

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE PERIPHERY. A CASE STUDY OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN REGION¹

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Abstract

Each country has specific regions, which differ mainly in social, demographic, cultural, and economic aspects. Our subject of interest is the study of peripheral environment that has undergone several migratory transformations in the 20th century that have affected it up to the present day. For this reason, the Sudetenland has become the subject of our research interest. The paper aims to show how the selected respondents from the studied region perceive everyday life and how it influences their political attitudes by combining three steps: the theoretical definition of the periphery, specific aspects of life in the selected Central European region, and qualitative structured interviews. For this purpose, we chose respondents' experiences with the political regime until 1989, quality of life, public services, the consequences of the transformation, access to education, the functioning of the community, and their attitudes towards supporting selected political parties. The paper shows how positive experiences of the past regime, but also emotions, mainly nostalgia, frustration and anger, are interwoven into support for political parties for some of the respondents. These factors lead to the choice of populist and radical parties. The authors uniquely extend existing theories of the periphery with a political science approach.

Keywords: *Periphery, Quality of life, Electoral support, Bruntál region, Socioeconomic situation, 1989.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is focused on the study of peripheries in the Czech Republic, more precisely, the periphery, which is the territory of the Bruntál district

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(in the paper, we also use the name Bruntálsko). The paper intends to fill the research gap on peripheries in the Czech Republic, which are known to be very diverse due to their different development, development potential, level of social capital, various negative and positive influences, resettlement and depopulation, economic problems, etc. (Bernard, Šimon, 2018, p. 50-74). We chose the qualitative approach because our purpose is "to interpret reality, not to describe it correctly" (Švaříček, Šedová, 2007, p. 298). Thus, conducting representative research from which we can draw general conclusions is not essential. Instead, we want to focus on reflecting on the everyday experiences of individuals or groups (Hendl, 2012). This method of research was also chosen because we have a range of quantitative data and research, which will be presented below. However, we lack qualitative studies with conclusions that would shed more thorough light on the way the selected environment is perceived, the quality of life and the way of thinking about society and politics. In the social sciences, it is not easy to define qualitative research, as it encompasses various approaches. What they have in common is what we have already stated: understanding the issue is more important than describing it. Our method of data collection, structured interviews and data analysis, which is a single case study, are subordinate to this aim. If we want to understand the specific problems of a particular region, we cannot do with a single approach, for example, from the political science perspective alone, but we require a broader interdisciplinary approach, utilizing sociological, historical, and geographical perspectives.

The Bruntál district, located in the north-eastern part of the Czech Republic, was chosen as the territorial unit of the research. Bruntál district belongs to the border, outer periphery. It overlaps with the historical territory of the Sudetenland and is characterized by the change of population, namely its several migrations in the 20th century, as well as cultural discontinuity. (Spurný, 2011) This situation significantly impacts the development of the local society, values, economic and social situation. In 2022, the research agency STEM surveyed and issued a typology of Czech municipalities. The survey was part of the Quality of Life Database project. The main types include (a) successful municipalities, (b) settled municipalities, (c) municipalities on the edge, (d) industrial municipalities, (e) neglected municipalities and (f) complicated municipalities. According to the survey's authors, the last category carries a historical burden and includes the municipalities of the former Sudetenland. They are characterized by higher crime rates, higher numbers of executions, structural problems, poorer quality of housing stock,

low election participation, the existence of excluded localities, increased support for extremist parties, etc. (STEM, 2022).

The peripheral position of Bruntál creates a suitable space for our research. The factors that characterize the type of such a complicated municipality also represent different forms of deprivation that complement and reinforce each other. Shaw introduced the concept of deprivation, which consists of three dimensions, as summarized by Burke and Jones (2019, p. 96): “Household deprivation (such as low income), opportunity deprivation (availability of services), and mobility deprivation (barriers to transport)”. The interaction of these deprivations reinforces the peripheral position of the region. Negative factors, ranging from limited public services to loss of togetherness, lead to emotions of nostalgia (Buzalka, 2018), frustration, and grievances (Muliavka, 2021; Flinders, Hinterleitner, 2022), which are most likely to be reflected in support for populist parties (Webber, 2023). We are aware that everyday lived experiences and emotions play a significant role in supporting political parties, not just socio-economic factors (Garry, 2014; Suhay, Erisen 2018; Marandici, 2022).

Based on these facts, we formulate two research questions: (1) what views and attitudes do respondents hold about everyday life? (2) How does this experience translate into their political attitudes and voting preferences?

In the first part of the article, we discuss the literature review, which theoretically defines the issue of peripheries, as well as socio-economic characteristics and the specifics of the Sudetenland and the selected region, i.e. Bruntál. In part 2, we present the basic characteristics of voting behavior in the region. In part 3, we discuss the methodology, in particular the introduction of respondents, for the qualitative research. In part 4, we analyze the qualitative structured interviews, followed by a conclusion summarizing the research.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

As we stated in the introduction, two themes are crucial for our research: the theoretical clarification of the concept of the periphery and its concrete materialization in the literature concerning Bruntál or the Sudetenland as such.

Research on peripheries is extensive and builds on a core-periphery polarity (Musil, Müller, 2008), with peripheries being understood as areas “on the outskirts”. It also depends on which area of science the issue is viewed. From a geographical perspective, peripheries “are the result of

uneven development of society in a territory. This development is influenced by different historical, political, economic, social, cultural and natural conditions“ (Havlíček, Chromý, Jančák, Marada, 2005). The periphery depends on the center and cannot generate its resources. We particularly refer to administrative, economic, political, and cultural dependence. Social sciences have come up with other definitions. For example, Bernt and Colini (2013, p. 3) define the complex concept of the periphery as follows: „We define peripheralization as a multidimensional process which includes economic (deindustrialization, restructuring), social (impoverishment, discrimination, stigmatization) and political (exclusion from decision-making, dependence) phenomena and leads to the emergence of peripheries characterized by dependence, disconnection, poverty, and outmigration. “ In a theoretical study, Kühn (2015) shows that the increase in socio-spatial inequalities led to an increased interest in the study of peripheries and marginalized territories and that the concept builds on insights gained in the economic, political and social fields. Specifically, this means that the issue of peripheralization can be explained through three theoretical approaches: economic polarization, social inequality, and political power. In the case of power, two key factors express the relationship of the periphery to the core (center): dependency and exclusion. The study of inequalities has been noticeably affected by the financial crisis (since 2008), which has led to a further decline of the peripheries (Parker and Tsarouhas, 2018), of which the most visible is depopulation, entailing the erosion of socio-territorial cohesion, the reduction of services, the further deepening of economic and social problems, etc. (Ślusarz, 2021). The decline in the quality of life and socio-economic environment affects citizens' attitudes, including political ones. In this regard, over the last twenty years or so, political scientists have focused on populism. Populist parties and movements are also gaining strong support in peripheral areas, including those that we refer to as structurally disadvantaged (Bláha, 2023; Suchánek, Hasman, 2022; Kevický, 2022), which includes Bruntál region. Some research focuses on the shift of votes from the more traditional focal points of support for left-wing parties to populist projects and the radical right. This phenomenon is encountered across European societies, such as the German one, especially in former East Germany (Ziblatt, Hilbig, Bischof 2023), the European peripheries (Bellucci, Lobo, Lewis-Beck 2012; Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou 2023) and, of course, also in the Czech Republic (Lysek, Lebeda, 2018). Some of the research is devoted to various case studies showing the factors influencing the choice of populist parties. This could be a higher share of

Roman Catholics in the population in Slovakia (Garaj, Bardovič, Mihálik, 2021), a lack of ideology (Maškarinec 2019), economic or political crises, or a weak civil society (Guasti 2020). In terms of voting behavior, this certainly includes the concept of cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Together with the development of party systems, their erosion, and the transformation of values in society, which has undergone several crises since 2008, the pressure of globalization, etc., the influence of these lines is also evolving. While in the first transformation period after 1989 in the Czech Republic, the socio-economic line, i.e., the modified owner-worker cleavage, played an essential role (Hloušek, Kopeček 2004), in the subsequent period, the (also modified) core-periphery line is crucial for electoral behavior.

Research and literature on peripheries are well available in the Czech context, and it is crucial what properties are being investigated. These are the characteristics that we can then assess peripheries against. Bernard (2018, p. 17) focused on purely rural peripheries, which are inhabited by 10 to 20% of the population of the Czech Republic and which exhibit many negative phenomena, such as higher unemployment, precarious and semi-legal work, etc. The consensus is that most Czech peripheries are inland (Musil, Muller, 2008). Marada (2001, p. 22-23) stated that a periphery “is an area characterized by a sparser population, less progressiveness of the economic structure (associated with a lower number of entrepreneurs), as well as a lower rate of material investment, fewer secondary school facilities and a lower intensity of crime. These areas are often located at a greater distance from regional centers. “The research adds other characteristics, such as higher unemployment rates, poorer job availability, lower quality education, higher execution rates, aging, and limited cultural activities. Bernard and Šimon (2017, p. 22) point out that there is no single type of periphery; “this finding leads us to believe that a multidimensional conception of rural peripheral areas, in which we can distinguish several types of the peripheral area according to the predominant type of disadvantage, is plausible in the Czech Republic.” The authors draw attention to an important and specific circumstance that emerged in the context of the post-Soviet transformation. It “exposed several border regions with relatively unstable populations and high migration turnover due to post-war population change” (Bernard, Šimon, 2017, p. 22). Although from the point of view of the Czech Republic as a whole, the transition to a democratic regime was successful, we observe a different development in the areas where the socialist production base has not been well transformed, i.e., in the areas of coal mines, heavy industry, or some near-border areas (for example, in the Jeseníky region). The negative aspects

of this development include depopulation, higher levels of unemployment, lower incomes, leaving of younger and more educated people, the aging of the population, low intensity of housing construction, reduction of public transport, etc. (Kubeš, Kraft, 2011, p. 806). Thus, we can say that the impact of the transformation in these areas has further deepened peripheralization, which is also an important finding for our study. A multidisciplinary approach to peripheries has been taken by Jeřábek et al. (2021), who analyzed peripheries in the Czech Republic through 15 indicators, including transport accessibility, internet coverage or economic level, with findings confirming the existence of internal rather than external peripheries, i.e., peripheries at the border. From a territorial perspective, the Bruntál district is a combination of these two peripheries, external and internal.

The second important dimension important for our research is that Bruntál is part of the Moravian Sudetenland. The border area located in the territory of the former Sudetenland is characterized by three facts: „1. peripheral location in relation to the center; 2. specific natural and climatic conditions (predominance of higher altitude areas); 3. socio-cultural discontinuity caused by the historical development (the displacement of Germans and the subsequent resettlement of the borderlands after World War II).“ (Chromý, 2000, p. 70) These three factors are crucial for our research, especially the discontinuity that is part of qualitative interviews.

The boom in research interest in this area occurred after 1989. In this respect, social science research has focused on the region's history, especially in the 20th century. The parts of the Sudetenland lying within the territory of Bohemia and Moravia are very well reflected in the scientific and expert literature; see in particular the books *Proměny sudetské krajiny* ("The Changes of Sudetenland landscape," Spurný, 2006), *Zmizelé Sudety* ("The Lost Sudetenland," Mikšíček, 2006) or the monograph devoted to minorities in the borderlands after 1945 (Spurný, 2011). Spurný has defined the Sudetenland as a region that distinguishes itself primarily on three levels: "The first is the specificity given by its particular geography, especially its mountainous terrain, and the particular history shaped by the Germans there. We, therefore, speak, for example, of a Sudeten type of settlement. The second layer is the specificity given by expulsion, rapid settlement, demolition, neglect, uprootedness, abandonment, inhospitality, Sudeten homelessness (...) And the third is the aforementioned power and the revival of the Sudetenland inspired by it, which has become one of the great themes of contemporary Czech society, especially among the younger generation." (Spurný, 2006, p. 12). All these aspects are reflected in life in

the Bruntál region, as evidenced by Karel's historical syntheses, especially *Příběh lesů a lidí Rýmařovska* ("The Story of the Forests and People of the Rýmařov Region", Karel, 2008) and the monumental book *Rýmařov v dějinách* ("Rýmařov in History", Karel, 2021). Nature, landscapes and their use by people, migration, often documented by the stories of individual people, and the slow revival of society after 1989 are prominent aspects of Karel's books and smaller studies. Migration, in turn, influences the formation of social capital and local or regional identity. The dimension of such regional identity is crucial regarding individuals' values, as it is the basis for forming and functioning communities. Individual identity can be understood as "the result of social interaction between the individual and the society." In contrast, regional identity is understood as "a constructed concept based on historical consciousness, the existence of values, norms by which an individual identifies with a given territory and local group" (Cejpová, Šimáková, 2021, p. 102, 103). Similarly, Fialová and Vágner (2012, p. 124) reflect that "(i)dentitý is a process of changing the state in which we define who we are and who we become by our choices." If identity results from commonly shared values, it is also essential in forming belonging and communities. The theory of belonging works with this idea and talks about the various bonds that create belongingness, which can positively affect attitudes toward democracy (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

In line with what has already been mentioned, border regions, which are the outer peripheries, are characterized by many negative phenomena, ranging from higher unemployment, a higher number of executions, a lower share of university graduates in the population, lower performance of primary school students, and lower life expectancy than in places with a higher standard of living (Grossmann, Jurajda, Zapletalová, 2023). The interconnections and contexts of some of these phenomena have been traced by Prokop (2019) in his book *Slepé skvrny* ("Blind Spots"), where he has pointed out, among other things, the considerable regional differences in Czech society, with the inner peripheries (among the Czech regions) and border areas being particularly disadvantaged, where the level of education is lower than the average for the population as a whole: "The offsprings of less educated parents are also significantly more likely to fall into execution or be long-term unemployed." (Prokop, 2019, p. 72) These individuals are then less supportive of democracy and tend to be more supportive of authoritarianism (Šaradín et al., 2021). The above-mentioned negative phenomena, which are interrelated, have an impact, for example, on voter participation (Linek, Lyons 2007, pp. 63-85), which is lower here than in

the average population, or on support for extremist, radical, and populist parties. The latter is higher in peripheral areas than the average gains of these subjects in the whole country. Petr Daněk has shown, using data from the 1990s, that “the differences between continuously settled and under-settled places remain significant” (Daněk, 2000, p. 60), especially regarding the electoral results of some parties. Based on the three parliamentary elections in the border areas, he already observed higher support for Sládek’s Republicans, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and the left as such (especially the ČSSD, Czech Social Democratic Party). The spatial analysis of the Czech party system was the focus of Kouba (2007). In the case of the Sudetenland, “(h)istorical reasons for the above-average identification with the Communist Party in the former German-populated borderlands seem to lie in the post-war involvement of the Communist Party in the expulsion of the German population and the subsequent confiscation and redistribution of German property” (Kouba, 2007, p. 1032). The Sudeten regions also determined the outcome of the presidential elections held in both 2013 and 2018: “(T)he largest mobilization effect took place on the internal borders of the regions, especially in the Ústí nad Labem, Karlovy Vary and Pilsen regions. Therefore, these areas, which partly resemble the historical Sudetenland, decided the election” (Lysek, Lebeda, 2018). The electoral situation in the former Sudetenland is perceived in this way by the national media, as evidenced by headlines such as “Economist: the Sudetenland votes differently. Lower education, fewer jobs, and fear for property are to blame” (Hronová, 2021), “Post-war expulsion of Germans still directly influences the political map of Sudetenland, says scientist” (Musil, 2021), “Lessons from the election: will loving care for Sudetenland fix it?” (Zámečník, 2018), “The Sudeten curse of Czech democracy continues. Whoever breaks this will win.” (Jandourek, 2021).

An interesting study was published by Guzi, Herber, and Mikula (2021) in which they concluded that population change in areas formerly inhabited by Germans has a long-lasting effect. These areas are characterized by lower social capital that results in more frequent migration, less participation in local associations, and fewer social gatherings. Researchers from the IDEA think tank have examined the impact of liberation involving either the Soviet or the US military. Grossmann and Jurajda (2022) showed that more Sudeten Germans remained in the parts of the Sudetenland liberated by the American army, which resulted in higher voter support for the Communist Party of the Czech Republic. In the communities in these areas, citizens also held more left-wing attitudes than in those liberated by the Soviets.

There are studies depicting the historical, demographic (Hlavienka, 2020; Niesner, 2015), social (Stanoev, 2018), cultural (Bielešová, 2016), and economic development of Bruntál (Bartoš 1994; Karel 2008), which show its peripheral position. Data and forecasts point to a further gradual decline of the population, which is ultimately expected to be substantial (Tvrđý, 2009). However, more recent research on the area is lacking. Still, we have no information on how people perceive life in Bruntál and how this translates into their voting preferences.

The literature conceptualizes the former Sudetenland as a "(l)aboratory, which to this day makes it possible to observe the consequences of such a drastic change very clearly - the fundamental transformation of the landscape, including the not sporadic disappearance of villages, extensive and largely persistent social, national and religious heterogeneity of the new population or the specific (and again largely heterogeneous) identity of these people and the related ambivalent relationship to the places of memory of the original German population" (Stočes, Váně, 2017, p. 41). This perceived laboratory of change, which began with the breakup of Czechoslovakia and the forced flight or expulsion of "160-170,000 Czechs, Jews, and of course Sudeten Germans from their homes to the inland"(Kural, 2002, p. 110), continued through the post-war displacement of the German population to several waves of varying degrees of resettlement in the borderlands. We can say that "cultural-historical regions exist only insofar as they exist in the consciousness of the inhabitants, and when the inhabitants forget their existence, the regions effectively disappear" (Siwek, Bogdová 2007, p. 1041). As we have stated, the socio-economic situation in the territories of the former Sudetenland has its specificities, which are also manifested in other areas, such as voters' political preferences.

2 MAIN ELECTORAL TRENDS

In the previous text, we mentioned some specific features of voting behavior in the Bruntál region. The basic socio-demographic characteristics include an increase in the proportion of elderly residents, a higher proportion of unemployed, a lower proportion of people with a university degree, a higher proportion of people with foreclosures, a population decline (by 15% in the last 20 years), etc. (Český statistický úřad, 2022) These are features that correspond to the periphery as presented in the theoretical framework above. Due to the socio-economic characteristics of the population and the social structure, left-wing parties have been dominant here since the first

parliamentary elections in 1990 (Kouba, 2007), which were later replaced by populist parties (see Table 1).

Table 1: Electoral support of selected parties (in %)

	1996		1998		2002		2006		2010		2013		2017		2021	
	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ
ČSSD		26.4	43.2	32.3	33.5	30.2	39.1	32.3	28.8	22.1	26.1	20.5	8.5	7.3	5.0	4.6
KSČM	12.2	10.3	14.8	11.0	27.9	18.5	18.4	12.8	17.1	11.3	22.1	14.9	12.0	7.8	5.5	3.6
ANO	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.4	18.6	36.6	29.6	36.2	27.1
SPD	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9.9	6.9	15.1	10.6	15.5	9.6

Source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ). Note: BR – Bruntál region, CZ – The Czech Republic.

In 2013, the entity led by Tomio Okamura ran under the name Úsvit, and since 2015, it has run under the name Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD).

Looking at the support for political parties in the parliamentary elections in Bruntál district, there is a noticeable inclination first to left-wing parties and later to more populist and radical parties. Direct presidential elections have been held in the Czech Republic since 2013, and the Bruntál district is characterized by a strong anti-liberal orientation, manifested by the strong support of Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš (Table 2).

Table 2: Second round of the presidential election

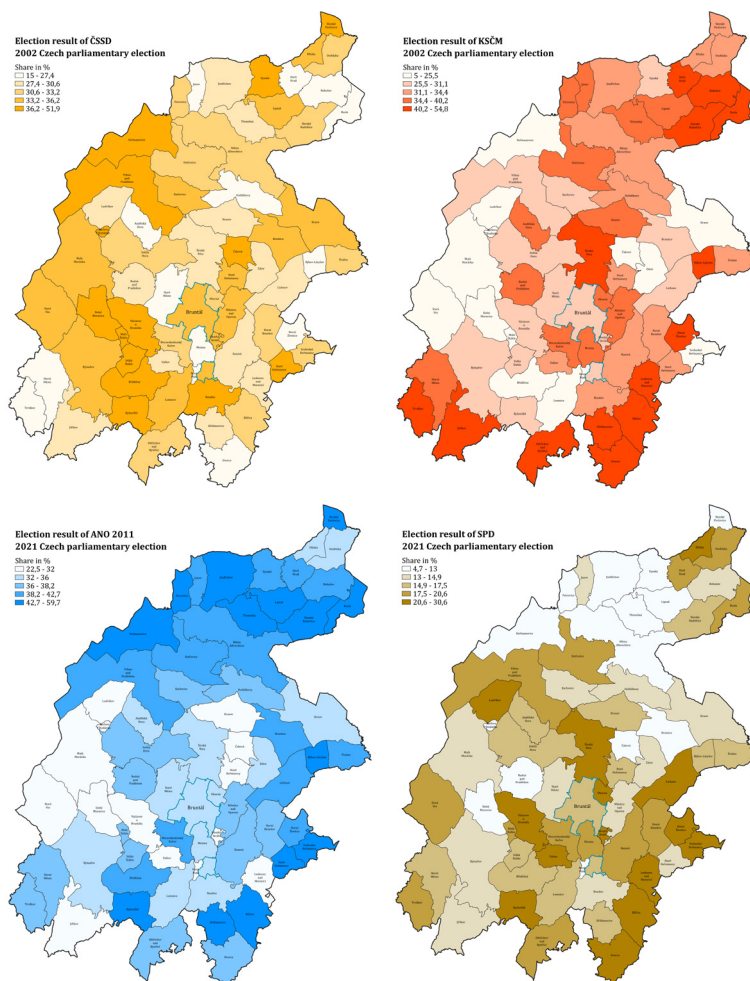
	2013		2018		2023	
	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ
Miloš Zeman	73.9	54.8	-	-	-	-
Karel Schwarzenberg	26.1	45.2	-	-	-	-
Miloš Zeman	-	-	68.6	51.4	-	-
Jiří Drahoš	-	-	31.4	48.6	-	-
Andrej Babiš	-	-	-	-	60.3	41.7
Petr Pavel	-	-	-	-	39.7	58.3

Source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ). Note: BR – Bruntál region, CZ – The Czech Republic.

The trend of strengthening the radical right and political populism at the expense of the left, especially in its original bastions, can be observed in various parts of Europe (Berman, Snegovaya, 2019). It is also true that in peripheries like Bruntál, some social factors are stronger, for example due to significant transition costs after 1989. One of the main consequences was high unemployment. For many, the past regime represented security, functioning services and employment. (Kunštát, 2013, pp. 171-180). This may justify the strong position of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovak Republic and the support for the social policy of the ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party). Table 1 shows the gains made by the left from the first parliamentary elections in the independent Czech Republic to the most recent ones. Adding up the votes for the Communists and the Social Democrats, the strongest support for the left was in 2002, with a total of 61.4% of the vote. In the last parliamentary elections (2021), which were already dominated by the populists (ANO) and the radical populist right (SPD), the gain for both left parties was only 10.5% of the vote. The weakening of the left in less than twenty years is extreme, especially in the Bruntál district itself. The KSČM (Communist Party) has weakened by 24%, and the ČSSD even by 28% of the vote in two decades. There is an important note to the results. The Czech party system underwent a major electoral break in 2010, which is also partly evident in Table 2. At that time, the traditional parliamentary parties declined, which also affected the left—the year 2010 also marked the emergence of new political parties and movements. The parliamentary elections confirmed this trend of their strengthening in 2017 and 2021.

Maps 1-4 show the voter support in the individual municipalities of Bruntál district in 2002 for the ČSSD and KSČM, and then in 2021 for ANO and SPD. This study does not aim to track vote shifts between parties, but the overlay shows the similarity of the maps with support for ČSSD and ANO on the one hand and KSČM and SPD on the other. The gains for ANO in some municipalities in 2021 were enormous, reaching up to the 60% mark. In 2002, the KSČM and ČSSD could gain at most slightly more than 50% of the vote in some municipalities.

Maps 1-4: Support for ČSSD and KSČM (2002) and ANO and SPD (2021) in municipalities



Source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), made by Jakub Janega.

3 METHODOLOGY

The primary field information collection methods we have chosen fall within the broad field of oral history recording. Qualitative research is based on structured interviews with open-ended questions. The range of

topics followed the broader framework of everyday life that developed in the study region in 1989. Demographically, it is an intricately composed unit with the potential for different social interactions in the respective social strata assumed. The questions related to the past before 1989 as well as to the new living, social and cultural situation in the Bruntál region after 1990. Respondents were selected via purposive sampling, where we anticipated interviewing information-rich cases. Respondents were selected to be familiar with the environment and showed a deeper insight and interest in the region. Therefore, we selected respondents from the local government sector, historians and respondents who had experience with the situation before 1989. We supplemented these with younger respondents with experience mainly with the post-Soviet situation. We worked with a structured set of questions, assuming the acquisition of original, historically interesting information (primary source material), which, unlike free-flowing and uncorrected personal memories, is targeted at the range of topics that we subsequently discuss with other respondents. This method of analysis allows us to confirm theoretical assumptions about social aspects of life in the periphery, highlight selected themes and specify them. Of course, it also allows both research questions to be answered. The responses were analyzed through open coding, axial coding and selective coding, which allowed us to grasp the overall results.

Throughout the research, we worked with 23 respondents selected to achieve theoretical saturation in the responses and to obtain conclusive findings. We consider the number of respondents to be sufficient and consistent with our previous research (Lebeda, Kubátová, Šaradín, Hojgrová, 2021). The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The selection of respondents considered geographical, social, age, cultural, gender, and political diversity. Although the accounts of respondents in the over-60 category are crucial for our research, we were also interested in the experience of younger respondents. According to age, we therefore use three age categories: 60+, 40 to 59, and 39 and below.

The purpose of dividing the respondents into these three age categories is to support the aim of the article, i.e. to find out the opinions on the above-mentioned issues of people who experienced the period before 1989 and the subsequent social changes in their fully productive age (60+), partially (40-59) and who do not fully remember it or are not burdened by it (<39 years). It is not our aim to compare these age groups, but age serves the reader to understand the respondent's statements. The interviews took place between 2020 and 2022.

Table 3: Respondents and their basic characteristics

Participant number	Gender	Position in the research	Age category
1	Woman	Mayor	60+
2	Man	Mayor	60+
3	Woman	Vice-mayor	40-59
4	Man	Mayor	40-59
5	Woman	Mayor	60+
6	Man	Former employee of a state farm	60+
7	Woman	Former employee of a state farm	60+
8	Man	Former state farm employee and national committee worker	60+
9	Man	Former employee of a state farm	60+
10	Man	Historian	60+
11	Man	Historian	60+
12	Woman	Historian	40-59
13	Woman	Representative of the resettled population	60+
14	Woman	Representative of the resettled population	60+
15	Man	Representative of the resettled population	60+
16	Woman	Representative of the resettled population	60+
17	Man	Representative of amenity migration	40-59
18	Woman	Representative of amenity migration	40-59
19	Man	Representative of amenity migration	40-59
20	Woman	Representative of a vacation homeowner	40-59
21	Man	Representative of amenity migration	Under 39
22	Woman	Daughter of a representative of the resettled population	Under 39
23	Woman	Daughter of a representative of the resettled population	Under 39

The range of topics followed the issues of everyday life that has evolved in the region over the last 30 years. As already mentioned, demographically, it is an intricately composed entity with the assumed potential for different social interactions in the corresponding social strata. Our interest was mainly in the findings based on the theoretical concept of the periphery and in findings with specific subjective experiences of the periphery. We decided to go beyond statistical data and focus on interpreting experiences, prioritizing understanding rather than explanation. We emphasize that this type of research does not allow for generalizations that would hold for all peripheries in the Czech Republic. Still, it is a deeper probe into understanding issues with political implications and seeing specific voting behavior. To appropriately target the everyday life experience in the region, core themes included questions related to perceptions of the consequences of transition, access to education, community functioning, and attitudes towards support for political parties. These themes (e.g. infrastructure, transport, etc.) are pursued in the theoretical concepts of periphery, as discussed in Part 1 of the article. The basis for selecting themes was a document on relevant indicators of quality of life in the country (Maussen 2018). Our interviews also included the topic of experience with the past regime. Questions related to the participants' recollections were asked only the respondents who had experienced the past regime.

4 EVERYDAY LIFE AND PERCEPTION OF SOCIETY

In this section, we analyze factors related to quality of life as presented above, the social climate of the past and present and political attitudes. Based on the preceding information, we can conclude that Bruntál, as a peripheral area, is, to a large extent, a relatively isolated region, which may be reflected, for example, in the inaccessibility of some public services. From the responses recorded, it emerged that the region's transport and public transport services are generally very poor. The Bruntál district is located on the border of the Olomouc and Moravian-Silesian regions. This generates a significant communication mismatch and poorly set up logistics of transport connections between the two areas. The complexity of transport is illustrated by the testimony of respondent 5, who has served as mayor of the municipality for many years: *"Many connections are not connected to each other because of how the regions were created. The line from the Moravian-Silesian region actually runs into the Olomouc region, so the transport infrastructure, both to work and to schools, is quite difficult."*

The state of the railway connection and its (im)possible development in the future is illustrated by the statement of a historian who has experience of the whole region in the context of his profession (respondent 11): *“The railway line that is here is over 100 years old and, unfortunately, it is built in such a way that it cannot be made double-tracked, so getting to Olomouc or Ostrava is a problem.”*

In the interviews, nostalgia emerges not only for the system of former district authorities, which primarily provided essential public services, but also for functional transport. Citizens see the integration of the whole area into the Moravian-Silesian Region as one of the biggest problems. They are very critical of the (lack of) interest of the regional representatives in the life and needs of the villages in the Bruntál district. From Ruda, which belongs to the municipality of Tvrdkov, the distance to the regional city of Ostrava is 110 kilometers, and to the neighboring regional city of Olomouc is 36 kilometers. From Sovinec, it is only 33 kilometers to Olomouc. Citizens compare the level of care for the municipalities in both regions daily. Respondent No. 11, who is a historian by profession, did not hide his disillusionment and compared the situation: *“When we were the Olomouc district or the Olomouc region, and I have experienced it, it seems to me that the Olomouc region has been so much more accommodating to people until today. Here, as far as the Moravian-Silesian Region is concerned, it seems to me that way, and they sometimes indicate that way; it ends somewhere behind Opava.”* Respondent No. 12, a representative of the younger generation and also the director of one of the cultural institutions in the Bruntál region, critically described the low interest of the region in the studied area: *“...we are a locality that is affected by the fact that we fall under the Moravian-Silesian Region. Whenever anything has been addressed, Rýmařov has always been at the tail end of the region.”* Respondent 1 summed up the situation, the status, and self-assessment of the municipalities in the former Bruntál district very critically: *“People are still aware of what was here. For example, when we tell them the post office is about to be shut down, they feel we can put these municipalities in the muck.”* Respondents confirmed the experience of peripheral areas, i.e., increasingly reduced public transport, but added their experience of public administration reform. Indeed, according to respondents, dysfunctional public services resulted from a poorly executed public administration reform in 2000, which established self-governing regions. Many municipalities in the southern Bruntál district considered referendums on joining the Olomouc region, but the referenda were not held. The administration of the

Moravian-Silesian Region assured the affected municipalities that it would assist them financially and otherwise.

Similarly, the lack of shops in the countryside and the absence of regular and locally available health care are painfully felt by the citizens, to which respondent 5 added a comment about the state of health care in the 1980s in Lomnice: *“At that time there was a health center here, with a doctor for adults once a week and a doctor for children once a week. There used to be a gynecological outpatient clinic and a dental clinic here.”* The situation was similar in Huzová: *“Everything was there, the doctor was there twice a week. There was everything we needed to live”*, confirm the memories of respondent 6.

In the theoretical part, we argued that the post-Soviet economic transformation in the peripheral areas caused considerable social and economic problems, which impacted the closure of institutions and traditional workshops, farms, and factories. In the case of Bruntál, the consequences of the transformation were fatal. Even today, basic infrastructure is missing, causing further underdevelopment. These include poor cellular connections and the cancellation of telephone lines. Sometimes, only expensive satellite equipment is available, and there is no internet connection in some parts of the region. Not everyone can afford it, and it certainly does not add to the region's attractiveness, which is battling the fact that young people tend to leave. A 90-year-old woman (respondent 14) speaks critically about the current opportunities for young people: *“There are no jobs here, where are these people supposed to go to work? I have a son in Rýmařov; he has children in Brno, and they don't even want the house here. Well, what about here? Nothing! There's not even a shop here.”*

Respondent 4, who has experience as a deputy mayor and a mayor, has been trying to fight the migration of young people and the labor force throughout his term of office. He was aware of the region's limits in both capacities: *“We are still in the borderlands, where people have been moving out for a long time, fleeing. Especially young people are fleeing to bigger cities like Olomouc, Brno, and Prague to find work.”* Respondent 3, a city councilor at the time of the interview, specified the situation by saying: *“The problem is that we are on the periphery, that people here don't have jobs like they used to. The big factories that used to employ hundreds of people no longer exist today. People have to commute for work.”* Respondent 4 also complained about the low supply of skilled jobs: *“Long-term unemployment rate is high here, and the supply of jobs and highly skilled jobs here is lower than in the big cities.”* Respondent 17 also confirmed this specific situation: *“There are no*

job opportunities in Sovinec today unless you work from home via computer; you have nothing here. The nearest are Unex and Miele in Uničov. In Rýmařov and the Bruntál district, the job situation is bad."

The current situation has been gradually and over the long term compared to the massive supply of work before 1989, although previously, it was mainly in working-class occupations. The inhabitants of the Bruntál district experience the disappearance of traditional agriculture as a great pain. Until 1990, traditional agriculture was guaranteed on a large territorial scale by the State Farm Břidličná, with the largest branches in Huzová, Rýžoviště and other villages. The structure of the farm was described by respondent No. 7, who worked in the management of the farm: *"The State Farm Břidličná was comprised of perhaps ten villages. We had about 600 workers and 8,500 hectares of land."* The farm's focus was then described by respondent 8: *"Everything from grain to potatoes was grown here."* His testimony was again elaborated by respondent 8: *"Then there was a whole industry of flax growing. And there were two factories where flax was taken for processing, Čemolen Malá Štáhle and Čemolen Stará Libavá; it was labor intensive."* It must be added that the flax industry, not only here but also in the whole country, gradually disappeared during the 1990s, and with it, the employment opportunities. Both enterprises no longer exist today.

Milk production was another domain of local agriculture. Respondent 9, a former state farm employee, precisely one of its branches, insightfully spoke: *"When we worked in that large capacity cowshed, we focused on quality milk. And if it weren't for 1989, we would have been producing powdered milk for children."* Respondent 9 also criticizes the situation after 1989, when the farm was closed, and expresses his resentment towards the subsidy system, *"After 1989, the private sector took over, and they mostly went to the meat industry and subsidies at any cost. They're not as committed to work anymore because, after all, before 1989, you didn't see uncut meadows here, and now the land is not as farmed as it was."* Respondent 2 added to the picture of the transition period of the late 1990s and early 2000s with its many ills: *"Until 89, the state farm was where most people were employed. Then, there was a sawmill in Těchanov, where people from Jiříkov and the surrounding area were employed. When it all ended, there was a big increase in unemployment rate."* Respondent 9 said, *"As long as the state farm existed here, as long as Hedva existed here, there was employment for young people."*

Respondent 6 described the current situation on the farm in Huzová: *"Today, as far as the farm is concerned, about ten percent of the people who worked here before work here now. Nowadays, the only thing being done here*

from the original agricultural production is cattle breeding on green areas or meat cattle breeding." Based on his experience, Respondent 9 added and assessed the situation in agriculture, "There is not even that agriculture here anymore because whoever is doing agriculture here is only doing it as meadows for hay and cows."

In principle, the residents of Bruntál often compare the situation now with the case before 1989, and they tend to displace negative memories and argue with selectively chosen facts: "After the revolution, everything fell down here... Whether it was supply, transport, medical care... so I think it was better then," Respondent 2 added.

We also include the accessibility of schools, i.e., education, in the sphere of amenities. In the interviews, respondents were very sensitive to this issue. Respondent 5 described the system of clustering school facilities within several neighboring villages, which she said had been in operation from the 1970s until the early 1990s: "There was always a nine-year school here and children from neighboring villages, from Dětřichov and Valšov, came to us for the secondary level." Respondent 6's children had a similar experience, "They went to school here in Lomnica because it was a full nine-year school. I have to say that it makes me very sad that the school has disappeared. There is only a small kindergarten here, only the first to the fourth year. Otherwise, the children go to Bruntál." The situation in Jiříkov was described by respondent 2: "Well, the school ended in 1998, there were not enough children here." He also added that the disappearance of the school had an impact on other areas of social life: "At the same time, the kindergarten, which at that time belonged to the state farm Jiříkov or Huzová, was operating alongside the school. There was also after-school care. There was also a cooking for children and pensioners." As mentioned by respondent 2, the problem was and still is in many places, the lack of children. Respondent 17 recalled how, in the 1970s and 1980s, there were enough children in Sovinec and Jiříkov and compared this situation with the present situation: "There were children here, too. Nowadays, no children here are obliged to go to school." Interviewee 16 from Ruda described a similar experience: "But I remember when there were a lot of people and a lot of children."

Respondent 6 described the problem of the region's aging and the difficult conditions for the upcoming generations in a very suggestive way: "As far as the relationship to the village is concerned, I miss the education of children to be patriotic and to know where they belong. The kids aged six to ten go to Bruntál, spend their free time on the bus, and then don't know where they belong. I always say that we have euro windows, euros, and euro kids."

In this section, we have only discussed the accessibility of schools, leaving aside the quality of teaching, which is lower in peripheral areas than in the rest of the country (Prokop, 2019).

Another set of questions concerned social activities, community belonging, and local identity. Responses relating to community gatherings were often centered on the problems of demolishing community centers and mainly pubs. The lack of social activities was succinctly summed up by respondent 7: *"I think this village used to have quite a social life; I miss that now."* Closing shops, schools, and pubs have substantially affected or dampened the opportunities for social activities, especially in small villages the size of Jiříkov, Sovinec, or Těchanov. According to the respondents, the loss of community is one of the most painful experiences and reinforces negative attitudes towards the center (the capital city of Prague). Respondent 2, for example, commented on the reduction of social life: *"The shop has been closed, the pub as well, so it's not like it used to be... There was also a hospitality industry, but that ended because there was no spending capacity."* Respondent No. 17 also negatively evaluated the disappearance of the pub: *"There was a nice pub here. There were parties there: hunting parties, firefighters' parties and ROH (Communist trade unions). The barber used to go there every Friday; everybody used to meet there, locals and people from the cottages, and everything was handled there."* The futile efforts of the municipal politician to stir up the village community were approximated by Respondent no. 1: *"People at home sit in front of the TV and don't come out, even though it's free, that's a group of people who just aren't interested, who are comfortable like that. And that's all."* Respondent 2 specified the problem in the sports area: *"There used to be sportsmen, hunters, the Red Cross, all of that fell apart when the National Front broke up. Now, there is not even any fun here."* Respondent 17 further clarified the local situation: *"The only thing to do in Jiříkov is to get together on the playground and eat mackerel."*

Respondent 18, who came to Rýžoviště in the early 1980s and spoke enthusiastically about the village's amenities in the past, added another memory: *"They had a theatre group here, so they used to do theatre, so that was great. They used to do all kinds of dances and a lot of (events) for people."* The contemporary witness of a sports club, respondent no. 9, evaluated the current situation very skeptically: *"The young people are not so attracted, and they don't understand that there was a tradition here, that somehow people would get together, have fun... There were football players, firefighters, and then people like that who had no problem helping or doing something for the village, and the fun was worth it. Those people were able and willing to*

have fun.“ Almost two generations younger, respondent 19 also concluded the debate about sport in the village with some very alarming words: *“The times are such that people are no longer interested in anything. Football has been here for fifty years, and they suddenly have a problem getting together.”*

Even the question of whether there is any local identity did not evoke positive emotions among the respondents. Many respondents, not only respondent 1, have been missing *“...the village togetherness, for the people to live together, to be able to talk, even dance and solve their problems.”* Respondent 8 attempted to comment directly on identity: *“It’s the identity of the village, the folklore and what the village used to be about that has been lost.”* In this context, Respondent 4 recalled the issue of post-war displacement and resettlement, which brought people to the region without a closer connection to it: *“The place is still looking for its generational roots.”* He cited a relatively simple indicator of how one can examine rootedness in a place, *“My dad and I used to joke that when you visit the graves during All Saints’ Day, we go all the way to Kyjov. The other part of our family is in Kostelec nad Černými Lesy, and part of our family is in Mníšek pod Brdy. ...(But) when our descendants come to all the graves here (to Bruntál), they will be rooted here. Until then, it’s not a complete connection with this place.”* In addition, respondent 6 stressed the importance of generational relationships and reflection on the past, *“We need to perceive that this is something that those ancestors left us here. We need to maintain it so that it will serve the generations to come.”* Historian - respondent 10, who has spent his entire professional life researching the Bruntál region, emphasized the constant population change, which hinders the connection with the landscape and identity formation. Not only the end of the 1930s, the post-war displacement, and settlement until the beginning of the 1950s, but also the subsequent demands of businesses influence further migration. In the 1960s, some factories were closing down; from the 1970s onwards, the plastics factory started production, which required other professions: *“Again, a new wave of people, and I know many of the people from all these waves here and I know that they don’t say that this is the city that has grown close to their hearts. It’s only maybe now, the youngest generation, after the ‘90s, so it’s starting to look slightly different”.* A certain optimism about a new regional identity, to which the younger generation, who are connected to the place and are organizing themselves civically, could relate, also appeared among other respondents.

Many respondents tried to suggest ways to build and strengthen their relationship with the region. Respondent 12 has worked in the cultural sector for a long time, dealing with the history of a place: *“You always build*

that identity in that place. It's all about the environment you live in and the experiences you get... We try to educate the younger generation from schools and kindergartens; we put on workshops, programs, museum nights, city tours; I think we try to do many things like that to attract the younger generation here."

Respondent 3, however, did not see the situation as dire. Like many other municipal politicians, she tried and still tries to rehabilitate the region, *"People might be interested in looking at what it looks like today, that in some ways the life has certainly moved on, that, of course, the landscape and other things have changed because life here in our region was hard, that those people had to struggle, that it was a hard slogging work day in and day out. And if that brings those people in, we'll be glad."* The people who will move to Bruntál will likely do so because the landscape and history of the place somehow appeal to them. They are and will be able to move despite the lower service offer. The area's hope lies in their ability to qualitatively change the landscape and settlements to come together and bring in a higher social capital.

The conclusion of the interviews focused on political preferences. Respondent No. 18 commented on the evaluation of society in Bruntál: *"When I came here, I was pleasantly surprised. Everything was here. There was a bank and savings and loans office, and all the doctors were here, from the dentist to the pediatrician, gynecologist, or obstetrician. There was a clothing store, a drugstore, a butcher shop, a bakery, Jednota [grocery store], housewares, a post office, everything, in fact. It was totally awesome."* She concluded her testimony by saying that these certainties led her to vote for parties where she felt they could provide society security and stability. Respondent 23, who is still studying at university, adds to the political situation: *"The people I meet are disappointed that no one has helped them. That is why they vote for Okamura and Babiš. And maybe they don't care whether they promise or actually do something. All they need is a protest because they are angry with the whole system."* The respondents' statements led us to believe that many consider their neighborhood frustrating, disappointing and angry. These feelings are mainly directed towards the government; however, respondent 21, also a younger generation member, feels that sometimes the same criticisms are made of the mayor: *"When they criticize, they criticize everybody. They criticize the government and the mayor, even though he's doing his best here."* When people are deprived and unwell, they often blame the government for their failure. Respondents also identified with the perception of Bruntál as a periphery because services do not work and the

state forgets about the residents. Respondent no. 13 believes that people like ANO because Andrej Babiš is the only one who thinks about ordinary people: *“People believe that when he comes back as a prime minister, he will give them something again.”* The interviews also revealed that, in the end, it is the best if people take care of themselves because their problems are not visible from Prague. Thus, the electoral support that went from the left to the populists resulted from the costs of transformation, loneliness (no one is helping the region), nostalgia for security, and anger at the ruling elites. What is particularly strong, it is the image of disappearing living standards, which was visible in 1989 and then disappeared. The disappearance of public services, the weakening of social life, the loss of jobs, and the decline of schools and population lead to a rather strong frustration and anger among many.

CONCLUSION

The article aimed to find out how the respondents perceive the functioning of public services, the consequences of the transformation, the availability of education, the functioning of the community, and what attitudes they have towards supporting political parties according to their everyday life experiences. We focused on explaining the issues from the perspective of the periphery. We formulated two research questions. First, what views and attitudes do respondents hold about everyday life?

The analysis showed that from the point of view of most respondents, or those who had lived through the previous regime, the year 1989 was a turning point. They do not mention the political situation of the pre-1989 period but focus on the quality of life, opportunities, and conditions they had. Jobs were plentiful and services were functioning, which was especially evident in the functional transport mentioned several times. There were schools and shops in the villages, the doctor was available, as was the post office, social events were held and children played sports. The land served the farmers and was cultivated. The situation has been different since the beginning of the 1990s, and according to the respondents' accounts, it has been generally worse. The former agricultural landscape is now used only for livestock farming, schools have closed in many villages, there are no shops or post offices, and people are moving away for work. During the 1990s, industrial production declined, and unemployment increased compared to the national average. The service system has broken down, transport is not working, and services are less frequent. In some places, there is no cellular

signal and no landline. According to respondents, the disappearance of district authorities, the territorial reform of the Czech Republic, and the creation of regions may have contributed to many problems, especially in public administration.

A probe into the lives of the inhabitants of the Bruntál district, or rather their everyday lived experience, reveals that they perceive their surroundings as problematic, they are aware of the peripheral position of the Bruntál district, they feel deprived in terms of social, economic and quality of life. Some respondents also believe that people lack a relationship with the land and have not formed a more robust social bond or identity. The majority of respondents declared a lack of togetherness.

Therefore, a second research question was formulated: how does this experience translate into political attitudes and choices? In particular, older respondents who had experienced the past regime in their working age recall the certainties mentioned earlier and, from their perspective, the fulfilling conditions for a good life. They are critical of politics, especially concerning the government. They initially projected their hopes onto left-wing parties that guaranteed them the necessary certainties, but eventually, they associated their hopes with populist politicians. In many ways, they are influenced by emotions, especially frustration and anger. In many ways, they are influenced by emotions, especially frustration and anger which are the emotions that lead to support for populist parties. The abandonment of the left by these voters is precisely because it has not been able to provide them with certainty and an improved life. In this, our findings coincide with other research (Berman, Snegovaya, 2019; Bandau, 2023).

Thus, the analysis of the responses showed that the respondents are aware of the peripheral position of the region not only in terms of distance from the capital city but also through the lower quality of life, which is, among other things, a consequence of the lack of available services. The Czech Republic has a set way of measuring quality of life, the so-called Indicator Framework for Measuring Quality of Life (Maussen 2018), which served as a basis for developing questions for qualitative interviews and as a document for the analysis of the responses. The findings of the interviews show that older respondents would like to combine the past certainties with the freedoms we can enjoy in the post-Soviet regime.

The qualitative approach proved beneficial because it can capture the respondents' actual mindset and how they understand politics. This is where our research is unique. This probe in one of the peripheral regions shows that dissatisfaction with the functioning of the state (dysfunctional

services) is also a cause. The research also has a significant social benefit, as it shows, through specific testimonies, the problems that significantly reduce the quality of life in the region (for example, no telephone connections).

Qualitative research cannot be expected to replicate the results, but rather to confirm and especially deepen existing theories of the periphery, where sociological and geographical approaches are predominant. Respondents confirm in their statements that they consider their neighbourhood to be a periphery, but we tried to go further, by adding a political dimension. We complement the theoretical concept of periphery with the ways in which older voters in particular express their dissatisfaction, especially through negative emotions. According to some respondents, the social and economic transformation has meant an unnecessary loss of social security, also recorded by electoral support, first for left-wing and later for populist parties. Thus, it appears that enriching existing theories of the periphery with a political science approach can be very beneficial.

The limitation of the study is its narrow territorial validity, as it focuses on a specific periphery, and its conclusions are difficult to transfer. On the other hand, it deepens our knowledge of Bruntál and its inhabitants and goes beyond the existing findings, which are mainly based on quantitative research (Kouba 2007; Tvrđý 2009, Ptáček et al., 2015) or are purely historical (Hlavienka, 2020; Karel, 2008, 2021). More recent and analytical studies of this area are absent.

Future research should focus on how residents perceive security and stability associated with the past regime, especially according to the older people. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which security is a matter of feelings or material security. In the latter case, there is a difference between the demand for direct transfers of money (benefits) and the demand for quality and accessible public services. However, this probably has to do with how we perceive politics and the possibilities we see in it. The research subject could be the peripheral rural areas in the Bruntál region, which have their specificities. Some villages in the Bruntál district are an hour's drive from the district town and are thus among the most remote in the country.

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