. The authors divide the Polish electoral scene between a PiS-dominated conservative, communitarian bloc which they term *Solidary Poland*, and a PO-dominated liberal, individualist bloc termed *Liberal Poland*. The authors found support for the 'Solidary' bloc to be associated with eastern, southern, and central rural/extra-metropolitan regions which are marked by negative trends in growth of economy,

service access, and population. Conversely, support for the 'Liberal' bloc is associated with western regions and the largest urban/metropolitan areas which act as national growth centers. Figure 10 exhibits a clear pattern connecting historical borders, and electoral geography between 2004-2019. 'Solidary Poland' is strong within the former Austro-Hungarian Partition in 2005, and the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Partitions together in 2015 and 2019. 'Liberal Poland' is consistently concentrated around the major cities, and dominant all along the former Prussian Partition in 2015. Minor parties tend to form and disband with each election cycle and orbit around the two major parties, some of which will coalesce into coalitions with each other, and with or without the two major parties for general elections, as can be seen in Figure 11 (Herodowicz et al. 2021).

Another researcher, Putintsev (2023), attributes the volatile forming and disbanding of minor parties to the country's relatively steep electoral threshold at 5% for parties and 8% for coalitions, and the popularity of 'anti-system' voting. The author goes so far as to characterize the dominance of the two major parties as a "two-and-a-half-party system" (p. 19), but paradoxically foresees a more diverse future as PiS' and PO's power is tempered by several factors. These include the proportional electoral system, low party membership numbers, and the deep polarization between them preventing any attempt at cooperating to further consolidate the system around major parties at the expense of minor ones. Furthermore, Putintsev argues, between 20% and 32% of the Polish electorate tend to claim not to feel represented by any existing party, which is the cause for the aforementioned anti-system voting.
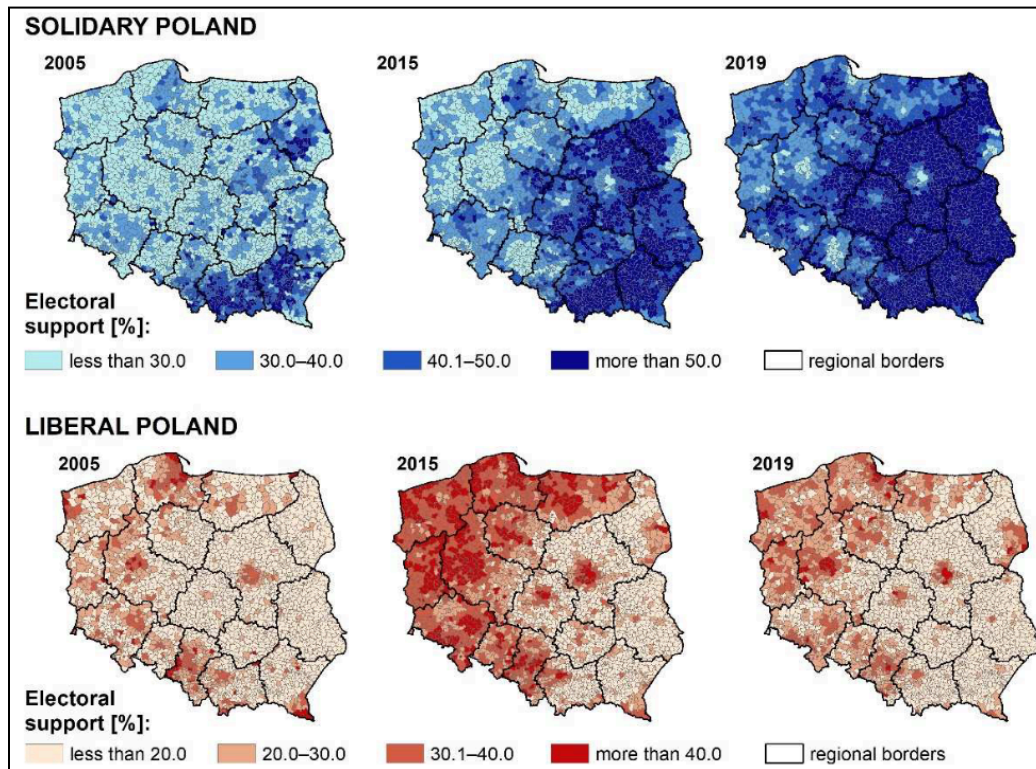
Figure 10. *Electoral Support for Political Blocs 2005-2019*

Adapted from Herodowicz et al., 2021, p. 7. CC BY 4.0 DEED.
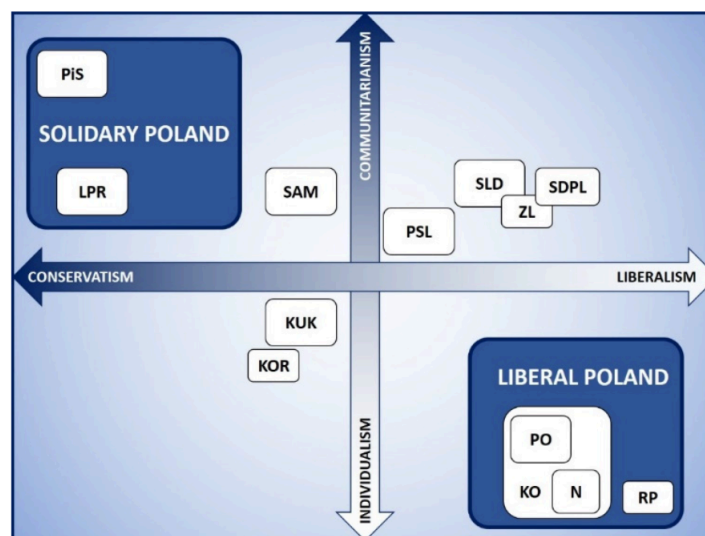
Figure 11. *The Principal Division of the Polish Political Scene in 2005–2019*

From Herodowicz et al., 2021, p. 5. CC BY 4.0 DEED.

4.3.2. The European Union and Populist Discontent in Eastern Europe

As described in the Introduction, 'populist' discontent is a growing trend throughout Europe, with such parties having been elected to power in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. Comparing the Visegrad Group (V4) countries Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, Scott (2022) examined the shift from European integration towards what he terms "illiberal regionalism" (p. 706), an oppositional stance particularly against EU values on refugee acceptance, justice system, and discriminatory or otherwise socially divisive policies. Scott argues that these sentiments are strengthened in the overall context of the V4 countries' shared concern of being marginalized within the EU, and cautions against reducing discontent to a purely socio-economic failure to address regional inequalities.

While he doesn't use terms such as places 'left behind' or 'that don't matter', Scott concludes that derogatory characterizations of 'Eastern Europe' as collectively backwards compared to a Western-centric norm, and dismissing the cultural aspect of discontent will risk strengthening illiberal regionalism further.

4.4. 2023 Elections Outline

The two-term incumbent PiS-led government could boast a strong, growing economy, rising employment and wages, and managing to uplift some of its poorest regions through expansive government welfare programmes. However, the government was deeply polarizing due to its nationalist and religious rhetoric and policies, including severe restrictions on women's and LBTQ rights, and targeting of minorities and immigrants, echoed by government controlled public media ("Poland—Constitution, democracy, reforms", n.d.; OSCE 2023; Dudik et al., 2023).

This, along with controversial institutional reforms undermining the freedom of democratic institutions sparked several mass protests and clashes with the EU. The reforms had enabled the government to use public funds to purchase, control, and politicize public media, and to reshape, control and appoint party loyalists to state institutions such as the central bank, and the justice system. The democratic 'backsliding' resulting from these reforms concerned the EU to the point where the Union decided to withhold $35 billion in development funds for Poland until the

problems were remedied (Dudik et al., 2023). Therefore, the 2023 elections were deemed critical for Poland's democratic future, and there were serious concerns both nationally and internationally about the legitimacy of the elections. However, international election observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe found that the elections were competitive, generally well-managed, and saw record high turnout, despite misuse of public resources to influence them (OSCE, 2023). Table 2 shows the results for parties that received over 1% of votes (National Electoral Commission, 2023b).

Party or Coalition	2023 Sejm result
Law and Justice (PiS)	35,38%
Civic Platform (PO)	30,70%
Third Way (TD)	14,40%
New Left (NL)	8,61%
Confederation Liberty and Independence (KO)	7,16%
Nonpartisan Local Government Activists (BS)	1,86%
There is one Poland (PJJ)	1,63%

Table 2. *Parties and Coalitions with >1% of Votes in 2023 Sejm Elections*

4.4.1. Populist Parties

In the Theory section of this thesis, *'populist' discontent* and similar concepts were defined as diverse blends of anti-systemic, anti-globalization, often nationalist opposition to a system of governance and an economy considered dysfunctional and unfair, which in the European context often manifests as Euroskepticism (R. Martin, et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose Terrero-Dávila, & Lee, 2023; Van Vulpen et al., 2023). Therefore, hard or soft Euroskepticism was used as the minimum criteria for designating a party as populist, though other relevant characteristics were searched for as well.

- *Law & Justice* (PiS), as described previously, is a soft Euroskeptic, conservative, nationalist party which has often engaged in conflict with the EU over harsh rhetoric towards minorities, human rights, and democracy (Dudik et al., 2023; OSCE, 2023).

- *Confederation Liberty and Independence* (KO) is a soft Euroskeptic party, self-described as libertarians, nationalists and conservatives, are strongly against EU policies on taxation, climate, and immigration. The party describes Poland's political and economic relationship with the EU as one-sided in the latter's favor (Po stronie Polska, n.d.; "O Konfederacji," n.d.). According to journalists Cienski & Kość writing for Politico (2023), prominent party members have frequently made misogynist, antisemitic, homophobic, and other derogatory statements.

- *There is one Poland* (PJJ) is open to leaving the EU according to the second point of their party program, and party slogans such as 'God, Family, Homeland' and 'Protection of life from conception to natural death' indicate conservative Christian stances ("Program Partii," n.d.). According to the journalist Dziadul (2023), writing for the Polish newspaper Polityka, the party sprang out of an anti-vaccination movement, is climate-skeptic, and anti-LBTQ.

- *Antypartia* (AP) is soft Euroskeptic according to point 14 in the party manifesto, though the party does not rule out a referendum to leave the Union if Polish interests are not sufficiently realized (Ciesielczyk, 2015).

	PiS	KO	PJJ	AP
Euroskeptic	✔	✔	✔	✔
Nationalist	✔	✔	✔	
Xenophobic	✔	✔	✔	
Antivax			✔	
Climateskeptic			✔	

Table 3. *'Populist' Parties in the 2023 elections*

4.5. Summary

The 18th century partitions of Poland into three pieces and the short-lived Polish sovereign state incarnations centered around Warsaw created patterns of spatial divergence which have lasted through several major wars, integration with both the Soviet and the European Union until this day. The result is a country with firmly entrenched spatial divergence and a heavily polarized political scene, with socio-economic and electoral geography often aligning with historical borders.

5. Methodology

5.1. Data Collection

Desk research was chosen for this thesis as a cost- and time-efficient way to take advantage of and iterate on the wealth of secondary data available from previous research on Polish historical, economic, and political geography. Similarly, the studies on the *regional development trap* at the core of this thesis offer a wealth of secondary data for NUTS 3 regions across Europe, so extracting this data for Poland by transferring information from maps to a datasheet was simple and practical, considering the risk of delays. Finally, primary data for EU regional statistics, the Polish territorial classification system was retrieved from the Statistics Poland website, and Polish election data from the National Electoral Commission's website, sorted by various formats and territorial categories.

5.2. Empirical Data

5.2.1. Polish Territorial Units

Base data for subregions, including names and locations were retrieved from Eurostat (European Commission, 2022). Poland is divided into six territorial units in the country's official *Coding System for Territorial and Statistical Units* (KTS), three of which correspond to the EU's NUTS system (Statistics Poland, 2023) used in most of the previously cited research. This includes the maps of *Regional Development Index* and *Time in Development Trap* which were

created in NUTS 3 (Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman, 2023) and are used in the following Analysis section. The National Electoral Commission (2023a) published results of voting for Sejm lists by electoral districts as well as KTS 2, 5 and 6, so for the purpose of easy comparison between 'regional development trap' indicators to electoral data, election results were calculated for KTS 4 by adding together KTS 5 results and dividing by number of powiats per Subregion.

KTS	NUTS	Subdivision name	Amount
KTS 1	NUTS 1	Macroregions (*Makroregiony*)	7
KTS 2	-	Voivodeships (*Województwa*)	16
KTS 3	NUTS 2	Regions (*Regiony*)	17
KTS 4	NUTS 3	Subregions (*Podregiony*)	73
KTS 5	-	Powiats and cities with powiat status (*Powiaty i miasta na prawach powiatu*)	380
KTS 6	-	Gminas (*Gminy*)	3868

Table 4. *Polish Territorial Classification System*

Predominantly urban regions	NUTS 3 regions where more than 80% of the population lives in 'urban clusters'
Intermediate regions	NUTS 3 regions where more than 50% and up to 80% of the population lives in 'urban clusters'
Predominantly rural regions	NUTS 3 regions where at least 50% of the population lives in 'rural grid cells'.

Table 5. *Urban-Rural Typology*

5.3. Variables

The two classes for the regional development trap were created from the data in maps by Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman, (2023).

- *Development Trap Index* (DTI) is split into three classes, where 1 indicates the lowest risk of falling into a development trap, and 3 the highest.

- *Time in Development Trap* (TDT) is divided into four, representing 1-15 years in total.

- *Regional trap Class* (RC) is created by merging the above variables.

- *Income Level* (IL) is based on Eurostat data on Gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices by NUTS 3 regions (Eurostat Data Browser. n.d.).

- *Urban-rural Typology* (UT) is based on Statistics Poland's official Urban-rural Typology (Statistics Poland, n.d.).

- *Populist Vote* (PV) was calculated by adding together the percentage of votes for the 'populist' parties as defined in Table 3, using data from the Polish National Electoral Commission, Results of voting for Sejm lists in percentage for communes National Electoral Commission. (2023a), as seen in Table 4. This is the dependent variable, which is tested against the others.

- *Historical Partition* (HP) was created by overlaying 18th century Partition borders in Figure 5, based on Churski et al., (2021), and approximating which country each contemporary NUTS 3 subregion belonged to. A number of subregions which could not be determined to belong to Prussia or Russia were excluded when calculating averages per Partition. Since this is not an exact process, and territory shifted, and a few subregions are split between different historical borders, percentages are indicated with an *almost equal* sign ($\approx$).

Variable	Meaning	Scale
DTI	Development Trap Index	(1) Low risk (2) Medium risk (3) High risk
TDT	Time in Development Trap	(1) 1-4 years (2) 5-9 years (3) 10-12 years (4) 13-15 years
IL	Income Level	(1) High-income (2) Medium-income (3) Low-income
RC	Regional trap Class	Least affected (1) to Most affected (7)
UT	Urban-rural Typology	(1) Predominantly Urban (2) Intermediate (3) Predominantly Rural
PV	Populist Vote	0-100%
HP	Historical Partition (18th century)	(A) Austro-Hungarian (P) Prussian (PR) Prussian/Russian split (R) Russian

Table 6. *Variables and their Interpretation*

5.4. Empirical Dataset Example

Table 2 shows an excerpt of the empirical dataset for illustrative purposes. The subregion of Białostocki is at the highest risk of getting caught in a development trap ($DTI = 3$), and has been there for 13-15 years ($TDT = 4$), which puts the subregion in the worst Regional trap Class ($RC = 7$). The subregion belongs to the middle-income class ($IL = 2$) and the intermediate Urban-rural typology between predominantly urban and predominantly region ($UT = 2$), and the subregion's 'populist' vote share was 52.50% ($PV = 52.50$). Finally, the subregion was historically part of the Russian Partition ($HP \approx$ R).

Subregion (NUTS 3)	DTI	TDT	RC	IL	UT	PV	HP
Białostocki	3	4	**7**	2	2	52.50	R
Bialski	2	2	**3**	3	3	59.08	R
Bielski	1	2	**2**	1	2	48.50	A

Table 7. *Empirical Dataset Excerpt*

6. Analysis

In this section, the full empirical dataset, which can be found in the Appendix, for the 73 subregions is presented by means of descriptive statistics for a concise summary of the statistical data distribution. Then, the data is analyzed using inferential statistical analysis to establish the basic relations between the variables. Finally, exploratory data analysis is used to further discuss patterns and trends in the data set, which is visualized using maps to represent the spatial relations in the data. All figures and maps in this section were created by the author of this thesis using the data analysis and statistical testing software Jamovi, and the Geographic Information System software ArcGIS Pro, respectively.

6.1. Analytical Assumptions Revisited

The analysis in this section is guided by the analytical assumptions made in the Theory section, with the ultimate purpose of leading into addressing the research questions in the Conclusion section:

- *Assumption 1: There exists a correlation between intensity of and time spent in a 'regional development trap' with the amount of votes for 'populist' parties in the 2023 elections.*
- *Assumption 2: Polish middle-income regions had a higher share of votes for 'populist' parties in the 2023 elections.*
- *Assumption 3: The historical geography of Polish sovereignty and development reinforced patterns of electoral geography in 2023.*

6.2. Descriptive Statistics

The table in Figure 12 shows the summarized distribution of variable data for all 73 subregions and their statistical distributions, visualized by the histogram bars, in which *density* indicates the distribution of subregions per class.

Both Development Trap Index and Time in Development Trap, and thus Regional trap Class, which is a combination of the former two, skew toward their middle classes, albeit with a few significant outliers towards highly affected. Income Level is very evenly split across the three income levels; while Urban-rural Typology leans towards class 3. Finally, Populist Vote skews towards the middle with a mean of 48.8%, but with a large range of 41.3 percentage points between 26.4% and 67.7%, with significant outliers at both extreme ends.

Descriptives						
	N	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Development Trap Index (DTI)	73	1.90	2	0.627	1	3
Time in Development Trap (TDT)	73	2.04	2	0.716	1	4
Regional development trap Class (RC)	73	2.99	3	1.338	1	7
Income Level (IL)	73	1.99	2	0.825	1	3
Urban Typology (UT)	73	2.25	2	0.760	1	3
Historical Partition (HP)	73					
Populist Vote (PV)	73	48.88	47.5	9.087	26.4	67.7
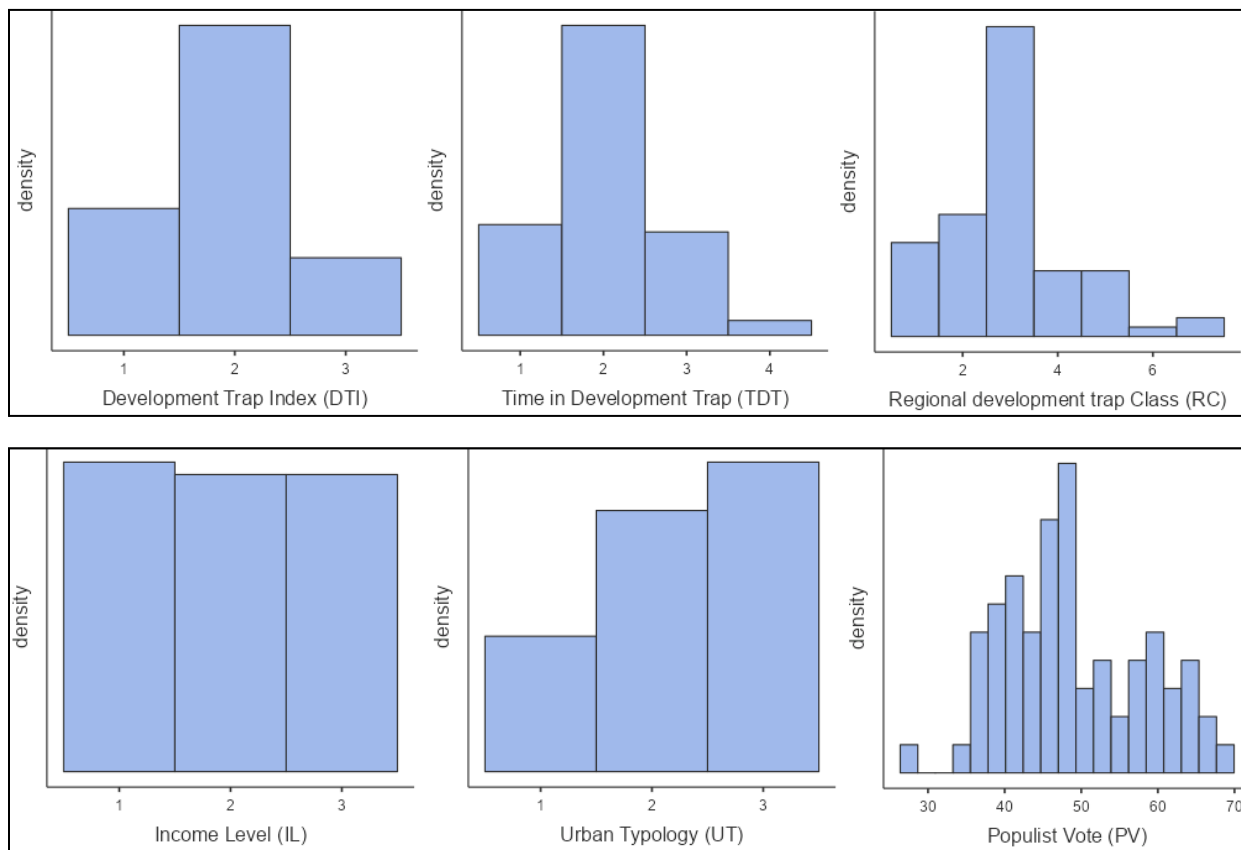
Figure 12. *Descriptive statistics for the Full Empirical Dataset*

6.3. Inferential Statistical Analysis

The correlation matrix in Figure 13 demonstrates that Populist Vote does not correlate at a statistically significant level with Development Trap Index or Time in Development Trap.

However, the *p*-values of <.001 between Populist Vote, Income Level*, *and Urban-Rural Typology indicate a statistically significant correlation. Furthermore, the *Pearson's r* values of 0.391, 0.515, and 0.531 indicate medium-strength positive correlations between the three latter variables. This demonstrates that support for 'populist' parties is higher the lower a subregion's income level is, and also higher in predominantly rural subregions compared to intermediate or predominantly urban subregions.

Correlation Matrix

		Populist Vote (PV)	Development Trap Index (DTI)	Time in Development Trap (TDT)	Income Level (IL)	Urban Typology (UT)
Populist Vote (PV)	Pearson's r	—				
	p-value	—				
Development Trap Index (DTI)	Pearson's r	0.036	—			
	p-value	0.762	—			
Time in Development Trap (TDT)	Pearson's r	0.130	0.690	—		
	p-value	0.272	< .001	—		
Income Level (IL)	Pearson's r	0.391	0.373	0.330	—	
	p-value	< .001	0.001	0.004	—	
Urban Typology (UT)	Pearson's r	0.531	0.138	0.083	0.515	—
	p-value	< .001	0.245	0.484	< .001	—

Figure 13. *Correlation Matrix*

A limitation of using three-class categorical variables is that they fail to account for the subtle differences which exist between high-income (1), medium-income (2), and low-income (3) subregions, or between predominantly urban (1), intermediate (2), and predominantly rural (3) subregions. The scatterplots in Figure 14 illustrate how the 73 subregions are clustered within the three steps of Income Level and Urban Typology, with a large range between them. Thus, while the correlations are statistically significant, it cannot be used as conclusive evidence but points towards a trend.
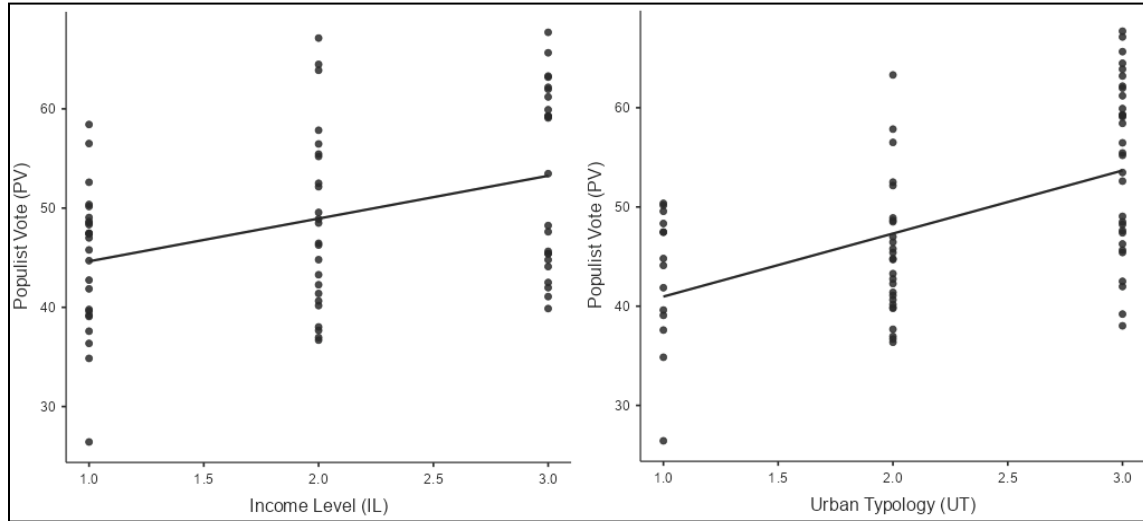
Figure 14. *Scatterplots of Populist Vote and Income Level; Populist Vote and Urban Typology*

6.4. Exploratory Data Analysis

6.4.1. The Populist Vote and Historical Borders

Map 1 demonstrates that the 2023 Sejm electoral geography aligns with spatial divisions brought up in the Theory and Case Description sections, such as the east-west divide, and the former 18th century Partition borders which run closely along modern boundaries in some cases, such as with Elbląski-Olsztyński-Ełcki in the north.

Populist voting accounts for more than 51% of votes in nearly all the former Austro-Hungarian and Russian Partition subregions, and there exists a continuous 'eastern wall' of subregions belonging to the highest category of populist vote (59-68%), running from Suwalski in the north to Krośnieński in the south. The city-subregions Miasto Warszawa, Miasto Łódź, and their adjacent subregions, as well as the city-subregion Miasto Kraków are noticeable exceptions within the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Partitions, all belonging to one of the two lowest categories of Populist Vote. When omitting the central subregions split between Prussia and Russia, the mean Populist Vote of the formerly Prussian subregions is lower at ≈42.47% than the formerly Russian subregions at ≈54.39%, and the formerly Austro-Hungarian subregions at the highest mean with ≈54.39%.
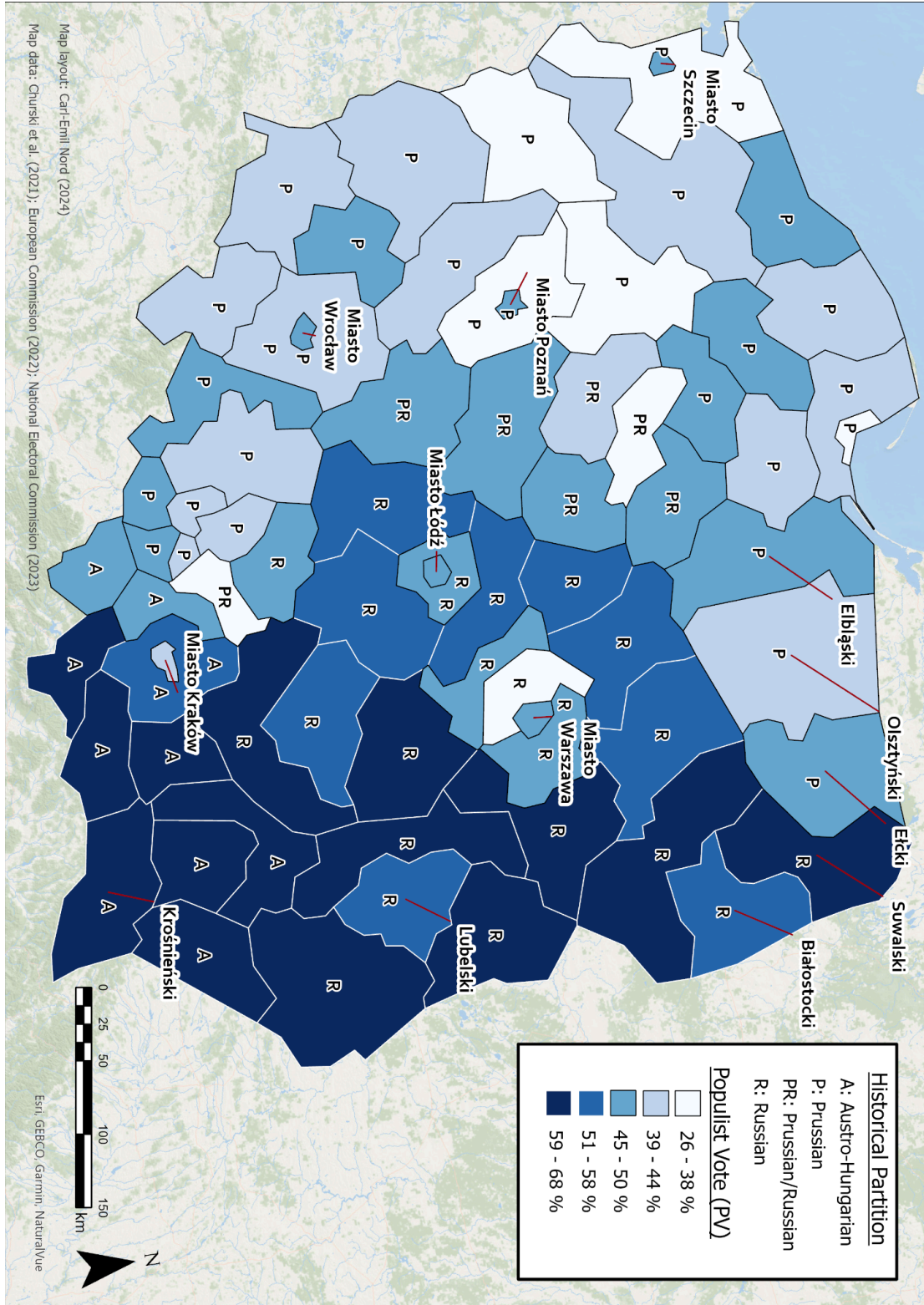
Map 1. *The Populist Vote and Historical Partitions*

6.4.2. The Populist Vote and the Regional Trap Class

Figure 15 and Map 2 show that a clear majority, 56 out of 73 subregions, belong to one of the three least affected Regional trap Classes, with each class spread over a large range of around 30 percentage point difference between minimum and maximum Populist Vote percentage. Looking at the extreme ends of classes, the ten subregions in the lowest class (1) have a mean value of 50.2% populist vote, while the mean of the two subregions in the highest development class (7), Białostocki and Oswiecimskie, have a barely higher mean at 50.7%. Looking at the three bottom categories 5,6, and 7 together for a larger sample size slightly raises the average to 54.86%, which in any case is only a few percentage points above the total subregion mean of 48.8%, as seen in the full empirical dataset in Figure 12.

Descriptives

	Regional development trap Class (RC)	N	Mean	SD	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Populist Vote (PV)	1	10	50.2	8.83	27.93	39.2	67.1
	2	13	45.0	8.08	30.03	26.4	56.5
	3	33	48.9	9.45	32.86	34.9	67.7
	4	7	52.5	9.61	23.71	40.2	63.9
	5	7	48.0	9.35	25.28	36.7	62.0
	6	1	63.2	NaN	0.00	63.2	63.2
	7	2	50.7	2.55	3.61	48.9	52.5

Figure 15. *Descriptive statistics for Populist Vote and Regional trap Class*
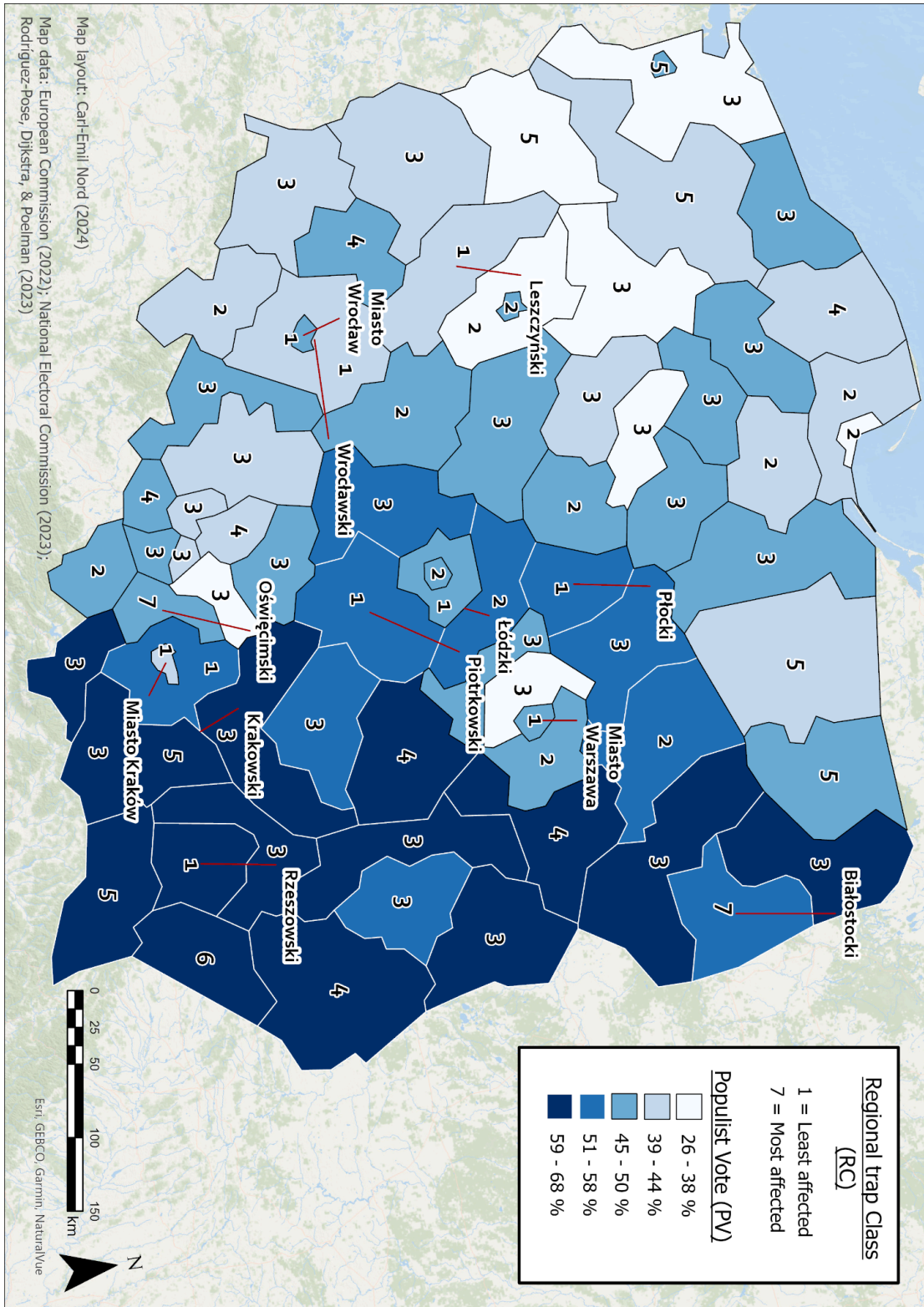
Map 2. *Populist Vote and the Regional trap Class*

6.4.3. The Populist Vote and the Urban-Rural dimension

Figure 16 and Map 3 show Populist Vote divided into three different classes of Urban-rural Typology. Predominantly urban subregions and their immediately adjacent subregions, typically also predominantly urban or intermediate, tend to exhibit a lesser degree of Populist Voting (42.97%) than do subregions belonging to the intermediate category (45.23%) or the predominantly rural category (54.55%).

Looking closer at subregions classified as *predominantly urban* specifically, these include cities large enough to constitute a subregion of their own, the capitals of voivodeships such as Łódź, and subregions like Trójmiejski which is dominated by the city Gdansk. The Populist Vote in these subregions ranges between 26.4% (Trójmiejski) and 50.4% (Miasto Warszawa). This is noticeably lower than the ranges of the other two classes, which span ≈37-65%, although the mean value of 43% Populist Vote for predominantly urban subregions is close to the 45.2% of intermediate subregions.

City-subregions, which are either predominantly urban or intermediate, stand out as 'islands' against the backdrop of their surrounding subregions. Trójmiejski, Miasto Kraków, and Miasto Łódź exhibit *lower* Populist Vote than their surrounding subregions, while the three western city-subregions Miasto Szczecin, Miasto Poznań, and Miasto Wrocław stand out with *higher* PV than both their immediately surrounding intermediate regions and most of the predominantly rural regions. Warsaw too has a higher Populist Vote than its western adjacent intermediate subregion.

Looking closer at *intermediate* and *predominantly rural* regions, eastern intermediate regions Bialostocki, Lubelski, and Radomski stand out with lower Populist Vote compared to adjacent intermediate or predominantly rural subregions. Notably, within the continuous north-south streak of subregions between Suwalki and Krosniencski belonging to the highest class of Populist Vote identified in Map 3, there is also a continuous streak of predominantly rural subregions.

Descriptives							
	Urban Typology (UT)	N	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Populist Vote (PV)	1	14	43.0	44.5	6.90	26.4	50.4
	2	27	45.2	44.7	6.76	36.4	63.3
	3	32	54.5	56.0	8.54	38.0	67.7

Figure 16. *Populist Vote and the Urban-Rural dimension*
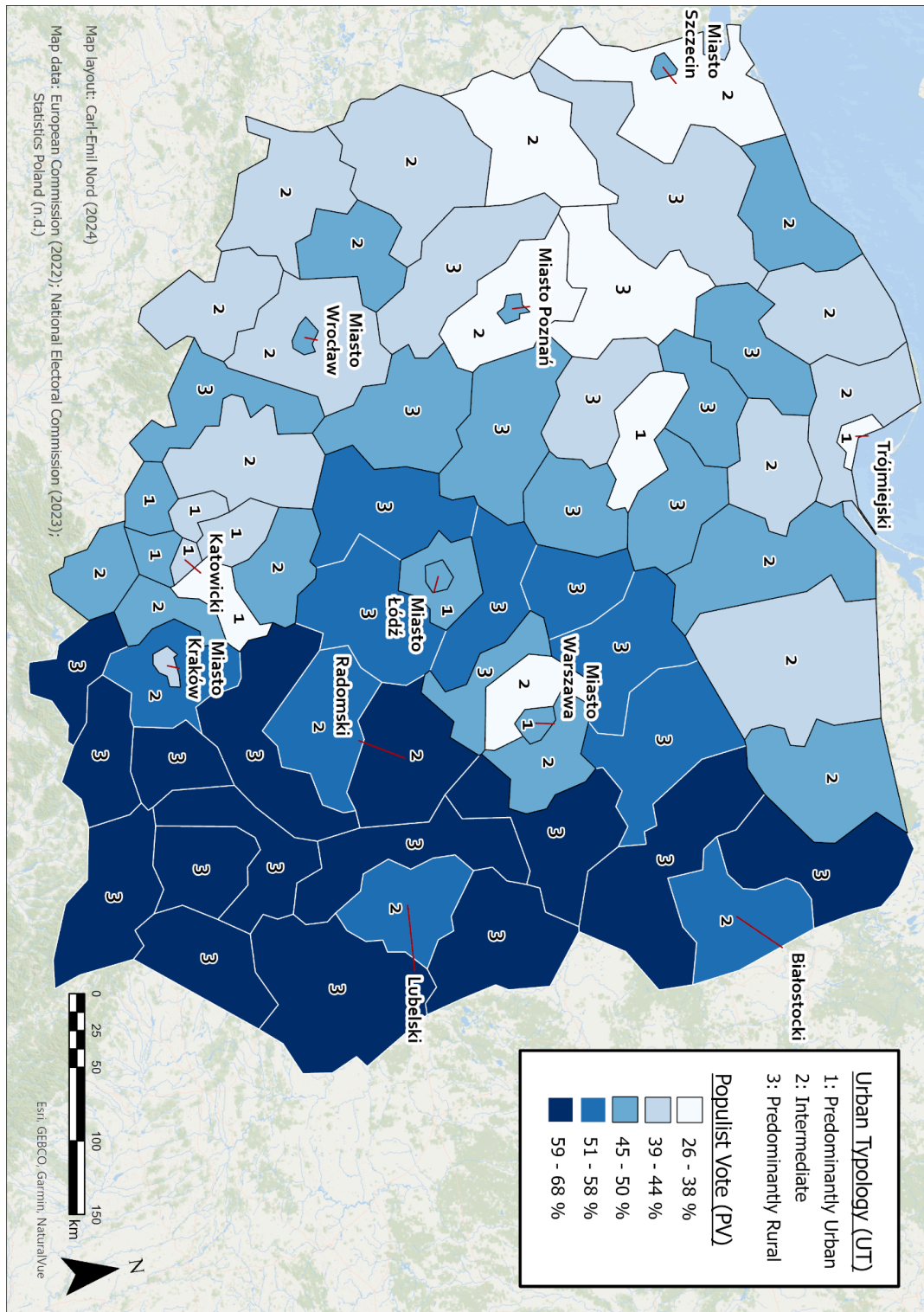
Map 3. *Populist Vote and Urban-Rural Typology*

7. Conclusion

The analysis was guided by three analytical assumptions, the first of which was that a correlation exists between intensity of and time spent in a 'regional development trap' with the amount of votes for 'populist' parties. The second assumption was that middle-income regions have a higher share of 'populist' voting than low- or high-income regions. Neither of these assumptions connected to the 'regional development trap' conceptual framework could be proven correct as applied in this thesis. Middle-income regions could not be proven to have higher share of votes for 'populist' parties either, as a statistically significant negative correlation was found between income level and 'populist' vote, indicating that low-income regions had the highest share of votes for 'populist' parties, and vice-versa.

However, the third assumption that Polish historical geography and socio-economic development reinforces patterns of electoral geography was proven correct, as Map 1 demonstrates. This is in line with research by Churski (2014); Gajewski and Tchorek (2017); Herodowicz et al. (2021); Churski and Kaczmarek (2022), as cited in the Theory and Case Description sections of this thesis.

7.1. Research Questions Revisited

The research questions presented in the Introduction were:

- *To what extent did being caught in a 'regio nal development trap' covary with the vote for 'populist' parties in the Polish 2023 Sejm elections?*
- *To what extent did spatial inequalities resulting from historical patterns of development covary with the vote for 'populist' parties in the Polish 2023 Sejm elections?*

7.1.1. The Populist Vote and Covarying Factors

The resulting answers are that according to the analysis performed in this thesis, being caught in a 'regional development trap' exhibited less covariance with the vote for 'populist' parties in the Polish 2023 elections than spatial inequalities resulting from historical patterns of development did. The 'populist' vote covaried stronger with spatial inequalities of

socio-economic development resulting from the history of Polish territorial evolution, indicated by subregion income level, and urban-rural typology.

The value of the 'regional development trap' framework as constructed by Diemer et al. (2022) as a foundation for researching the connection between regional inequalities and 'populist' discontent has been proven by the many subsequent studies from various angles. However, this thesis indicates that results may vary depending on the idiosyncrasies of places resulting from history and culture, as well as the time, place, and angle of approach in research.

Thus, using the analytical framework presented in the Theory section and the material presented in the Case Description, the results of the analysis in this thesis will be put into wider context.

7.1.2. Long-term Failure to Address Regional Inequalities

On one hand, the Polish post-Soviet economy has grown robustly throughout the 21st century due to successful liberalization, integration with the EU and wider European economy, and has often proven more resilient to major crises than most other countries of the European Union (Gajewski, 2022; *The World Bank in Poland*, 2023). On the other hand, regional inequalities have remained a constant factor despite both national programs and targeted EU policies such as the European Cohesion Policy to even out those inequalities.

This goes against the findings of that low-income regions exhibit higher support for the EU due to structural support programs such as the ECP typically favoring those regions, and could thus be a reason why development trap indicators doesn't seem to covary with 'populist' discontent in Poland. As indicated by Vasilopoulou & Talving (2023), misallocation of structural support may in fact risk widening existing inequalities. Researchers including Churski (2014) Herodowicz et al. (2021), point to typically high-income Polish metropolitan areas absorbing EU structural support, and diffusion to predominantly rural areas is held back by chronic structural problems in the economy and infrastructure.

It is a likely conclusion that as long as these problems aren't solved once and for all, spatial differences will remain and exacerbate the country's already polarized politics, 'populist' discontent will remain strong. Ultimately, this may threaten the future development of Poland's economy and democratic institutions, as well as European integration and cohesion.

7.1.3. Nationalism, Polarization, and Populist Discontent

While it is undoubtedly of critical importance to address the socio-economic aspects of regional inequalities 'populist' discontent isn't just affected by economic factors, but historical and cultural ones as well (R. Martin, 2021; Anderson, 2021; Hanneman 2023). What drives 'populist' discontent isn't necessarily objective socio-economic differences, but the *perception* as being underprivileged or 'left behind' by aloof elites.

As was demonstrated in the Case Description section, Polish national identity has been shaped by centuries of internal and external conflict, resulting in a particularly polarized society, with a higher 'populist' vote share than most European states as a consequence. That, and the fact that large numbers of Polish voters claim to not feel represented by any established party (Putintsev, 2023) is a warning sign that should be heeded by politicians, academics, journalists, and other commentators. Dismissing 'populist' discontent as ignorant complaints of people who simply refuse to move somewhere else or educating themselves for better opportunities only risks strengthening the arguments of those claiming they're part of a system in which they and their place 'don't matter'. Like Gajewski & Tchorek (2017) indicated, there might exist pockets of untapped potential such as the small-scale, high tech, and innovative agricultural enterprises in the eastern, formerly Russian, predominantly rural subregions where populist voting is strong. The authors, like other researchers including R. Martin, et al. (2021) and Pike et al. (2023) warned against oversimplifications and derogatory mischaracterizations in analysis and discourse, and advocated for policy tailored to regional specificities. This must be remembered when approaching new conceptual frameworks such as, for instance, the 'regional development trap' so as to not dismiss those caught in the trap as hopeless cases, nor to draw too definite conclusions based on it, as demonstrated in this thesis.

Whatever the shape of future EU or national level measures to even out regional inequalities, and address chronic structural problems in the economy and infrastructure, both action and messaging must be inclusive towards the disaffected. The challenge is to counter negative and pessimistic perceptions of places where people feel as though they 'don't matter', with a message of optimistic determination to find untapped growth potential in those places, and deal with the structural issues preventing diffusion there. If the belief in such potential was

highlighted by media, academia, and policymakers, people would have more reason to believe that they and the places they're in *do* matter, and that the 'system' they've voted against *can* work for them too, after all.

8. Discussion

8.1. The Evolution of the Thesis

The very first working title of this thesis was 'Space, place, and Identity in Poland: An Examination of the Connection Between Local Regional Economics and Political Identity in View of the 2023 Polish Elections.' The idea built on essentially the same concepts as the final product, including 'regional development traps' and their impact on the perception of 'places that don't matter', but with a stronger focus on the different regional identities of those attracted by 'populist' ideas, movements, and parties. The idea was quickly discarded due to anticipated difficulty of finding relevant data, and because initial background research indicated the fascinating interplay of Poland's long term historical, economic, and political geography on its regional development. Thus, the historical dimension came to occupy a larger role in the thesis, and as the results of the analysis showed that the 'regional development trap' framework couldn't adequately explain the 'populist' vote in the 2023 elections, the historical aspect became a central part of it.

Another aspect which changed during the course of working on the thesis was the emphasis on statistical analysis, which couldn't produce conclusive results due to the use of categorical variables. As mentioned in the Delimitations and Methodology sections, contacting the authors behind the 'regional development trap' (Diemer et al., 2022) to obtain the full empirical dataset was considered but discarded due to concerns over time constraints, but obtaining the data would've allowed constructing continuous variables which might have produced different results. Instead, the class based approach was chosen, and the number of variables expanded to facilitate analysis across a broader range of data collected for the 73 subregions to demonstrate relevant trends and spatial patterns.

8.2. Further Research

The nature of a thesis and academic research in general is raising more questions than can be answered. As outlined in the Introduction, European economic and political cohesion will remain a vitally important subject matter to research in the foreseeable and uncertain future, and Poland is arguably a particularly interesting case of regional inequalities and 'populist' discontent. Furthermore, the conceptual framework, indicators, and data produced by Diemer et al. (2022) of the 'regional development trap' has untapped potential. Therefore, there are many possible options for further research without straying too far from the topic and research design of this thesis, a few examples of which are outlined below.

8.2.1. Case Study Variations

For instance, the scope could be narrowed down for a more qualitative approach examining the manifold interesting spatial patterns and relations uncovered in the Analysis section of this thesis, involving individual or a couple of subregions. These could include the continuous north-south streak of subregions between Suwalki and Krosniencski exhibiting the highest shares of Populist Vote; Białostocki and Oswiecimskie, the two sole subregions belonging to the highest development Class (7); The differences in Populist Vote between predominantly urban subregions and their adjacent subregions to analyze diffusion effects; Statistically outlying subregions such as Trojmieskieje with its 26% Populist Vote, or Suwalski with 67.71%; to just name a few. Another possibility would be to use more localized units of measurement than this thesis, which was based on NUTS 3 territorial units.

Conversely, the scope could be widened for comparative studies of regions across national levels, for instance between one or more out of France, Italy, Hungary, and Poland, as these countries had particularly high amounts of votes for 'populist' parties, as indicated in Figure 4. Alternatively, the Visegrad Group (V4) countries Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, examined by Scott (2022) could serve as case study subjects for Eastern Europe's particular interplay of perceptions in those places which 'don't matter' towards European integration in the vein of Hanneman et al. (2023).

8.3. Closing Thoughts

As outlined in this thesis, the 21st century has been marked by a series of crises with global consequences: The Global War on Terror, the Global Financial Crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and coming decades are set to bring about accelerating consequences of climate change, AI, and as of yet unforeseen events. In such a context, international cooperation and coordination will be of paramount importance. For the member states of the European Union, the rising tide of 'populism' threatens the collective socio-economic development, cohesion, and resilience required to withstand future challenges.

Until voted out in the election of 2023, the 'populist' government of Poland had been on the path to dismantling or co-opting the democratic and legal institutions regulating its own power, and it had ruled and campaigned on socially divisive messages targeted against minorities and other vulnerable groups in society. Yet, the erosion of trust that leads to movements challenging fundamental societal institutions and fanning the flames of polarization cannot be dismissed or attacked as irrational actions by malevolent actors, lest more fuel is added to the fires of discontent. In democratic societies, discontent is the natural result of persistent failure and neglect to take the concerns of people in places that 'don't matter' or are caught in a 'development trap' seriously, and the development in Europe should be a wake-up call for media, academia, and policymakers to do so.

The future may look uncertain, but with the right approach, the looming threats could be harnessed to inspire the unity and solidarity needed to collectively face whichever challenges lie ahead.

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9.1. Standalone Maps, Figures, and Tables

Figure 2. 18th Century Partition Borders Superimposed over Polish 2023 Election Results

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Figure 6. Polish Sovereign Territorial Evolution from 1634 to 1945-Present Poland : History. (n.d.). Britannica. In *Encyclopedia

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10. Appendix

10.1. Full Empirical Dataset

The full empirical dataset, featuring the variables as described in the Methodology section, sorted by Populist Vote. This empirical dataset was used to produce the maps, figures, and tables in the Analysis section.

Subregion (NUTS 3)	DTI	TDT	RC	IL	UT	PV	HP
Trójmiejski	2	1	**2**	1	1	26.43	P
Bydgosko-toruński	2	2	**3**	1	1	34.85	PR
Poznański	2	1	**2**	1	2	36.36	P
Gorzowski	3	3	**5**	2	2	36.69	P
Szczeciński	2	2	**3**	2	2	36.95	P
Sosnowiecki	2	2	**3**	1	1	37.59	PR
Warszawski zachodni	2	2	**3**	2	2	37.67	R
Pilski	2	2	**3**	2	3	38.02	P
Gliwicki	2	2	**3**	1	1	39.07	P
Leszczyński	1	1	**1**	1	3	39.20	P
Katowicki	2	2	**3**	1	1	39.61	P
Opolski	2	2	**3**	1	2	39.78	P
Gdański	1	2	**2**	3	2	39.87	P
Słupski	2	3	**4**	2	2	40.17	P
Jeleniogórski	2	2	**3**	2	2	40.64	P
Wałbrzyski	1	2	**2**	3	2	41.08	P
Starogardzki	2	1	**2**	2	2	41.39	P
Miasto Kraków	1	1	**1**	1	1	41.86	A
Szczecinecko-pyrzycki	3	3	**5**	3	3	41.98	P
Olsztyński	3	3	**5**	2	2	42.27	P

Subregion (NUTS 3)	DTI	TDT	RC	IL	UT	PV	HP
Inowrocławski	2	2	**3**	3	3	42.50	PR
Wrocławski	1	1	**1**	1	2	42.74	P
Zielonogórski	2	2	**3**	2	2	43.28	P
Bytomski	2	3	**4**	3	1	44.10	P
Warszawski wschodni	1	2	**2**	1	2	44.70	R
Elbląski	2	2	**3**	3	2	44.78	P
Łódzki	1	1	**1**	2	1	44.80	R
Ełcki	3	3	**5**	3	2	45.40	P
Chojnicki	2	2	**3**	3	3	45.41	P
Grudziądzki	2	2	**3**	3	3	45.64	PR
Częstochowski	2	2	**3**	1	2	45.78	R
Świecki	2	2	**3**	2	3	46.27	P
Koszaliński	2	2	**3**	2	2	46.45	P
Legnicko-głogowski	2	3	**4**	1	2	46.99	P
Żyrardowski	2	2	**3**	1	3	47.39	R
Miasto Wrocław	1	1	**1**	1	1	47.45	P
Tyski	2	2	**3**	1	1	47.47	P
Włocławski	2	1	**2**	3	3	47.61	PR
Nyski	2	2	**3**	3	3	48.24	P
Miasto Łódź	2	1	**2**	1	1	48.33	R
Koniński	2	2	**3**	2	3	48.49	PR
Bielski	1	2	**2**	1	2	48.50	A
Miasto Szczecin	3	3	**5**	1	2	48.64	P
Oświęcimski	3	4	**7**	2	2	48.89	A
Kaliski	1	2	**2**	1	3	49.05	PR
Rybnicki	2	3	**4**	2	1	49.56	P
Miasto Poznań	1	2	**2**	1	1	50.16	P
Miasto Warszawa	1	1	**1**	1	1	50.36	R

Subregion (NUTS 3)	DTI	TDT	RC	IL	UT	PV	HP
Kielecki	2	2	**3**	2	2	52.15	R
Białostocki	3	4	**7**	2	2	52.50	R
Płocki	1	1	**1**	1	3	52.60	R
Sieradzki	2	2	**3**	3	3	53.47	R
Skierniewicki	1	2	**2**	2	3	55.20	R
Ciechanowski	2	2	**3**	2	3	55.44	R
Ostrołęcki	1	2	**2**	2	3	56.46	R
Lubelski	2	2	**3**	1	2	56.50	R
Krakowski	1	1	**1**	2	2	57.84	A
Piotrkowski	1	1	**1**	1	3	58.42	R
Bialski	2	2	**3**	3	3	59.08	R
Krośnieński	3	3	**5**	3	3	59.21	A
Łomżyński	2	2	**3**	3	3	59.27	R
Chełmsko-zamojski	3	2	**4**	3	3	59.28	R
Puławski	2	2	**3**	3	3	59.91	R
Sandomiersko-jędrzejowski	2	2	**3**	3	3	61.20	R
Tarnowski	3	3	**5**	3	3	61.97	A
Nowotarski	2	2	**3**	3	3	62.17	A
Przemyski	3	3	**6**	3	3	63.19	A
Radomski	2	3	**4**	3	2	63.30	R
Siedlecki	2	3	**4**	2	3	63.88	R
Tarnobrzeski	2	2	**3**	2	3	64.48	A
Nowosądecki	2	2	**3**	3	3	65.65	A
Rzeszowski	1	1	**1**	2	3	67.13	A
Suwalski	2	2	**3**	3	3	67.71	R