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# Democratisation and De-democratisation in Multi-level Democracy in Poland

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# Democratisation and De-democratisation in Multi-level Democracy in Poland

This book analyses and reveals evidence of changing patterns and processes of democratic or autocratic direction at subnational levels (provinces and cities) along with their relationship to those at central level.

With Poland as a case study, the book examines the interrelationship between national and lower territorial levels and identifies and explains reasons for emerging democratic deficit. It argues that decentralisation processes constitute an opportunity for subnational authorities to become more democratic but also more autocratic, as they may enhance the divergence in democracy levels between different territorial tiers of governance.

This book is of key interest to students and scholars of democratisation studies, local and regional politics, Central and East European politics, local government and policymaking.

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**ROUTLEDGE**



**Routledge**

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2025  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-041-12842-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-041-12847-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-66688-2 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003666882](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003666882)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

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# Preface

This book is a result of many academic efforts and discussions. They started during the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference in Wrocław (Poland) in 2019. We discussed the necessity to develop studies on democratisation and de-democratisation at the local and regional level in the European countries to have a full picture of these processes within the group of political scientists who work on democracy and territorial politics. Moreover, we saw the need to go one step further and to investigate the relationship between different territorial levels in the context of state of democracy. We decided to begin with a single country study and later to conduct a comparative analysis with others.

In 2020, I decided to apply for the grant to the Polish National Science Centre together with my Polish colleagues – political scientists and sociologists. We began the project “Democratisation and autocratisation in multi-level democracies. Case study of Poland” (no. 2020/39/B/HSS/01016) within the OPUS 20 programme in mid-2021. Working out the proper conceptualisation as well as theoretical and methodological framework was followed by a multi-stage collection of data from different sources, which could be also used in future projects, including an extensive data basis of the local and regional media articles created by the research team. Theoretical and empirical parts of our project were topics of many discussions at different conferences in Poland and abroad, including the most important political science events such as the World Political Science Congress of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), General Conference and Joint Sessions of Workshops organised by the ECPR as well as Annual Conference of the Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA). They were very helpful to improve the quality of our project.

The final result of our work is an in-depth study of a very interesting case of Poland, which contributes to the academic discussion on the democratisation and de-democratisation at different territorial tiers and relationship between them. We believe that it is the first step and an important incentive for further studies on Poland and other countries in Central Europe as well as other regions.

Adam Szymański  
Warsaw, 15 June 2025

# Acknowledgements

This book was supported by the Polish National Science Centre (NCN) within project no. 2020/39/B/HS5/01016 “Democratisation and Autocratisation in Multi-level Democracies. The Case Study of Poland” carried out at the University of Warsaw. We would like to thank the NCN and the project supervisors from this institution, Marcin Gac and Patrycja Pawlica, for their support.

Moreover, we would like to thank the University of Warsaw for supporting our project in terms of OA.

We would like also to express our gratitude to the project international partners, Luca Tomini and Giulia Sandri from the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), for their help in preparing this high-quality monograph.

# Introduction

Democratisation, understood as an improvement in the state of democracy, has been studied for decades, particularly in relation to the processes of democratic transition and consolidation. While the former refers to the change from an undemocratic to a democratic political regime (e.g. [Fink-Hafner & Hafner-Fink, 2009](#); [Schneider & Schmitter, 2004](#)), the latter generally means a political process where a democratic political regime becomes increasingly coherent and stable following the initial transition, significantly reducing the risk of democratic reversal ([Diamond et al., 1997](#); [Linz & Stepan, 1996](#)).

After a decade of studies on democratisation, a new research agenda has emerged, focusing on the opposite process of de-democratisation, reflecting the deterioration of democracy observed in many states around the world. The existing literature uses a range of terms in this regard, seeking to consider a variety of empirical cases in terms of the scope of regime change (from full transitions to autocracy to more limited declines in the quality of democracy; [Morlino, 2011](#)) and the stage of democratic consolidation when the reversal begins. In addition to de-democratisation ([Bogaards, 2018](#)), scholars refer to concepts such as democratic backsliding ([Bermeo, 2016](#); [Haggard & Kaufman, 2021](#)), democratic erosion ([Laebens & Lührmann, 2021](#)), democratic regression ([Diamond, 2021](#); [Gerschewski, 2021](#)) and autocratisation ([Cassani & Tomini, 2018](#); [Croissant & Tomini, 2024](#); [Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019](#)). The way to navigate this terminological chaos is to use the terms that best describe the analysed case(s) – a practice that will also be followed in this book.

However, both theoretical and empirical works on democratisation and its reversal have primarily focused on the national dimension. The existing studies have underestimated a crucial element: the territorial (subnational) dimension of democracy. The significance of subnational territorial units, such as states, regions, provinces, districts, municipalities and cities, in shaping political regimes is often overlooked ([Dandoy et al., 2018](#)).

This is a crucial gap in the literature. As contemporary democracies (and autocracies) experience a growing role of subnational governance, it is increasingly difficult to provide a comprehensive analysis of democratisation

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and de-democratisation without taking into account the subnational dimensions of analysis. Democratic performance at the subnational level can be just as uneven as at the national level; moreover, federalism and decentralisation, understood as “set of policy reforms aimed at transferring responsibilities, resources or authority from higher to lower levels of government” (Falletti, 2004, p. 3) do not necessarily strengthen democracy (Charron et al., 2014; Saikkonen, 2016). Recent evidence, presented in general works (Gervasoni, 2024; Troisi & Alfano, 2023) and empirical studies, particularly on Russia or Latin America (Giraudy, 2013; Mera, 2016; Obydenkova & Libman, 2013; Polga-Hecimovich, 2022) and without sufficient sets of data, suggests that de-democratisation trends emerge at institutional levels below the national tier. These include the development of clientelistic multilevel networks, restrictions on civil liberties, the weakening of mechanisms of local democracy and the centralisation of executive power exercised by or involving regional/local authorities.

### **Research objectives**

Therefore, it is increasingly important to incorporate this dimension into any comprehensive analysis of democratisation and its reversal. There have been studies on these processes at subnational levels in Europe, including Central Europe, but they are usually not comprehensive, focusing on specific aspects of the processes. Various studies have explored regional electoral competitiveness (Arce & Mangonnet, 2013), political participation and citizen engagement at the regional level (Fatke, 2016), the accountability of regional governments (Polverari, 2015) and the quality of local governance (Kyriacou & Morral-Palacin, 2015). However, only a limited number of works have adopted a more comprehensive approach (Charron et al., 2022; Tomini & Sandri, 2018).

The incorporation of both lower and upper levels of government into the analytical frameworks when exploring democratisation or de-democratisation processes remains rare (Charron et al., 2022; Mera, 2016; Obydenkova & Libman, 2013; Polga-Hecimovich, 2022). An even bigger gap in the literature concerns the analysis of relationships between different levels of multilevel governance – particularly between national and regional/local levels. The few existing studies focus primarily on the impact of the subnational level on national democracy (Fidalgo, 2022).

This study seeks to address this gap by examining: (1) changes in either democratic or autocratic direction occurring within local and regional structures, and (2) their relationship with similar processes at the national (central) level, focusing mainly on the impact of the national tier on lower territorial levels.

Identifying the impact of the national level on the state of democracy and relevant changes at the regional and local level is not a straightforward task. In

undemocratic countries, this influence is more noticeable and can be reflected in the abolition of subnational institutions or even elections. In democratic countries, this influence is still present, primarily due to the asymmetry of power between national and subnational governments. It is reflected mainly in the adoption of laws regulating elections and the functioning of local and regional institutions (Gervasoni, 2024).<sup>1</sup> This legal factor illustrates the national impact on subnational levels – through the broader legal framework. However, such influence is largely indirect. This broader legal framework sets the conditions within which self-government develops, but this development can vary across territorial units depending on how regulations are implemented, a process determined by factors specific to individual regions and local communities. This legal issue demonstrates that in democratic countries, the national level's impact on subnational territorial tiers is less apparent and more ambiguous than in authoritarian regimes – it may be functional or dysfunctional for democracy.

An analysis of the impact of subnational structures on democratisation/democratisation at the national level would be also interesting. However, such an approach would excessively broaden the scope of research, create methodological complications and ultimately make it more difficult to achieve the right results of the qualitative in-depth analysis.

## Poland as a case study

To achieve the objectives outlined above, this monograph presents a case study of Poland. There are several reasons behind the choice of this country. Firstly, Poland is a very interesting case of an EU member state that went through a process of democratic transition in the first years after 1989, followed by a period of democratic consolidation (e.g. Bernhard, 1993; Taras, 1996). However, it later experienced the opposite process, particularly between 2015 and 2023 when the right-wing conservative Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) ruled in coalition with much smaller parties (Grzymała-Busse, 2017; Sadurski, 2018; 2019; Zamęcki et al., 2023). Figure 0.1 illustrates these developments using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. It reflects the state of liberal democracy, which in Poland improved between 1989 and 1992 (democratic transition) and then remained at a relatively high level until 2015 (democratic consolidation). However, after PiS rose to power and began to introduce undemocratic changes, the country's score in the liberal democracy index declined significantly between 2015 and 2023. Because of the changing state of its democracy, Poland is a perfect case to study the national impact on subnational democracy and its evolution.

Democratic backsliding is a key term (apart from the more general democratisation) for describing the deterioration of democratic consolidation observed in Poland. In this study, it is understood as “the state-led debilitation

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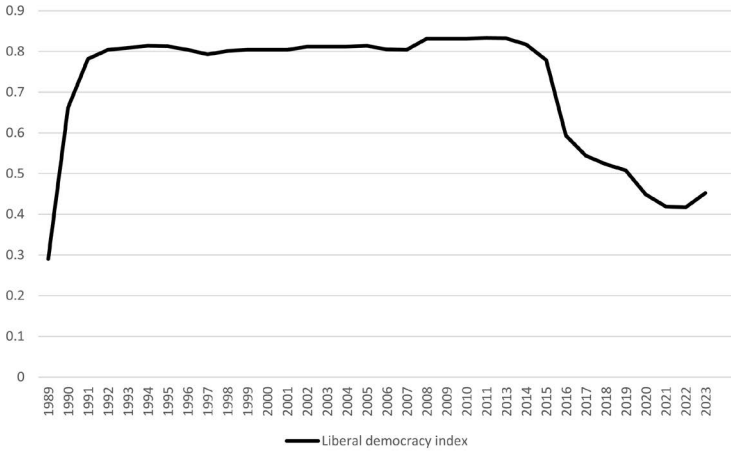


Figure 0.1 V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index – Poland 1989–2023.

Source: V-dem. *Varieties of Democracy* (2024).

or elimination of the political institutions sustaining the existing democracy” (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5) and a situation where

there is a substantive decline in the extent to which the regime fulfils the criteria for polyarchy proposed by Robert Dahl – free, fair and consequential elections, access to independent information, respect for individual freedoms of expression and association and for the right to compete in elections, and universal suffrage.

(Laebens and Lührmann, 2021, p. 910)

We agree that the decline of liberal democracy is tied to the diminished quality of the core components of democracy: free, legitimate, competitive and regular elections, protection of broad political rights and personal freedoms as well as adherence to the checks and balances system and the rule of law, understood also as a horizontal accountability. The term “autocratisation” has also been applied to Poland, particularly in English-language literature (e.g. Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). However, in our opinion, its use is still debatable when considering Andrea Cassani’s and Luca Tomini’s approach to the term which assumes that autocratisation involves a gradual shift towards a less democratic political regime, characterised by executive limitations and reduced opportunities for participation and contestation (Cassani & Tomini, 2018). While Poland’s democracy has clearly deteriorated, this does not yet represent a shift towards a less democratic regime. For instance, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s democracy index continues

to classify Poland as a “flawed democracy” rather than a “hybrid regime” (Democracy Index 2023, 2023).

Secondly, Poland is also an appropriate case study due to its distinctive territorial system with three subnational levels and a combination of the centralised and decentralised models of administration. The 1999 reform introduced three subnational territorial levels: municipalities – *gminy*, districts – *powiaty* and provinces/voivodeships – *województwa*. At the level of municipalities (and cities/villages), there are councils that act as legislative bodies while executive functions are exercised by heads (in cities – mayors or presidents, depending on the city size<sup>2</sup>) who are directly elected by citizens (since 2002) as in the legislative councils.<sup>3</sup> At the level of districts and provinces, only legislative bodies (in districts – councils, in provinces – so-called *Sejmiki*) are elected directly, while executive bodies and their heads (in districts – so-called *starosta*, in provinces – so-called *marszałek*) are appointed. The reform marked a significant step forward in the process of decentralisation and contributed to the development of a relatively strong territorial self-government, where local and regional authorities enjoy considerable autonomy in terms of tasks and competences but have limited financial autonomy. This is partly due to the presence of voivodeship governors (voivodes) in the provincial administrative model, who act as representatives of the central government with supervisory powers vis-à-vis the provincial self-government authorities (Regulski, 2003). In addition, the political profiles of local (municipalities and districts) and regional (provinces) authorities in Poland are diverse, including both politically non-aligned persons and models of their political relationship with the central authorities. Concrete cases will be presented in the subsequent chapters of the book.

Thirdly, Poland is an understudied case in terms of the deterioration of democracy at subnational levels. Similarly to the literature on other European countries, works on Poland have also focused mainly on single aspects of de-democratisation at local and regional territorial tiers. For instance, there are studies on the use of incumbency advantage in subnational elections (Mazurkiewicz, 2021; Turska-Kawa & Wojtasik, 2020), problems of electoral competitiveness and political pluralism at the local level (Gendźwiłł et al., 2015), partocracy (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2012), clientelism (Bartnicki, 2019), executive aggrandisement (Rajca, 2021), deficits of public consultations (Czopek & Żohierczyk, 2017), participatory budgeting (Błaszak, 2019), citizens’ panels (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024) and citizens’ initiatives (Banat, 2020). More comprehensive studies are rare, too general and outdated (e.g. Krysiak, 2014). The impact of the national level on subnational democracy has not been thoroughly studied. The few texts that have been published in recent years tend to focus on recentralisation, i.e. the indirect impact on local and regional democracy (Swianiewicz, 2024; Sześciło, 2019) or how cities respond to these trends (Aksztejn et al., 2024). This book aims to fill this gap in the literature.

## 6 *Democratisation and De-democratisation in Poland*

We chose a single case study instead of a comparative analysis with other countries in Central Europe and beyond for several reasons. Case studies are particularly valuable for exploratory research designed to elucidate causal mechanisms and capture the complexities of decision-making processes and the interplay of various interests (Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2018). They also allow for more flexible integration of various methods and data sources. We share these objectives of case studies. Previous research on democratic backsliding in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries demonstrated the utility of single case studies (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Sadurski, 2019). To address our research questions about local and regional politics in Poland, we had to conduct an intensive case study, as existing empirical data proved insufficient. Taking other cases into consideration would prevent us from achieving the goals of in-depth analysis of the Polish case, i.e. to fully explain the complexity of the performance of democratic institutions and mechanisms at the subnational levels in this country. Moreover, our conceptual and theoretical framework is grounded in universal theories of democracy and (de-)democratisation as well as decentralisation and governance. Therefore, our findings have broader relevance and can be applied beyond the Polish case.

To address some of the limitations inherent in a single-case study, we conducted a within-case time-series analysis to examine both temporal and spatial variability. The research presented in the book covers the years 2010–2023. It encompasses almost three full legislative periods of local and regional authorities, i.e. 2010–2014, 2014–2018 and 2018–April 2024, marked by frequently shifting political constellations. The study concludes at the end of 2023 rather than in April 2024, as this makes it possible to examine the period when both major parties in Poland's party system held power at the national level: the centre-right liberal Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO; since 2018 running as Civic Coalition, *Koalicja Obywatelska*, KO) in 2010–2015, in coalition with the Polish Peasant Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*, PSL), and PiS in 2015–December 2023, in coalition with much smaller right-wing parties. This timeframe also allows for the analysis of democratisation and de-democratisation processes, the latter particularly evident during the period of PiS rule.

The book covers the regional level (provinces) and the local level (cities). Five out of Poland's 16 voivodeships (provinces) were selected for analysis: Lublin, Lubusz, Masovian, Silesian and Subcarpathian voivodeships (Figure 0.2). The following cities in these voivodeships were studied: Lublin – Lublin, Zamość, Biała Podlaska and Chełm; Lubusz – Zielona Góra, Gorzów Wielkopolski and Nowa Sól; Masovian – the capital city of Warsaw and Radom, Płock and Otwock; Silesian – Katowice, Częstochowa, Bielsko-Biała and Gliwice; Subcarpathian – Rzeszów, Przemyśl and Sanok. The selected five provinces are representative of the whole country because they cover the main types of voivodeships in terms of size, population (small, medium-sized and big provinces), location (Figure 0.2) and historical heritage (voivodeships from different parts of Poland and all three historical partitions)



Figure 0.2 The administrative division in Poland – the level of provinces (voivodeships).

Source: The authors' own work.

as well as the variability and diversity of political constellations. Including additional provinces would merely repeat these main types with regard to these criteria. The selected cities are similarly representative of each province. We selected cities of different size, geographical location, political constellations, legal status (cities with and without district rights, which determines some obligations important for the development of mechanisms of local democracy) and significance within the province (capital cities, etc.). More details will be provided in the chapters dedicated to the analysis of each voivodeship.

## Hypothesis and questions

The general hypothesis that we would like to verify is that decentralisation processes constitute an opportunity for subnational authorities to become either more democratic or more autocratic, as they may enhance

## 8 *Democratisation and De-democratisation in Poland*

the divergence in democracy levels between different territorial tiers of governance.

The following questions are posed in the book to verify this working hypothesis:

- 1 What is the state of regional/local democracy in the selected Polish voivodeships and cities?
- 2 What changes occurred in this regard in 2010–2023?
- 3 What is the national level's impact on the state of regional/local democracy and its evolution?
  - a What is the impact of national-level processes of democratisation and de-democratisation on the state of democracy at subnational levels?
  - b What is the impact of decentralisation and centralisation processes in this regard?
  - c If the process of de-democratisation develops at the national level, can we still consider the analysed cities as “democratic enclaves” (Gilley, 2010), i.e. territorial units in which democratic mechanisms and institutions continue to function irrespective of the undemocratic changes at the national level?
  - d If the COVID-19 crisis accelerated the process of de-democratisation, did it have any impact on subnational structures?
- 4 What other factors could influence the state of regional/local democracy? In particular, what is the role of regional and local factors, primarily the progress of democratic consolidation at these subnational levels and the specific characteristics of regional and local politics?

This last question is particularly important as identifying alternative explanations (here: other than the national impact) is necessary to fulfil the requirements of correct process-tracing, one of the main research methods employed in this study (see below) (Bennett & Checkel, 2015).

### **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

Due to space limits, the theoretical and conceptual framework is outlined in this Introduction. The study presented in the book is based on the theoretical framework built around two core pillars: democracy/(de-)democratisation and the territorial dimension of politics. The first one refers to democracy and changes of political regimes (approaches to democratisation/de-democratisation and more static issues of the quality of democracy and local/regional democracy), the second one – to territorial politics, including multilevel governance as well as theories of decentralisation (see Figure 0.3).

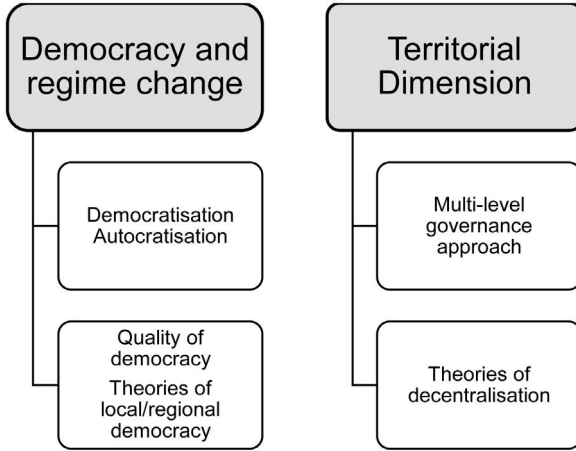


Figure 0.3 Two-pillar theoretical framework.

Source: the authors' own work.

Middle-range theories of democratisation, especially the aforementioned concepts of democratic consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996) and the quality of democracy (Morlino, 2011), are applied in this study to analyse de-democratisation at the national and subnational levels. These are complemented by local democracy theories that take into account the specific characteristics of democracy at these levels, e.g. distinct forms and mechanisms of direct democracy (Hendriks et al., 2010). The analysis also draws on such concepts as the aforementioned “democratic enclave”, which is useful for assessing the state of democracy at subnational levels when democratic backsliding occurs at the national level. This concept was developed by researchers such as Bruce Gilley who defined it broadly as “an institution of the state or a well-defined regulatory space in society where the authoritarian regime’s writ is substantively limited and is replaced by an adherence to recognizably democratic norms and procedures” (Gilley, 2010, p. 390). We limited its scope to territorial units, particularly cities, and applied it to de-democratising political systems rather than authoritarian regimes, which was the primary focus of Gilley’s research.

However, these theoretical approaches cannot provide a sufficient theoretical framework for analysing democratisation and de-democratisation at subnational levels. They must be complemented by approaches that also make it possible to study the interactions and links between national, regional and local levels – in order to assess whether, in the context of democratisation or de-democratisation, these processes occurring at one level influence their development at another level. For instance, it is important to analyse the impact

of such crucial political phenomena at the national level as politicisation, participatory, corruption and clientelism on the local or regional levels.

Governance theories, rather structural than functional aspects, are the starting point in this context in our study. They enable us to present a network of connections between different actors at national, regional and local levels. Multilevel governance as the general approach (not its detailed assumptions) underscoring the need to go beyond the national level must be mentioned in this regard (Kohler-Koch & Larat, 2009; Piattoni, 2010). The theoretical framework for analysing democratisation and de-democratisation at subnational levels should also include more specific approaches in order to analyse a very important democratic relationship between central and local/regional authorities, primarily in terms of the separation of powers and competences. In this regard, theories of decentralisation are particularly useful as they provide conceptual tools to examine its causes, effects and the relationship with democracy and (de-)democratisation (Antwi-Boasiako & Csanyi, 2015; Saito, 2001).

A summary of the components of the adopted theoretical framework is provided in Table 0.1.

Conceptually, this study goes beyond the liberal model of democracy, which underpins some democracy indices such as V-Dem, by taking into consideration participatory and deliberative democracy – both of which very important from the angle of local democracy. Drawing on the V-Dem theoretical framework, we identified four models of democracy, excluding only the egalitarian model, which was not useful for the purpose of this study.

Firstly, this study considers electoral democracy and liberal democracy – the two main components of the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Electoral democracy is identical with Dahl's concept of polyarchy (Dahl, 2000) and includes elements such as elected representatives, fair and competitive elections, freedom of speech, freedom of the media and freedom of association.

*Table 0.1* The components of the theoretical framework in brief

<i>Research agenda</i>	<i>Useful in investigating</i>
Democratisation and de-democratisation	Dynamic change
Quality of democracy	Static dimension + regime dimensions
Local democracy	More static approach – components and mechanisms of local democracy; concepts such as “democratic enclave”
Multilevel-governance approach	Relations between different national, regional and local actors and institutions – structural aspect
Theories of decentralisation	Causes, modalities and consequences of the process of decentralisation (and re-centralisation)

*Source:* the authors' own work.

To qualify as a liberal democracy, a number of other criteria must be met, including the protection of individual and minority rights, the rule of law, the functioning of checks and balances, particularly to control the executive power, and the independence and impartiality of the public administration (Antoszewski, 2016).

However, in order to investigate democratisation and de-democratisation at subnational levels, it was necessary to consider two other models (Kołomycew, 2023). The first is participatory democracy, as reflected, for example, in the V-Dem Participatory Democracy Index (Uziębło, 2009). It encompasses key elements such as mechanisms of direct democracy like referendums and mechanisms of semi-direct democracy like citizens' legislative initiatives, the right to petition, public hearings (including elements specific for subnational levels, such as participatory budgeting and panels), citizen participation and representation in local and regional authorities, citizen participation in civil society organisations and different forms of partnership (at local level, these include youth, women and senior councils, urban movements, etc.).

The second important model of democracy considered in this study is deliberative democracy, as reflected, for example, in the V-Dem Deliberative Democracy Index (Bächtiger et al., 2018). It encompasses citizen involvement in decision-making and public management as well as mechanisms and forums for dialogue and consultation.

## Methodology

The book mainly adopts a qualitative approach. There is a lack of sufficiently detailed data on the state of local and regional democracy (McMann, 2018). While raw statistical data is available in every country, it is often limited, a difficulty we encountered while collecting data on Polish provinces and cities (e.g. lack of older data, incomplete sets of data). This refers in particular to detailed indices capturing specific democratic indicators, which are commonly available at the national level and widely used in various types of statistical analysis, but are far less developed for subnational levels. The existing democracy indices, including the Freedom House Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index and the Polity Data Series refer primarily to the national level. The V-Dem Democracy Index includes some indicators related to the local/regional levels, but it has still many deficits, i.e. a limited number of items, lack consistency of datasets and gaps with regard to specific countries (Dandoy et al., 2018; McMann, 2018). The Quality of Government Institute (Charron et al., 2014) also measures the level of democracy at subnational levels. Faust et al. (2008) devised indicators related to elections at subnational levels, the degree of direct democracy and political rights. The Regional Authority Index (Hooghe et al., 2016) quantifies the autonomy of local institutions and their democratic quality. Nevertheless, with the exception

of the latter, the conceptual framework for these indices remains largely rooted in the national or federal level. Only recently have we witnessed the development of specific democracy indices conceptualised and operationalised for subnational levels (Fidalgo, 2022; Gervasoni, 2018; Giraudy, 2013; Grumbach, 2023); however, this field is still in its infancy. It is difficult to use quantitative methods for this study, even though such approaches have been used in other research (Sidel, 2014).

To analyse the links between the territorial dimension and democratisation/autocratisation in Poland the following sources were selected as part of a multi-stage research process (apart from desk research): local media materials – primarily the local branches of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of Poland’s biggest newspapers (Bielsko-Biała, Częstochowa, Gliwice, Katowice, Lublin, Płock, Radom, Rzeszów, Warsaw and Zielona Góra), local and regional newspapers and online news sites, which provided detailed reports about examples of deficits in the functioning of democratic mechanisms, data from two focus group interviews conducted in the autumn of 2022, involving seven local/regional journalists and NGO members from the selected voivodeships as well as from 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2022 and June 2024 with (1) representatives of subnational authorities (at the level of cities and provinces, both from legislative and executive bodies, representing different political parties (including nine PO and six PiS politicians) and local committees to capture diverse perspectives) and (2) experts, primarily academics and members of organisations working on democracy and politics in the analysed provinces and cities.<sup>4</sup>

At the first stage, the multi-stage collection of data focused on gathering factual material from local media, compiled in a special database, which was used in the next stages aimed at collecting data from different groups – observers of local/regional life who were members of specific professional groups (journalists, academicians, NGO members) and people directly involved in the work of local/regional self-government institutions and in the decision-making process (local/regional authorities). The idea behind it was to capture a range of different perspectives on the same set of issues (Gonzalez-Ocantos & Masullo, 2024, p. 12). It is obvious that people directly involved in the work of local and regional institutions view certain issues in different ways, often more subjectively and less critically, than those who observe this work from outside.

The study employs two methods of analysing data. The first is content analysis to identify any non-democratic legislation and practices at subnational levels and to explore how local and regional groups perceive the state of democracy in their cities and provinces. The second is process-tracing of the paths through which the national level affects (directly or indirectly) subnational structures as well as of alternative (subnational) paths in order to investigate causal chains leading to democratic or undemocratic changes. In the latter qualitative method, interviews play a key role (Gonzalez-Ocantos & Masullo, 2024).

## Book structure

The book consists of five main chapters and a concluding section. The main chapters present the results of research conducted in selected Polish provinces (voivodeships) and cities within these provinces.

Each of the main chapters includes the following components:

- a An introduction with a brief overview of the analysed province and its cities, including geographical, demographic and political data.
- b A section about the state of local and regional democracy in 2010–2023, divided into parts devoted to the diagnosis of electoral and liberal model of democracy as well as participatory and deliberative democracy. In this section, the authors argue that, on the one hand, the local and regional democracy in Poland made a noticeable progress from 2010 to 2023 in all analysed provinces and cities, although this process was not always continuous. On the other hand, significant deficits were observed in the implementation of the electoral/liberal, participatory and deliberative models of democracy in this period. They were already present in the 2010–2015 period when the Civic Platform governed with its coalition partner. During the PiS rule, many of these deficits intensified.
- c A section analysing the reasons for the state of local and regional democracy. This is the last part of [Chapters 1–5](#); it primarily addresses the key issue of the national level’s impact on the state of local and regional democracy, which occurred mainly through the “creeping re-centralisation” and the reproduction of undemocratic changes observed at the national level. In addition to the national impact, the specific characteristics of selected sub-national units and unconsolidated democracy at the local and regional level also played a clear role. The analysed provinces differed to some extent in the relative impact of national and subnational territorial tiers.

The book ends with Conclusions, which go beyond a simple summary of the main findings. They also include a comparative analysis of the provinces and cities examined.

## Notes

- 1 In the case of Poland, which will be analysed in the book, these legal acts include, first of all, the Electoral Law of 5 January 2011 ([Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2011](#)); before the 2014 elections – the legal acts of 1998 and 2002 on elections of municipalities and district councils/*Sejmik* as well as executive bodies ([Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 1998](#); [Kancelaria Sejmu, 2002](#)), the Act of 15 September 2000 on local referendum ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 2000](#)), the Law on Municipal Self-government adopted on 8 March 1990 and the Law on Self-Government in Voivodeship adopted on 5 June 1998 ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 1990, 1998](#)) as well as the Act of 11 January 2018 Amending Certain Acts to Increase Citizen Participation in the Process of Electing, Functioning and Controlling Certain Public Bodies ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018](#)).

- 2 Mayor is the executive body of the municipality where the seat of government is located in a town within the territory of that municipality. However, in towns and cities typically beyond 50,000 inhabitants (with some exceptions), the executive body is called the president.
- 3 In the municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants but without the status of the city with district rights as well as in the cities with district rights, in the analysed period 2010–2023, there was the open list proportional system (OLPR) for the council elections, with exception of 2014, when the first type of municipality had the majority system – FPTP (Zawadzka, 2024, p. 687).
- 4 The details of 32 individual in-depth interviews, which were supplemented by other important data sources, are available in the project website: <https://dedemokratyzacja.wnpism.uw.edu.pl/en/> and data repositories of the University of Warsaw (Szymański, 2025a; 2025b).

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# 1 Masovian Voivodeship

## 1.1 Introduction – Brief overview of the case

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the Masovian voivodeship and the selected cities, i.e. Warsaw, Radom, Płock and Ostrołęka. It aims to clarify the reasons behind the selection of cases and provide the reader with background information that will be useful in the next parts of the chapter.

### 1.1.1 Geographical and demographic data

The Masovian voivodeship is situated in the central part of Poland. In 2022, it covered an area of 35,559 km<sup>2</sup> and had a population of about 5.5 million. It is the biggest province in the country, both in terms of area and population. It consists of 37 districts, 314 municipalities, 95 towns and five towns with district rights ([Rocznik Statystyczny Województwa Mazowieckiego, 2023](#)).

The towns selected for the analysis include Warsaw, the capital of both the province and the country (about 1.8 million inhabitants), Radom (about 218,000 inhabitants), Płock (about 123,000 inhabitants) and Ostrołęka (about 45,000 inhabitants) ([Rocznik Statystyczny Województwa Mazowieckiego, 2023](#)). Therefore, we will focus on one big, two medium-sized and one small city, with different political constellations outlined below.

### 1.1.2 Political data

At the level of the Masovian province ([Table 1.1](#)), the analysed period was marked by political stability and the dominance of two parties – Civic Platform (PO), operating since 2018 as Civic Coalition (KO), and the Polish Peasant Party (PSL). Although Law and Justice (PiS) won elections to the provincial council (*Sejmik*) in 2014 and 2018, the PO/KO consistently formed the governing majority in cooperation with the PSL. Throughout the entire period, Adam Struzik from PSL headed the executive. Regional electoral committees did not play any role, which confirms that political life at this territorial level largely mirrors the political landscape at the national level,

DOI: [10.4324/9781003666882-2](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003666882-2)

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Table 1.1 The political situation at the Masovian voivodeship level

Body/authority – date	2010–2014	2014–2018	2018–2023
<i>Sejmik</i> – division of seats (51 seats in total)	Civic Platform (PO) – 17 Law and Justice (PiS) – 14 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 13 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 7	Law and Justice (PiS) – 19 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 16 Civic Platform (PO) – 15 SLD Left Together – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 24 Civic Coalition (KO) – 18 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 8 Non-affiliated Local Government Members – 1
<i>Sejmik</i> – governing majority	PO-PSL	PO-PSL	KO-PSL
Head of Executive ( <i>marszałek</i> )	Adam Struzik (PSL)	Adam Struzik (PSL)	Adam Struzik (PSL)
Voivode	Jacek Kozłowski (PO)	2014–2015 Jacek Kozłowski (PO) 2015–2018 Zdzisław Sipiera (PiS)	2018–2019 Zdzisław Sipiera (PiS) 2019–2023 Konstanty Radziwiłł (PiS) April–December 2023 Tobiasz Bocheński (PiS)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

with major political parties playing a central role ([Transcript of interview with R10, 2023](#)).<sup>1</sup>

The case of Warsaw ([Table 1.2](#)) is specific as holding power in the capital is also important from the point of view of national politics which is largely conducted in this city. That is why it is close to local politics ([Transcript of interview with R11, 2024](#)). In practical terms, this means that the major political parties dominate the city's political landscape. This concerns also other big cities in Poland ([Gendźwiłł et al., 2021](#)). Throughout the analysed period, the Civic Platform/Coalition continuously governed Warsaw, holding a majority in the city council and the office of the president of Warsaw.

In the analysed period, a far less stable political situation was observed in Radom ([Table 1.3](#)), a city in the southern part of the voivodeship. In 2010–2014, it was the largest city in Poland governed by PiS, which had a majority in the council thanks to a coalition with the PSL (the party which at that time governed with the Civic Platform at the national level!) and held

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Table 1.2 The political situation in Warsaw

Body/authority – date	2010–2014	2014–2018	2018–2023
Council – division of seats (60 in total)	Civic Platform (PO) – 33 Law and Justice (PiS) – 17 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 10	Civic Platform (PO) – 33 Law and Justice (PiS) – 24 SLD Left Together – 2 Warsaw Self-government Community (local committee) – 1	Civic Coalition (KO) – 40 Law and Justice (PiS) – 19 SLD Left Together – 1
Council – governing majority	PO	PO	KO
President	Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz (PO)	Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz (PO)	Rafał Trzaskowski (PO)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

the office of the president. Although PiS also won the city council elections in 2014 and 2018, its main rival, PO, managed to form a governing majority in 2014–2017 with the support of SLD Left Together, local committees and independent councillors. A stronger result in the 2018 council election allowed PiS to secure a strong majority in this body. However, the party lost the office of the president in 2014 and failed to regain it in 2018 – it was held by Radosław Witkowski, initially PO’s and then a local committee’s candidate, though still supported by KO. The constant competition between PiS and PO/KO had a negative impact on the stability of the local government (Rusek, 2019).

In the other two cities (Tables 1.4 and 1.5), there was much more continuity than change in 2010–2023, but their political situations differed significantly. In Płock, located in the north-western part of the voivodeship, PiS won all city council elections, but succeeded in forming a governing majority only from 2010 to 2014. Later, cooperation between PO/KO and PSL enabled these parties to control the council. Moreover, PO/KO held the office of the president (Andrzej Nowakowski) throughout the entire analysed period.

In the smaller town of Otwock, located near Warsaw, PO/KO remained in minority throughout the analysed period while PiS held a dominant position, controlling the council and, 2018–2023, also the executive, with Jarosław Margielski serving as city president. Moreover, an import role was played by local committees, which supported PiS in the council and, from 2010 to 2018, held the presidential office.

Table 1.3 The political situation in Radom

<i>Body/authority date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (28 in total)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 14 Civic Platform (PO) – 6 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 4 Association Radom Inhabitants Together – 2 (local committee) Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 1 I Love Radom – 1 (local committee)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 14 (since 2015 12) Civic Platform (PO) – 12 (since 2017 10) SLD Left Together – 1 The Marzena Wróbel Radom Inhabitants Together (local committee) – 1 Independents – 2 (since 2015), then 4 (since 2017)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 16 (then 15) Civic Coalition (KO) – 11 Independent Radom Inhabitants – 1, then 2 – after transfer from PiS (local committee)
Council – governing majority	PiS and PSL	Informal majorities – first PO with support of SLD, local committees and independents, since December 2017 PiS – with support of local committees and independents	PiS
President	Tomasz Kosztowniak (PiS)	Radosław Witkowski (PO)	Radosław Witkowski (The Radosław Witkowski Coalition for Change, local committee)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

## 1.2 The state of local and regional democracy in the Masovian voivodeship in 2010–2023

This section presents an in-depth assessment of the state of local and regional democracy in the Masovian voivodeship in 2010–2023. Although the respondents generally expressed a positive view on this issue, there was also some criticism. While local/regional politicians from the ruling party/committee acknowledged only isolated shortcomings ([Transcript of interview with R9, 2023](#)), those from the opposition were much more critical, often describing an overall deterioration of the situation. Politicians from PO/KO emphasised the negative impact of PiS rule at the central level in

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*Table 1.4* The political situation in Płock

<i>Body/authority date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (25 in total)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 9 Civic Platform (PO) – 7 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 5 Polish Peasant Party – 1 Association “Our Country” (local committee) – 2 Our City Płock (local committee) – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Platform (PO) – 9 Polish Peasant Party – 4 SLD Left Together – 2	Law and Justice (PiS) – 11 Civic Coalition (KO) – 10 Polish Peasant Party – 4
Council – governing majority	PiS – with support of local committees	PO-PSL, support of SLD Left Together	KO-PSL
President	Andrzej Nowakowski (PO)	Andrzej Nowakowski (PO)	Andrzej Nowakowski (KO)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

*Table 1.5* The political situation in Otwock

<i>Body/authority date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (21 in total)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 7 Civic Platform (PO) – 6 We Build Otwock Together (local committee) – 6 Our Common Home (local committee) – 1 Self-government Community of Otwock District (local committee) – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Self-government Community of Otwock District (local committee) – 3 OTW (local committee) – 3 Christan Social Initiative (local committee) – 2 Civic Platform (PO) – 1 Association Initiative for the City (local committee) – 1 Małgorzata Rock (local committee) – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Coalition (KO) – 4 The Przemysław Bogusz Friendly Otwock – 3 (local committee) SIM Self-government Initiative of Inhabitants – 3 (local committee) The Ireneusz Pańniczek Committee – 1 (local committee)
Council – governing majority	PiS – with support of local committees	PiS – with support of local committees	PiS – with support of local committees
President	Zbigniew Szczepaniak (We Build Otwock Together)	Zbigniew Szczepaniak (We Build Otwock Together)	Jarosław Margielski (PiS)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

2015–2023 on local/regional democracy of PiS ruling ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)). By contrast, PiS members usually saw an improvement in the state of democracy after 2015; they sometimes identified more problems at the provincial level than in cities due to political polarisation ([Transcript of interview with R10, 2023](#)). A more detailed analysis is presented in the next sections.

### 1.2.1 *Components of electoral and liberal democracy*

*Elections:* Subnational elections in the Masovian voivodeship during the analysed period were generally conducted in accordance with democratic principles ([Gendźwiłł, 2020](#)). However, some electoral malpractices were observed, particularly in relation to the competitiveness of elections, irrespective of the political profile of incumbents.

This problem has been clearly seen for many years at subnational levels. In the case of the Masovian voivodeship, it involved electoral malpractices related both to the electoral law (in cities) and voter choices (in cities and at the provincial level) ([Birch, 2012](#); [Wojtasik, 2022](#)). With regard to the electoral law, firstly, its rules favoured major political parties (or parties in general) in council elections, particularly in large cities such as Warsaw. As one of the capital city’s authorities said, “as a result of the fact that almost everywhere in local elections we have five-mandate constituencies, in fact in most places mainly PiS and the Platform are represented, which greatly distorts the overview, I would say, of our society” ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)). Secondly, the absence of term limits in Polish local election law until 2018 contributed to reduced electoral competition in small- and medium-size towns, where mayors or city presidents often held office for multiple terms with a hegemonic position ([Gendźwiłł et al., 2015](#)). In our study, this situation was observed in Płock ([Table 1.4](#)).

As for electoral malpractices influencing voters’ choices, in all analysed cities the local governing authorities used public money, PR machine and media as propaganda tools. They also relied on businessmen, offices and knowledge of planned investments that was not available to other candidates to increase the electoral chances of favoured candidates ([Turska-Kawa & Wojtasik, 2020](#)). These practices were often accompanied by investments in the city infrastructure shortly before elections, such as squares in Otwock or footbridges in Warsaw – a form of vote buying ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)).

Interestingly, the use of incumbency advantage was acceptable by local authorities. One opposition politician from Otwock said that “in the case of [local] elections, it is known that the government always has the opportunity to advertise in various situations (...). It is natural” ([Transcript of interview with R14, 2024](#)).

*Media:* Subnational media in the Masovian voivodeship generally operated without any substantial difficulties in the analysed period. However, the problem of media bias was evident. Many outlets supported a particular political party or committee and, as previously noted, were used as propaganda tools during election campaigns. Płock is a notable example: the weekly *Tygodnik Płocki* was financed by the state-run oil company Orlen and used for political purposes by the national government, regardless of who was in power. However, PiS used it in its second term particularly extensively, after Orlen's takeover of the Polska Press media group in 2021 (Szacki, 2021). There were also examples of self-government media reporting uncritically on the achievements of PO/KO-led local institutions (Transcript of interview with R9, 2023). In Otwock, where polarisation was less pronounced due to PO/KO's weak position, both PiS and one of the local committees operated its own media platforms (Otwock.pl and iOtwock, respectively) that reported favourably on their activities while criticising their political opponents. In contrast to Płock, the situation in Otwock only emerged in the last few years – these partisan outlets replaced *Linia Otwocka*, a newspaper which was relatively objective (Transcript of interview with R15, 2024). Politicised media were also present in some districts of Warsaw. More objective and independent outlets struggled to maintain a long-term presence due to a lack of resources (Transcript of interview with R11, 2024).

*NGOs:* Since 2018, the number of NGOs has been gradually increasing both in the Masovian province and Warsaw, following fluctuations between 2010 and 2018 (Figure 1.1; data for other cities is not available).

However, local authorities observed that NGO activity often involved a decreasing number of participants (Transcript of interview with R9, 2023). In smaller towns, such as Otwock, some residents also perceived this activity as politically or financially motivated (Transcript of interview with R14, 2024). Nevertheless, NGOs were often treated as important advisory bodies for local or regional authorities. For instance, in Płock, they “create their own programmes, [organise] meetings, various events and meet the president, they pass on their opinions on some topics” (Transcript of interview with R9, 2023). However, NGOs invited to participate in such consultations were often affiliated with local/regional authorities, as was the case in Warsaw (Transcript of interview with R12, 2024).

A more serious democratic deficit concerned the unequal treatment of NGOs by city/provincial authorities. The situation improved incrementally between 2010 and 2023, but the deficit persisted. Providing extensive support, including financial assistance, to certain types of NGOs was politically risky because it could lead to a loss of electoral support. This was particularly true for organisations representing minorities. The clearest example was the treatment of LGBT+ organisations in Warsaw. In 2019, President Trzaskowski signed the LGBT Charter, the first document of this kind in

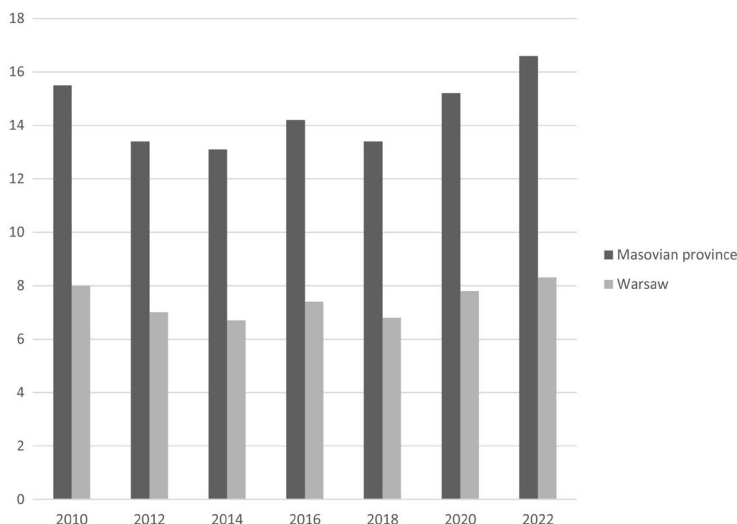


Figure 1.1 The number of NGOs – the Masovian voivodeship/Warsaw (in 1,000s).

Source: Główny Urząd Statystyczny (2023).

Poland (Karpieszuk, 2019a). He also granted official patronage to Equality Parades, unlike Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, another PO/KO politician who served as president of Warsaw from 2010 to 2018. However, financial support for LGBT+ organisations and their events remained limited. There were some concerns that it could be exploited by political opponents, particularly PiS, to discredit the city president (Karpieszuk, 2019b). Trzaskowski's only substantial financial support was PLN 300,000 for an intervention hostel (Transcript of interview with R13, 2024).

*Self-government institutions. The system of checks and balances:* With regard to the role of the *Sejmik* at the provincial level and city councils as legislative and control institutions vis-a-vis the executive bodies, there were both positive elements indicating their democratic functioning and improvement in subsequent years as well as some areas of concern, particularly in relation to inclusiveness and the system of checks and balances.

An improvement in the legislative function could be observed in 2010–2023. In January 2018, transparency of legislative work was enhanced through the adoption of the Act of 11 January 2018 (Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018). It introduced electronic voting which made it possible to identify how individual councillors voted (Sześciło, 2018, p. 24) and mandated the broadcasting, recording and public accessibility of the *Sejmik's* plenary sessions and council sessions (Sitniewski, 2018). This was implemented in practice: people could watch online live broadcasts or recorded *Sejmik/*

council sessions on the official website. In Otwock, this also applied to committee meetings. However, it was still problematic to access specific types of information, such as budgetary data ([Transcript of interview with R15, 2024](#)).

The key problems in the legislative performance of the *Sejmik* and city councils, with only minor improvements in subsequent years, regardless of whether PO or PiS governed at the national level, concerned the limited inclusiveness of the opposition and citizens as well as the restricted impact of these bodies on the outcomes of decision-making processes.

The interviewed members of the Masovian *Sejmik* and city councils accepted the principle of majority rule but also indicated that its exercise by incumbents often went too far, leading to intensified politicisation and, in some cases, the marginalisation of the opposition. This was reflected in the composition of the *Sejmik*'s main bodies: apart from the audit committee (which, under the amended 2018 law on self-government in voivodeships, must be chaired by a member of the opposition), there were almost no committees with chairmen or even deputy chairmen from the opposition (PiS). Opposition-initiated draft proposals were often not taken up in committee proceedings and participation in debates was obstructed. The latter problem also extended to citizens ([Transcript of interview with R10, 2023](#)).

The situation in city councils looked better; however, in Warsaw, a high level of politicisation translated into what was described as “the majority violence” ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)), as PO/KO retained their dominant role throughout the analysed period ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)). Nevertheless, in all the analysed city councils, the inclusion of the opposition and citizens was formally restricted only by time limits on interventions during debates, the order of proceedings ([Transcript of interview with R11, 2024](#)), requirements for collecting signatures and an upper limit for the number of participants ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018](#)). Moreover, the aforementioned Act of 11 January 2018 introduced the possibility for all political groups to add a new point to the agenda, provided that it was submitted at least seven days before the session ([Sześciło, 2018](#), p. 25).

Another deficit in terms of the legislative role of the *Sejmik*/city councils concerned their relatively limited impact on the legislative and decision-making process throughout the entire analysed period, with some positive legal changes thanks to the Act of 11 January 2018. This stemmed from a much stronger position of the executive within the “strong mayor” (horizontal power relationship) or “executive mayor” (vertical and horizontal power relationship) form of local government system in Poland ([Heinelt et al., 2018](#); [Heinelt & Hlepas, 2006](#)), particularly in cities ([Heinelt, 2021](#); [Zawadzka, 2024](#)), where, following the 2002 reform, presidents and mayors are directly elected by residents and thus enjoy strong democratic legitimacy ([Regulski, 2003](#)). Even though citizens do not elect heads of executives at the provincial

level, the *marszałek* of the Masovian province also gained a strong position in decision-making processes, holding the office throughout the entire period under analysis.

The legislative process of adopting resolutions, the main legal act of the *Sejmik* and city councils, was initiated in all important areas by the city executive; only in less important cases was the initiative taken by the council (Transcript of interview with R9, 2024). When a majority of councillors belonged to the same party/committee or a coalition aligned with the head of executive, resolutions were adopted in line with the executive's position. The opposition could do little about this – it could express its views during debates but then voting always went in favour of the president's/mayor's majority. One exception was the mechanism of informal talks between the PiS president and PO/KO opposition councillors in the Otwock city council, which was developed after 2018 with the aim of reaching some consensus before voting in the council (Transcript of interview with R15, 2024).

A different situation arose when the president did not have the majority in the council, as was the case in Plock (2010–2014) and Radom (2017–2023) but even in these cases the president usually remained the key actor in decision-making, despite the noticeable weaker position in comparison to the situation of having majority in the council (Zawadzka, 2024).

The control function of the city and provincial legislative bodies in the Masovian province, regulated by the laws on self-government mentioned in the Introduction, was limited to the adoption of the budget, the approval of the annual financial and budgetary reports presented by the president or the executive board (i.e. the *marszałek* and board members at the provincial level) and, since 2018, the approval of annual reports of these bodies on the implementation of policies and plans in the previous year. In addition, from 2018, councillors at both city and provincial levels gained the right to submit interpellations and questions to the president/mayor or the *marszałek*, respectively, as well as right to access to information, documents and the offices of city halls or that of the *marszałek*. However, these oversight mechanisms did not play any significant role, particularly when the majority supported the president or the executive board with the *marszałek*. As a local journalist said, “in fact the power is held by one person, and three times a year councillors vote on important matters” (Transcript of FGI I, 2022).

Even if a council/*Sejmik* rejected the required reports or budget, this did not automatically result in the dismissal of the executive, that is – the president/mayor or the provincial executive board, because this required a referendum in cities (after a rejection of reports or budget in two consecutive years) or a vote of no confidence supported by three-fifths of the *Sejmik*'s members in the case of the provincial executive board (Kancelaria Sejmu,

2018). This was confirmed by the case of President of Radom Radosław Witkowski who in 2020–2023 failed to receive approval of the budget or a vote of confidence, yet remained in office because the referendum was not initiated by PiS councillors (Grzmiel, 2023). A referendum took place only in the case of President of Otwock Zbigniew Szczepaniak in December 2016 following the rejection of the budget by the city council and the initiative of PiS councillors, who held 10 of 21 seats in the council at the time. However, Szczepaniak remained in office because of low voter turnout – just 14% (Obserwatorium Wyborcze, 2016).

### 1.2.2 *Components of participatory and deliberative democracy*

This section discusses in detail the most common mechanisms of local and regional democracy while briefly outlining other democratic tools.

*Traditional mechanisms:* Local referendums are regulated by the Act of 15 September 2000 (Kancelaria Sejmu, 2000). The initiative to hold a referendum can come from either council members or residents; the required threshold is 5% of eligible voters in municipalities and districts and 10% in provinces (Podolak, 2024). Two local referendums were held in the analysed cities during the period under study – in Warsaw (2014) and Otwock (2016) – but both were unsuccessful due to low turnout (Dziennik Urzędowy Województwa Mazowieckiego, 2024).

In contrast, petitions to subnational authorities were much more common in 2010–2023. At the voivodeship level (petitions to the *Sejmik* considered by a special committee and the *marszałek*), the number of petitions increased between 2015 and 2023 (no data is available for earlier years), with the exception of 2020 (the COVID-19 year) and 2023, when the decline was irrelevant (Figure 1.2).

With regard to the cities, we do not have a full picture for Płock, Radom and Otwock due to limited access to data. However, a clear decline can be observed in Warsaw, which began during the COVID-19 period; the figure has remained below the pre-pandemic level from 2019 ever since (Figure 1.3). Even if the number of petitions in smaller cities was relatively low, their numbers rose during the period of decline in Warsaw (2020–2021 and then 2022–2023).

A slight decrease in the number of petitions, particularly in 2022 in Radom, Płock and Otwock and then in Warsaw in 2023 (the previous sharp decline largely resulted from the COVID-19 crisis), was treated by local authorities as a result of improved performance of city institutions (Transcript of interview with R14, 2024). However, this trend was not necessarily positive from the perspective of citizen engagement. Another issue was the rejection of unrealistic petitions by the special committees of the council or the *Sejmik*, introduced in 2018 (Transcript of interview with R15, 2024).

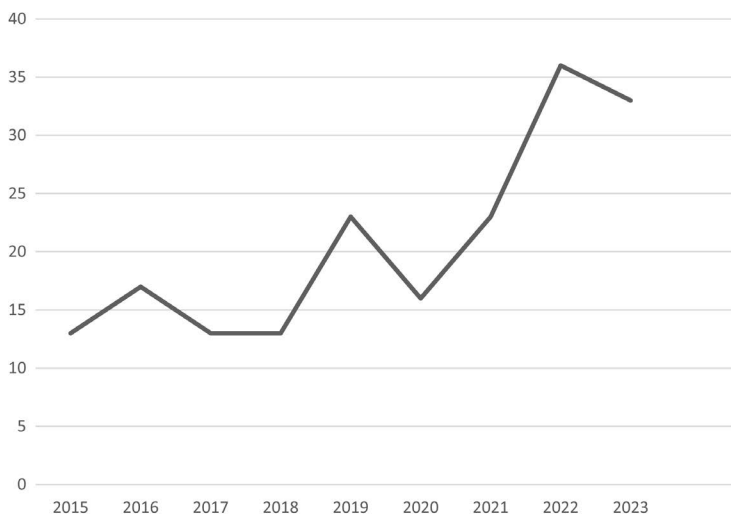


Figure 1.2 The number of petitions – the Masovian voivodeship (*Sejmik + marszałek*).

Source: [Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Mazowieckiego w Warszawie \(2024\)](#).

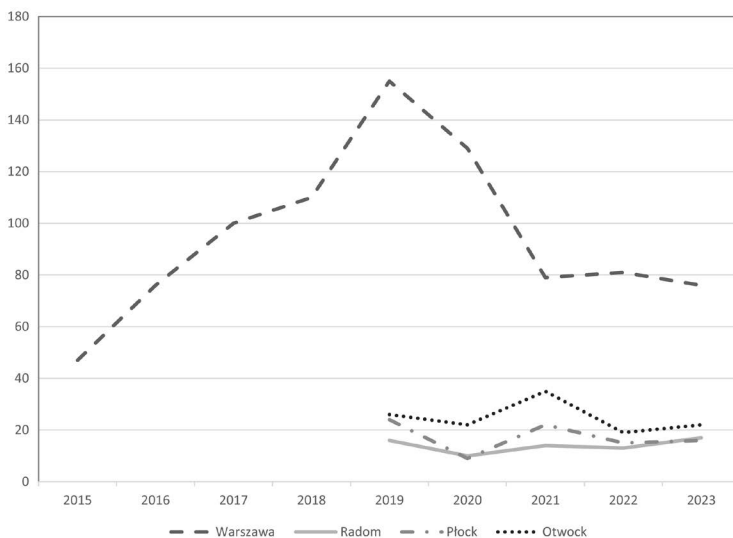


Figure 1.3 The number of petitions in selected cities (council + president).

Source: [Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy \(2023\)](#); [Radom – siła w precyzji \(2024\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Otwocka \(2024\)](#).

*Other mechanisms:* More innovative tools were also used in the Masovian province. The first was the participatory budgeting. The amendments to the self-government laws introduced by the Act of 11 January 2018 established an obligation for all cities with district rights to implement a participatory budgeting as part of the city budget, amounting to a minimum of 0.5% of the expenditure reported in the most recent financial statement (Góraj, 2023; Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018). In addition, the participatory budgeting became a legally binding instrument (Sześciło, 2018, p. 24).

Participatory budgeting has been used in the analysed cities since 2013–2015 and at the provincial level as the Regional Participatory Budgeting (RBO) since 2020. The RBO was introduced by the Act of 11 January 2018 (Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018). This mechanism of local/regional democracy has been evolving, showing gradual progress in terms of quality. In Warsaw, since 2020 projects can be submitted at the level of individual city districts or the city as a whole, allowing the scope of proposals to better reflect diverse local needs (Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy, 2024). In Płock, new regulations were introduced to prevent institutions such as schools from gaining an unfair advantage in securing funds through organised student voting (Transcript of interview with R9, 2023).

Different tendencies were observed concerning the level of citizen involvement in the participatory budgeting. In the case of the RBO, the number of submitted projects and votes/voters clearly increased (Figure 1.4) in the 2022 and 2023 editions after a decline in 2021 which was likely a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis.

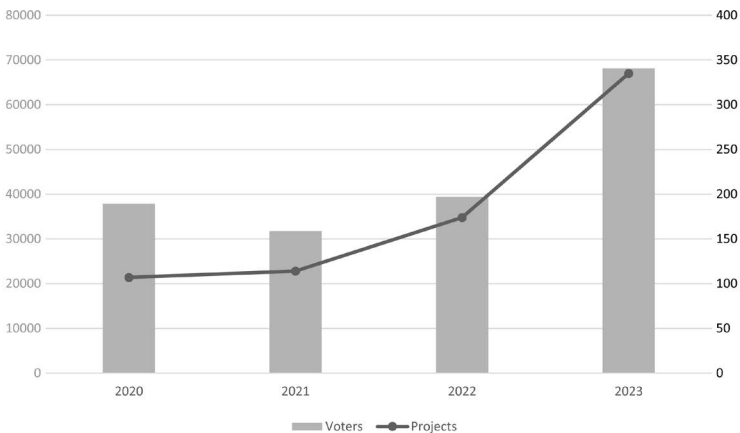
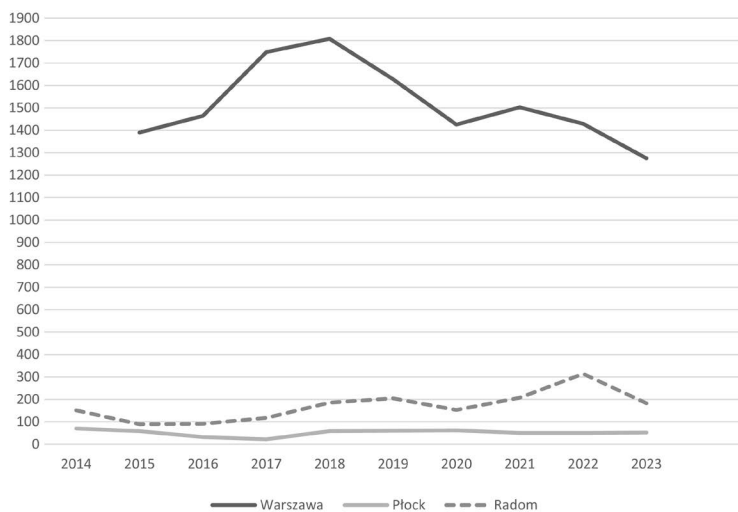


Figure 1.4 The number of projects and voters in RBO in the Masovian province.

Source: Budżet Obywatelski Mazowsza (2024).

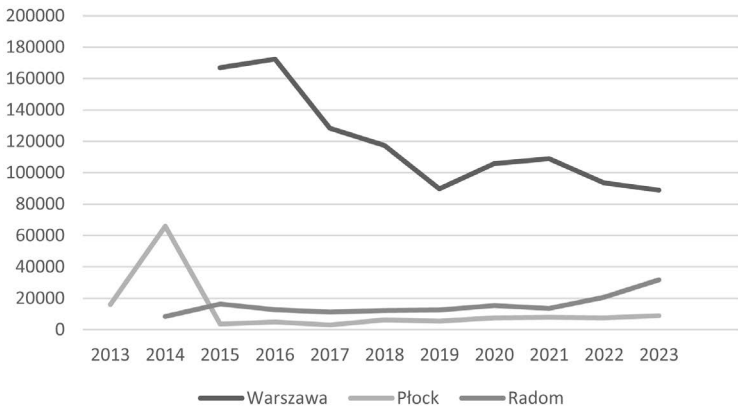
All the analysed cities have district rights and are required to implement the participatory budgeting mechanisms. These are presented in [Figures 1.5](#) and [1.6](#), excluding Otwock due to fragmented data and a break in the implementation of this budgeting in 2021–2023. This interruption was officially explained by the COVID-19 crisis ([Transcript of interview with R14, 2024](#)), but it was not a convincing justification given that other cities continued to operate this mechanism.

In Warsaw, after several years of a fairly high number of projects (after 2018), a continuous decline has been observed (apart from 2021), indicating a crisis of this institution ([Wojtczuk, 2018a](#)). In terms of the number of votes, the decline began two years after the participatory budgeting was introduced, i.e. after 2016. This tendency changed slightly in 2020–2021, possibly as a result of the rising popularity of online voting which requires less effort than traditional voting: while 95% of inhabitants voted online in 2019, this figure increased to 99% in 2020 and 99.6% in 2021 ([Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy, 2024](#)), but the previous negative trend returned thereafter. In Płock, the number of projects fluctuated slightly between 2014 and 2020, but then remained at a similar level in 2021–2023, 50–52 positively verified projects per year ([Budżet obywatelski Płocka, 2024](#)). As for



*Figure 1.5* The number of submitted projects within the participatory budgeting – cities in the Masovian province.

Source: [Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy \(2024\)](#); [Budżet partycypacyjny Płocka \(2024\)](#); [Budżet obywatelski \(2024\)](#).



*Figure 1.6* The number of votes for participatory budgeting projects – cities in the Masovian province.

*Source:* [Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy \(2024\)](#); [Budżet partycypacyjny Płocka \(2024\)](#); [Budżet obywatelski \(2024\)](#).

the number of votes after a sharp decline in 2015, the numbers fluctuated until 2019, followed by a steady increase ([Budżet obywatelski Płocka, 2024](#)), particularly in smaller residential areas ([Transcript of interview with R9, 2023](#)). Even more promising was the situation in Radom, particularly with regard to the number of projects, which increased steadily between 2016 and 2022, except for the COVID-19 period in 2020. In 2023, the number of projects decreased, but the number of votes rose significantly, from about 20,000 to 31,000 votes, continuing the upward trend seen in 2022 ([Budżet obywatelski, 2024](#)).

Thus, the level of participation differed between cities – revealing in cases of cities with decreasing participation “the crisis of participatory budgeting” ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)). The decreasing number of projects reflected, on the one hand, a pattern of engagement by an increasingly narrow, often recurring group of “enthusiasts” ([Transcript of interview with R11, 2024](#)). On the other hand, participatory budgeting was used by local authorities to “patch up their own investment backwardness” or for self-promotion, while good projects proposed by residents were subsequently presented by local authorities as their own initiatives ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)). In Otwock, local politicians were often involved in promoting certain projects which served the aforementioned purposes ([Transcript of interview with R15, 2024](#)). In Warsaw, participatory budgeting was also used by some firms: for example, a company which produced graduation towers submitted a large number of applications ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)).

In addition, the quality of many projects submitted through the participatory budgeting and certain procedural aspects left much to be desired, which contributed to its abuse by politicians and relatively low citizen participation. Projects increasingly lacked originality, quality and practical feasibility, which often resulted in negative verification or made it impossible to implement them (Transcript of interview with R11, 2024). This gave fuel to politicians who wanted to discredit this mechanism of local democracy (Transcript of interview with R12, 2024).

Between 2010 and 2023, various consultation mechanisms were developed, particularly at the city level (Transcript of interview with R9, 2023). According to self-government legislation, local and regional authorities can organise consultations with citizens in cases prescribed by law or on issues of importance for local/regional communities. In the former case, consultations are often obligatory, e.g. in relation to spatial development plans, investments in sectors affecting the environment and drafts of development strategies (Czopek & Żolnierczyk, 2017; Regulski, 2003). There was an increase in the number of different forms of consultations in the Masovian province, ranging from various online and paper surveys, including consultations on alternative options of spatial development plans (Transcript of interview with R15, 2024), to online and on-site meetings in an open format (mainly with city presidents), consultations workshops, walks, points, tents and trolleys (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, Warszawa, Radom, Płock, 2010–2023; *Konsultacje społeczne*, 2024).

Special consultation bodies were introduced gradually: in addition to settlement councils, these included councils representing specific social groups, such as youth, seniors and women (Table 1.6). There were no women councils at the provincial level or in Otwock in the analysed period, but they were established in other cities, though in Płock and Radom they were only created over the last two years. Other types of councils existed both at the voivodeship level and in the analysed cities, though they were established at different times, with the longest tradition seen in Warsaw. Efforts were made to improve these mechanisms at both analysed levels, with varying results, in

Table 1.6 Consultation councils in the Masovian voivodeship

Province or city/ council type	Youth council/Sejmik	Senior council/Sejmik	Women council/Sejmik
Voivodeship	X (since 2019)	X (since 2016)	–
Warsaw	X (since 2009)	X (since 2014)	X (since 2019)
Radom	X (since 2019)	X (since 2014)	X (since 2024)
Płock	X (since 2015)	X (since 2016)	X (since 2023)
Otwock	(Only in Otwock district since 2023)	X (since 2018)	–

Source: Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Mazowieckiego w Warszawie (2024); Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy (2024); Radom – siła w precyzji (2024); Urząd Miasta Płock (2024); Urząd Miasta Otwocka (2024).

terms of distribution of information and technical organisation ([Transcript of interview with R16, 2024](#)).

However, several deficits have persisted, including some that resemble the challenges in the implementation of participatory budgeting ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)). Most notably, local politicians often used public consultations instrumentally, primarily for three purposes: (1) to secure social acceptance for particular initiatives, while those invited to participate mainly included individuals and NGOs affiliated with local authorities ([Transcript of interview with R12, 2024](#)); (2) to postpone decision-making on unpopular issues ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)); (3) to allocate positions within consultation councils to party/committee members ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)).

Citizens were also rarely heard by local authorities. In some cases, councils rejected all amendments proposed during consultations by organised groups of residents ([Transcript of interview with R10, 2023](#)). For instance, in Radom in 2018, 57% of residents supported the construction of a cycle lane in one part in the city, but the decision-makers selected a different location for this project ([Ludwińska, 2018](#)). However, sometimes these decisions were justified by a low quality of submitted opinions, which were deemed unfeasible or irrational ([Wojtczuk, 2018b](#)). Moreover, consulted groups often expressed negative views which raised questions about the advisory value of these mechanisms ([Transcript of interview with R9, 2023](#)).

Only one citizens' panel was organised in Warsaw between 2010 and 2023. In general, this instrument has been implemented only in Poland's biggest cities ([Podgórska-Rykała, 2024](#)). In the capital city, the Warsaw Climate Panel was held in 2020. The group of 90 randomly selected city residents discussed climate-related issues and prepared 49 recommendations aimed at improving the city's energy effectiveness and promoting the use of renewable energy resources ([Warszawski Panel Klimatyczny, 2020](#)). A local official explained the limited use of citizens' panels in Warsaw by stating that "the leadership of the Civic Platform in Warsaw does not accept further citizens' panels, because they believe that conducting citizens' panels is taking away competences from the Warsaw Council. And that it is giving power not to those who are empowered to exercise it" ([Transcript of interview with R13, 2024](#)).

The Citizens' Resolution Initiative ([Podgórska-Rykała, 2021](#)) was not implemented at the level of the Masovian province in 2010–2023 and was used only sporadically, but without success, in the analysed cities, particularly in Warsaw ([Transcript of interview with R12, 2024](#)).

### **1.3 The reasons behind the state of local and regional democracy**

It is necessary to identify and analyse the factors underlying the described state of democracy at the level of the analysed province and its cities. In particular, it is important to examine the impact of the national level

(exogenous factors) and regional/local sources of democratic deficits (endogenous factors). Most respondents claimed that both types of factors play a role.

### 1.3.1 *Impact of the national level*

Between 2010 and 2015, the PO-PSL governments continued the process of democratic consolidation and supported decentralisation (Siekłucki, 2022; Sześciło, 2018, pp. 7–11). This created a potentially fertile breeding ground for the consolidation of self-government institutions and the development of mechanisms of local democracy in all Polish provinces and their cities, including the Masovian voivodeship (Kuhlmann et al., 2025; Mbate, 2017, pp. 3–6; Saito, 2001, p. 2). However, the positive impact of the central government on democratisation at the local/regional level between 2010 and 2015 through the strengthening of self-government as a democratic institution and its self-reliance was in practice limited to certain areas, such as the transfer of responsibility for managing one-fourth of EU funds for the 2007–2013 period and new competences in the area of sewerage management in 2013 (Sześciło, 2018, pp. 5–11). The earlier development of participatory budgeting and consultations bodies, such as youth and seniors' councils, between 2013 and 2015, cannot be directly attributed to the impact of the national level. Instead, these changes represent a process of incremental democratisation at these territorial tiers during this period resulting from limited engagement of the central government in the area of self-government (Piasecki, 2016).

A much stronger and clearer impact of the national level and of de-democratisation on the previously identified democratic deficits at the level of the Masovian province and its cities can be observed after 2015. Local and regional PiS politicians from the Masovian province did not recognise the centralisation steps taken by their party's central government from that year onwards (Transcript of interview with R10, 2023). Instead, they tried to frame certain aspects, such as financial constraints, as long-term problems of self-government that went beyond the period of PiS rule (Transcript of interview with R12, 2024). However, “the creeping re-centralisation” (Skorut & Starwarz, 2020, p. 49) was clearly seen in the de-democratising changes introduced by successive PiS governments, which had a negative impact on local and regional democracy by weakening the autonomy of the self-government institutions. This process of recentralisation (Swianiewicz, 2024) was aimed at taking control over another institution in the country, self-government, whose representatives were often (particularly in big cities) in opposition to PiS and its governments (Transcript of interview with R11, 2024).

This trend was reflected in the period 2015–2018, notably in the limitation of the competences of local and regional governments, which were transferred either to central authorities or central administration bodies in provinces, primarily voivodes. In the first case, affecting all self-governments in Poland,

examples include the Ministry of Agriculture's takeover of the competences of provincial executive boards with regard to oversight of regional agricultural advisory centres (June 2016) and the transfer of control over regional environmental funds to the Ministry of Environment (April 2017) (Sześciło, 2018; Wilkowska-Kołąkowska, 2022). These changes were negatively assessed by local and regional politicians in the Masovian province, particularly those from the opposition parties at the time. They saw them as steps taken against the interests of local communities which know their needs much better than the central government (Transcript of interview with R13, 2024).

There were numerous instances in which decisions made by the voivode negatively affected the initiatives and competences of city authorities, including the invalidation of their decisions. These actions often undermined democratic principles and were perceived as politically motivated, something that in many cases was confirmed by court decisions. The most prominent examples were seen in Warsaw. For example, the voivode took control over Piłsudski Square, where a monument commemorating the victims of the 2010 Smoleńsk plane crash was erected without the consent of city authorities (2017), repealed the landscape resolution adopted by the Warsaw city council (2020) and blocked the expanded paid parking zones (2021) (Osowski, 2021; Wojtczuk & Urzykowski, 2017). Such interventions were made possible by rulings of administrative courts, including those issued before 2015, which interpreted the law in favour of the central administration, recognising self-government competences only in areas explicitly mentioned in regulations (Transcript of interview with R13, 2024).

This clearly illustrates the influence of politicisation and the shift of political confrontation and polarisation from the national to the local level. The aforementioned actions of the PiS-appointed voivode were aimed at discrediting the political opponent – Rafał Trzaskowski and his party PO/KO (Transcript of interview with R11, 2024).

Secondly, the process of recentralisation was reflected in the reduction of financial resources of local and regional authorities and their competences in allocating these funds through a decrease in income tax revenues and a growing reliance on subsidies distributed by the central government; this significantly reduced the expenditure autonomy of self-government. The system of centralised subsidies enabled arbitrary allocation of money from the central budget, mainly to the regions, cities and municipalities ruled by PiS (Flis & Swianiewicz, 2022). This form of cronyism, which deprived PO-governed cities of government subsidies, in contrast to other cities governed by PiS (Transcript of interview with R9, 2023), was aptly described by one Warsaw councillor:

In 2023, our loss due to PIT [income tax] amounted to almost PLN 2.8 billion, and we received compensation in the range of PLN 800 million. Meanwhile, smaller district or municipal self-governments, where the political authority was either indifferent to the government or directly

connected to the ruling camp through local authorities or councillors, received almost 100% compensation.

([Transcript of interview with R11, 2024](#))

This unequal treatment was further confirmed by disparities in the revenues of the analysed cities in 2019 and in 2023. In Płock, revenues increased from almost PLN 60 million in 2019 to PLN 85 million in 2023. In Otwock, however, the rise was more substantial thanks to the high level of subsidies – from PLN 30 million in 2019 to PLN 68 million in 2023 ([Urząd Miasta Otwocka, 2019, 2023](#); [Urząd Miasta Płock, 2019, 2023](#)). Reduced funding for cities governed by other parties than PiS created difficulties in implementing tasks, including those newly assigned by the central government ([Transcript of interview with R11, 2024](#)). This not only contributed to discrediting self-government but also created barriers to implementing expensive democratic mechanisms: for example, the costs of citizens' panels range between PLN 100,000 and PLN 300,000 ([Górski et al., 2021](#)).

Moreover, we could observe a countrywide process of reproducing undemocratic changes from the national level across all three territorial tiers in Poland. They were implemented either in territorial units where PiS held power in subnational bodies (in this case, primarily Otwock and some districts of Warsaw) or exercised substantial influence through affiliated “agents” ([Transcript of interview with R10, 2023](#)). The previously described intensification of media bias after 2021, for instance in Płock, clearly mirrored the takeover of national public media by PiS and their transformation into propaganda tools after 2015. Similarly, bans imposed by the voivode on cultural events or dismissals of individuals responsible for organising them on ideological grounds, often as part of the struggle against “the gender ideology” or “radical feminism”, also reflected the reproduction of undemocratic practices initiated at the national level. A notable example was the repeal by PiS voivode Konstanty Radziwiłł of President Trzaskowski's decision to appoint Monika Strzépka as director of one of Warsaw's theatres ([Karpieszuk, 2022a](#)).

However, we can also identify some influence of the national level irrespective of the government's political profile, which was seen throughout the analysed period. This primarily concerns the aforementioned influence of the legal framework governing elections and the functioning of self-government institutions and mechanisms, whose impact on local and regional democracy can be ambiguous depending on the manner of implementation. The aforementioned electoral laws and self-government legislation, particularly their amendments, were generally favourable to democracy nationwide (with the exception of certain provisions of electoral law that favoured major parties), but their implementation in the realities of individual provinces or cities often led to democratic deficits, such as executive aggrandisement, electoral malpractices and the instrumental use or limited effectiveness of instruments of local democracy.

Secondly, the process of reproducing national-level practices at subnational levels must be highlighted once again. Regardless of who governed at the national level, the substantial role of political parties was consistently reproduced at the level of the Masovian province and in the bigger cities, with Warsaw being a particular case. The capital city is home to all national institutions. It has a direct impact on Warsaw's local politics and politicians, whose careers are closely linked to the national level ([Transcript of interview with R11, 2024](#)). The dominant position of political parties throughout the entire analysed period contributed to the marginalisation of regional or local committees and independent candidates – both in the elections to the *Sejmik* and councils of bigger cities such as Warsaw or even in Płock.

However, a more problematic feature was the domination of and political conflict between the two biggest political parties. In the Masovian province and the analysed cities (except for Otwock), this political confrontation and polarisation between PO/KO and PiS were clearly transferred from the national to the subnational levels. The intensification of conflict between different levels of local government is treated in theoretical literature as one of the possible negative consequences of decentralisation ([Mbate, 2017](#), pp. 6–8; [Saito, 2001](#), pp. 1–2). However, the Polish case appears to differ, as the source of conflict, such as tensions between the voivode and city authorities from opposing political camps, was primarily rooted in national-level politics. This was criticised by local and regional politicians in the Masovian province, irrespective of their political affiliation, as a factor which adversely affected the political atmosphere and relations between different institutions at the local and regional level as well as the performance of these institutions, including the quality of debates, which were often dominated by quarrels and theatrical displays by politicians in front of cameras ([Transcript of interview with R12, 2024](#), R13, 2024). The lack of dialogue refers to relations between voivodes and self-government authorities as well as interactions between incumbents and the opposition in the *Sejmik* and city councils. The aforementioned examples of excluding the opposition from key positions and the legislative process in the Masovian *Sejmik* and Warsaw city council were also a result of the transfer of political conflict and polarisation from the national to subnational levels. Moreover, the dominance of the two biggest Polish parties reinforced the impact of the previously discussed electoral law that gave advantage to PiS and PO/KO.

The difference between the periods 2010–2015 and 2015–2023 appears to lie solely in the intensification, during the PiS rule, of the negative consequences for democracy stemming from the growing political conflict and polarisation between the two biggest parties, as indicated in [Figure 1.7](#). While dialogue, meetings and conversations between PiS and PO politicians in Warsaw's local institutions, for example between the president and PiS councillors, were still possible during the presidency of Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz,

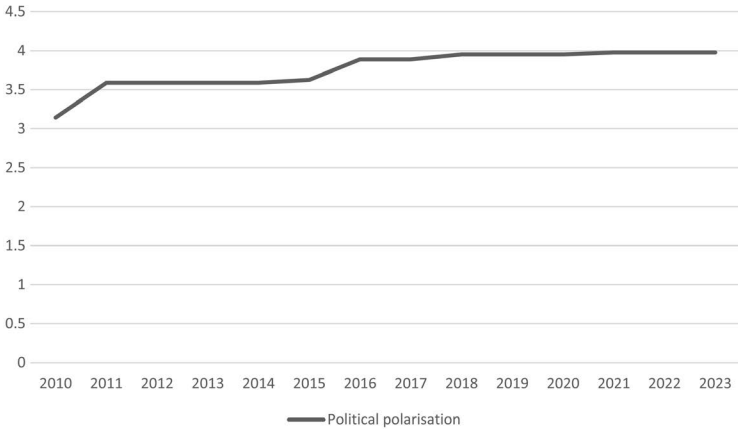


Figure 1.7 Political polarisation in Poland 2010–2023.

Source: V-dem. *Varieties of democracy* (2024).

this was no longer the case in 2018–2023 (Transcript of interview with R10, 2023). According to Warsaw councillors, PiS adopted an increasingly aggressive and polarising style of debate in the city council after 2015. One of them highlighted the “degradation of language, degradation of political culture, a full infection with the virus of a certain political populism” (Transcript of interview with R13, 2024).

### 1.3.2 Impact of the local/regional level

The identified impact of the national level on the state of local and regional democracy in the Masovian province accounted for only part of the democratic deficits at the provincial level and in the analysed cities, presented in Section 1.2. Additionally, this impact was often indirect because the aforementioned recentralisation weakened the autonomy of self-government, which often led to a decline in the quality of democracy. The other identified democratic deficits, particularly those related to mechanisms of local democracy, can be better or fully explained by the factors rooted in local/regional politics and society.

The previously discussed electoral malpractices during local and regional elections in the Masovian province are related to the process, which in theoretical literature is treated as an adverse effect of decentralisation on democracy, namely, the consolidation or even hegemonisation of power by local and regional authorities (Mbate, 2017, pp. 6–8; Saito, 2001, pp. 1–2). In the analysed cases, this referred to the consolidation of power (offices and

institutions) and resources in the hands of executive bodies and their heads as well as associated political parties and/or committees (as in Radom and Otwock) holding a majority in the *Sejmik*/city council and developing gradually clientelistic networks (Bartnicki, 2019). As previously described, such a situation developed at the level of the Masovian province and in the analysed cities, with some mainly temporary exceptions (Radom) where the majority came from a different political camp than the head of executive. In all the cases, it was a gradual process, facilitated by earlier legal regulations, particularly the electoral law, which appeared to favour big parties and gave strong legitimacy to mayors/presidents through the introduction of direct executive elections in 2002. This influence of the national level, however, should be seen as indirect rather than direct – and in the case of the 2002 reform, largely unintentional. As indicated in Figure 1.8, the strong position of heads of executives, which also posed challenges for the previously described relationship with the *Sejmik*/council, enabled the incumbency advantage during election campaigns. Favourable conditions for this phenomenon were created by the acceptance of electoral malpractices not only by local/regional politicians, for whom electoral victories brought political and economic benefits, but also by residents, for whom the incumbency advantage seemed to be acceptable if it also meant material benefits for them, such as new green spaces or renovated roads (Bartnicki, 2017).

This last issue refers to the problem of a weak democratic political culture at the local and regional level which underlies some of the previously indicated democratic deficits in the Masovian province. The sceptical attitudes of sub-national politicians towards the development of mechanisms of local democracy can be partly attributed to financial issues, but their instrumental use and the aforementioned arguments about the sufficient role of traditional mechanisms of consultation between the mayor/president and residents revealed a lack of understanding of the importance of local democracy mechanisms. This

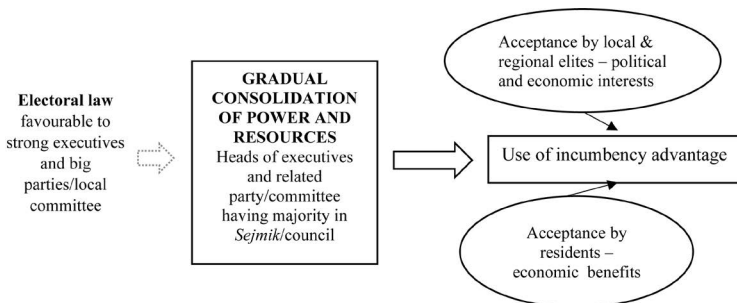


Figure 1.8 Democratic deficits – causal chain.

Source: the author's own work.

last issue also contributed to the previously described low or declining citizen participation in mechanisms of local democracy. The attitudes of local and regional politicians were a significant factor in reinforcing this trend.

A Płock councillor confirmed this observation, pointing to a lack of civic education concerning local democracy among young people ([Transcript of interview with R9, 2023](#)). An explanation of participation fatigue within the local community, reflecting broader deficits in democratic culture, was also offered by a council member in Otwock, who claimed that

the fight for (...) a better apartment, a better car and so on, and so on, all this means that we don't have time for it, we don't think about devoting time, our energy here to local communities, to get involved in some activities. We don't need it.

([Transcript of interview with R14, 2024](#))

## 1.4 Conclusions

The case of the Masovian voivodeship and the selected cities presents an ambiguous picture regarding the state of local and regional democracy between 2010 and 2023. It also demonstrates that even relatively advanced decentralisation (at least political and administrative) does not necessarily translate into progress in democratisation.

With regard to the electoral/liberal model of democracy, certain improvements were observed in 2010–2023; however, a number of deficits persisted and in some cases deepened in subsequent years, particularly after 2015, or following the subnational elections in 2018. The COVID-19 period did not significantly affect these models of democracy. At subnational levels, many instruments of participatory and deliberative democracy were established, developed and improved, although this was not always a progressive process. These mechanisms included petitions, participatory budgeting (extended to the provincial level since 2020) and various consultation mechanisms and bodies. Other instruments were used and organised less frequently (e.g. citizens' legislative initiative), rarely (e.g. traditional referendum or citizens' panels) or not at all (e.g. women's councils at the provincial level and in Otwock). However, a closer examination of how these mechanisms functioned revealed some deficits in their effectiveness, which became more pronounced in subsequent years in some of the analysed cases. The COVID-19 period also generated some minor challenges in this regard, most notably the suspension of the participatory budgeting in Otwock.

This diagnosis raises doubts as to whether the analysed cities can be called "democratic enclaves" during the period of de-democratisation at the national level in Poland between 2015 and 2023. Many of the indicated deficits were already present before this period and either intensified or weakened

afterwards (but remained observable). These doubts were reinforced by the predominantly critical views expressed by subnational authorities in the interviews (Transcript of interview with R12, 2024, R13, 2024). Only a few respondents offered a partially positive assessment in this regard, pointing to progress in cooperation between city authorities and residents while acknowledging challenges related to citizen engagement (Transcript of interview with R9, 2023) or claiming that democratic consolidation was a matter for the future (Transcript of interview with R15, 2024).

The reasons behind the democratic deficits in the Masovian province can be found both at the national level and in the specific characteristics of local and regional politics.

While democratic consolidation, still evident in 2010–2015, had only limited impact on the state of democracy at the analysed subnational levels, the influence of the undemocratic rule of PiS after 2015 was more pronounced. There were some exceptions when this kind of impact was consistently strong across the entire period, such as the domination of sharp political polarisation and conflict between PO/KO and PiS. However, in other cases the impact of the PiS rule was more pronounced than that of the PO-PSL governments. It was reflected in the recentralisation policy, which influenced the state of subnational democracy mainly indirectly, by weakening self-government and its institutions as well as through the activities of PiS “agents” at the regional and city levels, who often undermined the principles of liberal democracy.

The remaining deficits in the liberal model of democracy and most deficits in the participatory and deliberative models in the Masovian province appear to stem primarily from local and regional factors rather than national-level influences. The deficits in the liberal model were already present before 2015 and often merely intensified in the following years. This refers primarily to the domination of the executive power at the expense of the council – a consequence of the gradual consolidation of power and resources in the hands of city presidents and their parties. The underdeveloped democratic political culture among both local/regional authorities and residents of the Masovian province and its cities contributed significantly to the acceptance of electoral malpractices. In the case of provincial/city authorities, it also appeared to be the key reason for the aforementioned exclusion of the opposition and residents from decision-making in the *Sejmik*/council and for deficits related to the instruments of local democracy (their instrumental use and lack of implementation).

The discussed two sets of factors, national and subnational, were sometimes responsible for the same democratic deficits. This was the case with issues such as media bias, the marginalisation of the opposition and “soft” executive aggrandisement. In these cases, the dysfunctional national factor usually exacerbated pre-existing problems in local or regional democracy (particularly during the PiS rule from 2015 onwards) or served as a catalyst for the development of negative effects of subnational conditions, as in the case of some provisions of the electoral law adopted prior to the analysed period.

## Note

I R means Respondent throughout the book. Personal data is not disclosed. Respondents are identified by ordinal numbers, accompanied by the year of the interview.

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## 2 Subcarpathian Voivodeship

### 2.1 Introduction – Brief overview of the case

This section begins with a brief overview of the Subcarpathian voivodeship and the selected cities: Rzeszów, Przemyśl and Sanok. It aims to explain the selection of this province and these cities while also providing the reader with useful information.

#### 2.1.1 Geographical and demographic data

The Subcarpathian voivodeship is situated in the south-eastern part of Poland. In 2022, it covered 17,845 km<sup>2</sup> and had a population of about 2.1 million. It is considered a medium-size province in the country. It comprises 21 districts, 160 municipalities, 52 towns and 4 towns with district rights ([Rocznik Statystyczny Województwa Podkarpackiego, 2023](#)).

The towns from the Subcarpathian voivodeship selected for the analysis include Rzeszów, the capital of the province (about 200,000 inhabitants), Przemyśl (about 60, 000 inhabitants) and Sanok (about 37,000 inhabitants) ([Rocznik Statystyczny Województwa Podkarpackiego, 2023](#)). Thus, the analysis will cover one large city, one medium-sized city and one small town.

#### 2.1.2 Political data

Law and Justice (PiS) won all three elections to the *Sejmik* in the Subcarpathian province ([Table 2.1](#)) but it governed only in 2014–2018 and 2018–2023. Before that, in 2010–2014, when the Civic Platform (PO) governed together with the Polish Peasant Party (PSL) at the national level, these two parties were still strong enough in the province to form a majority in the *Sejmik* with the Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, SLD).

The Subcarpathian voivodeship has long been a PiS stronghold in national elections. The party's political domination was reflected at the provincial level, where PiS politicians held executive power from 2013 to 2023, led by Władysław Ortyl, who was the head of the executive (*marszałek*). PiS further

Table 2.1 The political situation in the Subcarpathian voivodeship

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
<i>Sejmik – division of seats (33 seats in total)</i>	Law and Justice (PiS) – 15 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 7 Civic Platform (PO) – 7 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 4	Law and Justice (PiS) – 19 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 9 Civic Platform (PO) – 5	Law and Justice (PiS) – 25 Civic Coalition (KO) – 5 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 3
<i>Sejmik – governing majority</i>	PSL-PO-SLD	PiS	PiS
<i>Head of Executive (marszałek)</i>	2010–2013 Miroslaw Karapyta (PSL) 2013–2014 Władysław Ortyl (PiS)	Władysław Ortyl (PiS)	Władysław Ortyl (PiS)
<i>Voivode</i>	2010–2013 Małgorzata Chomycz-Śmigielska (PO)	2014–2015 Małgorzata Chomycz-Śmigielska (PO) 2015–2018 Ewa Leniart (PiS)	Ewa Leniart (PiS)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

strengthened its position in this voivodeship after 2015 when the voivode also came from this party (Ewa Leniart).

At the local level, the analysed cities exhibit clear differences, with political constellations and extent of political change. Rzeszów (Table 2.2) represents a distinct political enclave. In a province dominated by PiS, the capital city has maintained a strong position of the local committee Rzeszów Development established by Tadeusz Ferenc, a former Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) politician who also was President of Rzeszów from 2010 to 2021. His tenure was followed by Konrad Fijolek, leader of the local committee Rzeszów Development 2.0 who became the city's president in 2021 following early elections. Throughout the entire analysed period from 2010 to 2023, the majority in the city council was formed by councillors from Rzeszów Development (later 2.0) and PO/KO.

In Przemyśl (Table 2.3), political constellations changed more frequently in the analysed period. Between 2010 and 2014, the dominating political force was Regia Civitas, a local committee led by Robert Choma, a former PiS member who also served as city president during this period. However, although he was re-elected as president for the 2014–2018 term, his committee had to share power in the city council with the increasingly influential Law

Table 2.2 The political situation in Rzeszów

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (25 in total)	The Tadeusz Ferenc Rzeszów Development – 11 Law and Justice (PiS) – 9 Civic Platform (PO) – 5	The Tadeusz Ferenc Rzeszów Development – 11 Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Platform (PO) – 4	The Tadeusz Ferenc Rzeszów Development in Rzeszów – 12 Law and Justice (PiS) – 9 Civic Coalition (KO) – 4
Council – governing majority President	Rzeszów Development and PO Tadeusz Ferenc (Democratic Left Alliance)	Rzeszów Development and PO Tadeusz Ferenc (Rzeszów Development)	Rzeszów Development and KO 2018–2023 Tadeusz Ferenc (Rzeszów Development) 2021–2023 Konrad Fijolek (The Konrad Fijolek Rzeszów Development 2.0)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

and Justice, which won 10 of 23 seats, a much better result than in 2010. In the 2018 local election, two national parties, KO and Kukiz'15 (the latter was transformed in 2019 into the local committee Together for Przemyśl), secured the biggest number of seats and formed a majority in the council. Additionally, Kukiz'15 candidate Wojciech Bakun was elected city president. However, the majority in the council proved unstable, leading to two changes: in 2020–2022, a strange informal coalition was created by PiS, Regia Civitas and the left-leaning SLD; in 2022–2023, KO regained a majority by forming another informal coalition with Together for Przemyśl and “Regia Civitas”.

Sanok (Table 2.4) reflected a pattern typical of many smaller towns in this voivodeship, with a crucial role of local committees. They dominated in the council in 2010–2014, when the leading political force was the local committee of Wojciech Blecharczyk, a former SLD member who also served as mayor during that period. In the 2014–2018 and 2018–2023 terms, the majority in the council was formed by the increasingly powerful PiS, whose candidate became the mayor of Sanok in the 2014 election. However, the party required coalitions with local committees, which retained their strong position in 2018–2023, as reflected in the election of Tomasz Matuszewski as mayor in 2018 – he was a politician from the local committee Sanok Connects Us which also formed a coalition with PiS.

Table 2.3 The political situation in Przemyśl

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (23 in total)	Robert Choma Regia Civitas (local committee) – 8 Civic Platform (PO) – 8 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 3 Self-government Community San Valley – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Platform (PO) – 6 Robert Choma Regia Civitas (local committee) – 4 SLD Left Together (coalition) – 3	Civic Coalition (KO) – 6 Kukiz' 15 (since 2019 Together for Przemyśl) – 6 (decreased to 4) Law and Justice (PiS) – 4 Association for Przemyśl “Regia Civitas” – 4 (decreased to 3) (local committee) SLD Left Together (coalition; since 2020 Our Przemyśl) – 3 Independents – 3 (councillors from Kukiz' 15/Together for Przemyśl – 2 and “Regia Civitas” – 1)
Council – governing majority	Regia Civitas and PO	PiS and Robert Choma Regia Civitas	2018–2020 KO and Kukiz' 15/ Together for Przemyśl 2020–2022 – PiS, “Regia Civitas” and SLD/Our Przemyśl (informally) 2022–2023 KO, Together for Przemyśl, “Regia Civitas” (informally)
President	Robert Choma (Robert Choma Regia Civitas)	Robert Choma (Robert Choma Agreement for Przemyśl)	Wojciech Bakun (Kukiz' 15/ Together for Przemyśl)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

Table 2.4 The political situation in Sanok

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (21 in total)	Committee of Wojciech Blecharczyk – For Sanok – 8 (local committee) Civic Platform (PO) – 3 Law and Justice (PiS) – 3 United Self-government Activists of Sanok Land – 3 Self-government of Sanok Land – (local committee) – 2 Association of Sanok and Sanok Land (local committee) – 2	Law and Justice (PiS) – 9 Committee of Wojciech Blecharczyk – For Sanok (local committee) – 5 Self-government of Sanok Land – (local committee) – 2 Self-government Movement for Development of Sanok – 1 Maciej Drwięga (local committee) – 1 Association of Sanok and Sanok Land (local committee) – 1 Non-affiliated for Development of Sanok (local committee) – 1 National Movement – 1 (local committee)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 9 Sanok Connects Us (local committee) – 4 Democrats of Sanok Land – 4 (local committee) Self-government of Sanok Land – 2 (local committee) Independents Sanok – 2 (local committee)
Council – governing majority	Committee of Wojciech Blecharczyk – For Sanok, Association of Sanok and Sanok Land and Self-government of Sanok Land	PiS supported by local committees: Maciej Drwięga, Association of Sanok and Sanok Land, Non-affiliated for Development of Sanok and National Movement	PiS and Sanok Connects Us
Mayor	Wojciech Blecharczyk (Committee of Wojciech Blecharczyk – For Sanok)	Tadeusz Pióro (PiS)	Tomasz Matuszewski (Sanok Connects Us)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

## 2.2 The state of local and regional democracy in the Subcarpathian voivodeship in 2010–2023

This section presents an assessment of the state of local and regional democracy in the Subcarpathian voivodeship between 2010 and 2023. The interviewed politicians, representing both the government and the opposition and holding various political affiliations, emphasised the growing citizen participation. Those with the experience in working at various territorial levels noted a difference in the quality of democracy between the local and regional level – the latter was negatively affected by partocracy and politicisation ([Transcript of interview with R8, 2023](#)). PiS politicians, who have governed at the provincial level since 2014 ([Table 2.1](#)), generally saw some improvement in democratic standards, but they acknowledged that regional authorities often prioritised their own short-term interests at the expense of democratic quality ([Transcript of interview with R6, 2023](#)).

However, there were varying interpretations of how and why democracy had changed. PiS politicians from the Subcarpathian province saw an improvement in the quality of democracy right since 2010, viewing the period of their national rule in particularly positive terms ([Transcript of interview with R5, 2023](#)). PO/KO politicians and local committees supported by PO/KO pointed to a democratic improvement (smaller or bigger) throughout the entire 2010–2023 period, often highlighting a particularly dynamic progress in recent years, as in the case of politicians from the committee of Konrad Fijołek in Rzeszów, who emphasises gains during his presidency ([Transcript of interview with R2, 2023](#)). At times, they also criticised the recent deterioration of the institutional aspect of local democracy, attributing it to PiS and their performance at the national level ([Transcript of interview with R4, 2023](#)). More neutral opinions were expressed by the local committee in Sanok, previously affiliated with PiS, which noted an overall improvement in democratic standards without attributing it to any specific period ([Transcript of interview with R7, 2023](#)). A more detailed assessment is presented in the following sections.

### 2.2.1 *Components of electoral and liberal democracy*

*Elections:* In the Subcarpathian province, local and regional elections were generally conducted correctly, but concerns were raised regarding the unequal conditions of electoral competition due to the advantage held by local/regional incumbents and/or political parties, which led to electoral malpractices relating to the application of electoral law and voter choice ([Wojtasik, 2022](#)).

Electoral regulations provided financial advantages to political parties in big cities, such as Rzeszów, in council elections. They were able to access

resources that were unavailable to grassroots city movements. A local activist said:

We, as a city movement, have a certain limit, because we run as a local committee, we have a statutorily defined limit that we can spend on presidential elections and elections to the city council (...). If political parties run under the party banner, this limit counts nationwide.

(Transcript of interview with R2, 2023)

Another legal deficit at the local level, in place until 2018, was the absence of term limits for mayors and presidents, which often allowed long-serving local politicians to consolidate hegemonic positions (Transcript of FGI II, 2022).

The use of incumbency advantage was also widespread throughout the entire analysed period, regardless of who was in power. Local and regional politicians sought to improve their electoral chances by leveraging public funds, staff from local/regional administration as well as media and the local Catholic church, a highly influential institution in the conservative Subcarpathian province (Szczepański, 2018). The 2018 election campaign in Sanok illustrated such practices, as the mayor's office was also used to prevent the publication of an interview with a political rival in the weekly *Tygodnik Sanocki* (Gorczyca, 2018a).

Furthermore, the incumbency advantage was exercised by the incumbents from the central level to support local or regional candidates. Although this occurred under all governments between 2010 and 2023, the PiS rule from 2015 to 2023 was often described as more “pushy” in terms of the use of non-democratic methods, as one local journalist put it (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). For instance, during the early presidential election in Rzeszów in 2021, public funds from special central government programmes were used for campaign purposes while central government ministers provided direct support. One journalist described these malpractices as follows:

Mrs. Ewa Leniart, who was a candidate for president [in Rzeszów], was also the voivode of the Subcarpathian voivodeship at the time. She could count on the support of government ministers, the prime minister and Kaczyński, and these promises [for example cheques] were flying like crazy in our country. Minister Warchoł did not even need to bring his colleagues with him, because he could bring money from the Justice Fund himself.

(Transcript of FGI I, 2022)

*Media:* Local and regional media in the Subcarpathian voivodeship operated without any substantial difficulties during the analysed period. A politician in Rzeszów pointed out that by 2023, the number of media outlets had

tripled compared to 2010 (Transcript of interview with R5, 2023). However, the problems of media bias and censorship could also be observed. Subnational media were linked to the incumbents or affiliated institutions, which also provided financial support. In Rzeszów, the *Nowiny* weekly remained relatively independent until 2021, but after the takeover of the Polska Press group by the state-run oil company Orlen, it became a PiS propaganda tool, alongside the regional outlets *TVP Rzeszów* and *Radio Rzeszów*. According to many respondents, such politicisation of the media was not seen before 2015 (Transcript of interview with R2, 2023). President of Rzeszów Konrad Fijołek also developed his own media platforms after 2021, hiring former journalists for this purpose. A similar pattern was seen in smaller towns such as Sanok, where the self-government weekly was affiliated with the City Public Library (Transcript of interview with R7, 2023).

Moreover, censorship of local media became increasingly evident after 2015. In addition to the aforementioned case of the 2018 election campaign in Sanok, *Radio Rzeszów* dismissed experienced journalist Grażyna Bochenek in 2019 after she allowed her guests to express critical views of Polish President Andrzej Duda, elected as the PiS candidate, during her broadcast (Gorczyca, 2019).

*NGOs:* A relatively high number of various NGOs and city movements operated without any major difficulties in the Subcarpathian voivodeship and the analysed cities. Since 2018, their number has been gradually increasing across the province, following a period of fluctuations between 2010 and 2018 (see Figure 2.1).

The local authority in Rzeszów acknowledged that the number of NGOs, such as ecological organisations and youth movements, had been increasing,

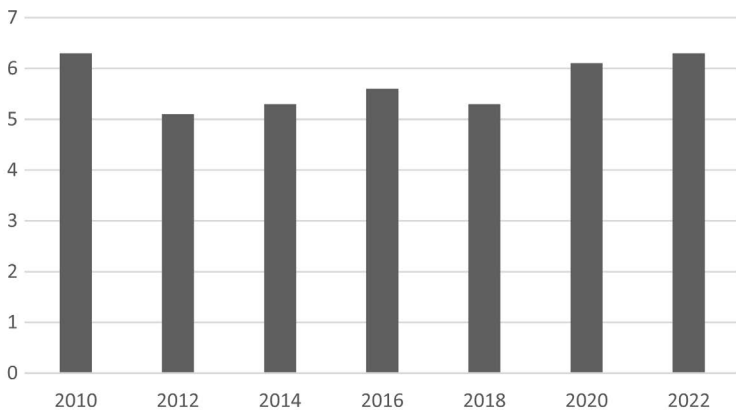


Figure 2.1 The number of NGOs – the Subcarpathian voivodeship (in 1,000s).

Source: Główny Urząd Statystyczny (2023).

particularly over the past four to five years. These groups actively participated in shaping city policy ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)), although their activity levels fluctuated and some organisations even experienced operational breaks ([Transcript of interview with R3, 2023](#)).

However, a key issue concerned the unequal support provided by local and regional authorities to different organisations. Those representing minorities could generally rely on support in the form of official patronage for their events, but it was difficult for them to secure financial assistance as city and provincial authorities feared political backlash from their opponents. In Rzeszów, President Fijolek took the events of LGBT+ organisations under his patronage, in contrast to his predecessor Tadeusz Ferenc, who even banned certain events, such as the Equality Parade in 2019 ([Gernand, 2019](#)); the *marszałek*, affiliated with PiS, also withheld support ([Bolanowski, 2022a](#)). However, Fijolek refrained from offering financial assistance to these groups. This was summarised by a member of one of Rzeszów's city movements as follows:

The city treats social and civic organisations as one in the food chain, there are institutions and movements that are more important, which the city supports, and we are one of them only if there is something left, then we will get it.

([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#))

Another example, involving Ukrainians in Przemyśl, showed that minority organisations were not only deprived of support but sometimes also discriminated against. For instance, in 2019, President Wojciech Bakun banned an event on Polish-Ukrainian relations organised by Ukrainian and Polish associations; his decision was later overruled by the self-government appeal body ([Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeszów, 2019](#)). However, there were also examples of support in the same city. In May 2018, the Association of Ukrainians in Poland received PLN 6,000 from President Robert Choma for a project marking the 100th anniversary of Poland's independence ([Gorczyca, 2018b](#)).

*Self-government institutions. The system of checks and balances:* With regard to the role of the *Sejmik* at the provincial level and city councils as legislative and oversight bodies vis-a-vis executive authorities, the Subcarpathian region displayed both elements indicative of democratic functioning and progress in subsequent years as well as some shortcomings, primarily related to the system of checks and balances.

In terms of the legislative function, the transparency of these institutions' legislative work improved following the adoption of the Act of 11 January 2018, as referenced in the book's Introduction and [Chapter 1 \(Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018\)](#). However, one persisting issue concerned access to legal acts, which were not published in some municipalities in the Subcarpathian province ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)).

The inclusiveness of legislative bodies was largely respected during the period 2010–2023. Even if politicisation was present, particularly in the *Sejmik*, this did not mean that the opposition was excluded from the main bodies of this institution. Between 2014 and 2023, when PiS held a majority in this provincial institution, it maintained an advantage in the *Sejmik* bodies, but the opposition (mainly PO/KO) secured positions beyond the head of the audit committee, which is guaranteed to the opposition by law ([Transcript of interview with R8, 2023](#)). A similar situation was generally observed in the analysed city councils. Both opposition members and residents could participate in commission debates and sessions without obstacles. One exception was the Sanok council, where access for individuals other than councillors required a vote by council members ([Transcript of interview with R7, 2023](#)).

The key problem affecting the performance of the *Sejmik* and city councils, with only limited improvement in subsequent years regardless of whether PO/KO or PiS governed at the national level, was their role as legislative and oversight bodies vis-à-vis the executive. Similarly to other voivodeships, the *Sejmik* and councils in the Subcarpathian province had relatively limited competences. Resolutions, typically initiated by the executive, were primarily significant in matters such as adopting the budget and setting the main directions of work for the president/mayor or board with the *marszalek*; however, policy decisions were taken by the executive ([Transcript of interview with R2, 2023](#)). Having a majority in the council with the head of executive (particularly in the *Sejmik* as well as in the city councils in Rzeszów and Sanok, and in some periods also in Przemyśl) usually translated into a strong position in the legislative and decision-making process, which raised some concerns about the effective functioning of the system of checks and balances.

However, in the analysed cases, this did not necessarily lead to the full subordination of councils or the marginalisation of the opposition. The position of councillors improved in the subsequent years. For instance, in the Rzeszów council, the opposition regularly met with the resident and his majority in the council to discuss the agenda before sessions and to seek agreement on certain issues ([Transcript of interview with R2, 2023](#), [R5, 2023](#)). In Sanok, it was also possible for the opposition to reach consensus with the committees forming the majority, as their representatives did not always support the mayor's initiatives ([Transcript of interview with R7, 2023](#)). In the *Sejmik*, everything depended on the mobilisation of opposition councillors – it was sometimes possible to push through specific issues, such as the project for a road leading to the airport ([Transcript of interview with R8, 2023](#)). Therefore, it is difficult to speak of extensive executive aggrandisement.

As in all other provinces and their cities, in the Subcarpathian province, several key oversight tools were available to *Sejmik* and city council members vis-à-vis the *marszalek* with the board and president/mayor, respectively. These mechanisms provided the legislative bodies with the potential to

influence the local/regional finances, budgets and policies. However, in practice, they could fulfil their role only when the head of the executive at the city level or the executive board at the provincial level did not have a majority in the council/*Sejmik*. This was the case with President Bakun in Przemyśl. The city council did not approve the budget on three occasions between 2020 and 2022 and withheld a vote of confidence in the president. However, Bakun successfully appealed these decisions before the provincial administrative court (Bolanowski, 2022b).

### 2.2.2 Components of participatory and deliberative democracy

This section presents a detailed discussion of the most common mechanisms of local and regional democracy while briefly outlining other democratic tools.

*Traditional mechanisms:* In the Subcarpathian voivodeship in 2010–2023, local referendums were held only twice – in 2016 and 2018 in Rzeszów – on the incorporation of a municipality and a village area into the city’s territory (Dziennik Urzędowy Województwa Podkarpackiego, 2024).

During this period, residents made much more frequent use of petitions addressed to local and regional authorities. At the voivodeship level (petitions to the *Sejmik* and the *marszałek*), full available data shows a fluctuating trend (Figure 2.2). Cycles of increase and decline occurred every two to three years and only some of them resulted from obvious circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

A full picture is not available for Rzeszów due to incomplete access to data prior to 2019. However, some observations regarding the cities

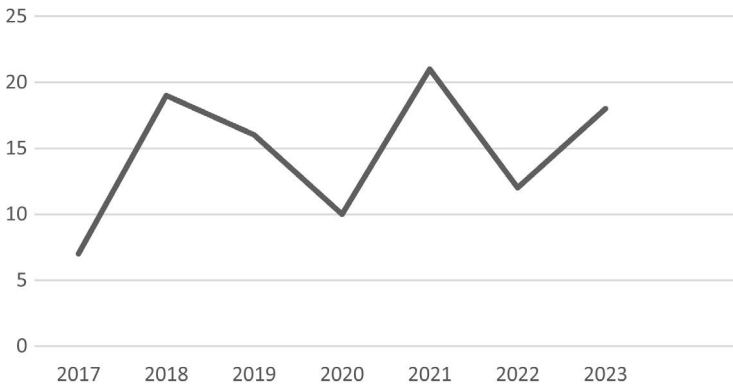


Figure 2.2 The number of petitions – the Subcarpathian voivodeship (*Sejmik* + *marszałek*).

Source: Samorząd Województwa Podkarpackiego (2024).

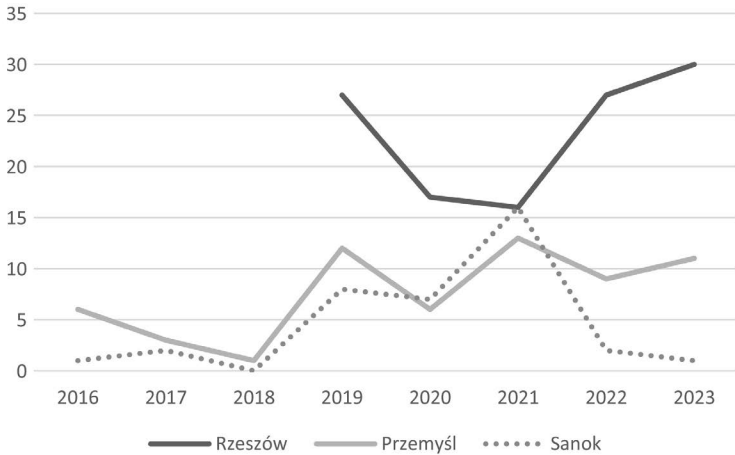


Figure 2.3 The number of petitions (councils + president/mayor) – cities in the Subcarpathian region.

Source: Serwis informacyjny Urzędu Miasta Rzeszów (2024); Miasto Przemyśl (2024); Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej. Urząd Miasta w Sanoku (2024).

(Figure 2.3) can still be made. There were notable differences between individual cases. In Rzeszów, following a period of decline, likely related to COVID-19 (2020–2021), the number of petitions increased in the following years, which confirms the views expressed by local authorities and journalists about the development of local democracy mechanisms after the early presidential election in the city in 2021 (Transcript of interview with R2, 2023). Sanok experienced an opposite trend. After a period of rising petition numbers between 2016 and 2021 (with a brief decline during two of those years), a sharp drop occurred in 2022–2023. In Przemyśl, after a decline in 2017–2018, fluctuations in the number of petitions were observed between 2020 and 2023.

The increasing numbers of petitions can be assessed positively as an indicator of the development of local democracy. However, politicians in the Subcarpathian voivodeship pointed out that their quality was very low and the councils/*Sejmik* frequently rejected them as not legitimate (Transcript of interview with R3, 2023). In fact, the authorities were not obliged to respond favourably even to well-prepared and well-substantiated petitions supported by a broad range of residents and local organisations. For instance, a petition submitted to the Rzeszów authorities calling for a reduction in the use of Christmas lights was endorsed by 12 local organisations, supported by several thousands of people on social media and signed by 120 residents. Nonetheless, the city authorities disregarded it (Transcript of FGI II, 2022).

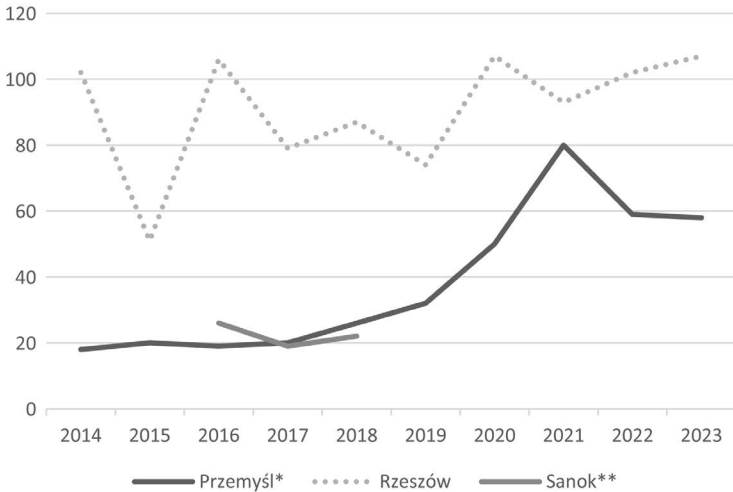


Figure 2.4 The number of projects for voting (participatory budgeting) – cities in the Subcarpathian province.

Source: Serwis informacyjny Urzędu Miasta Rzeszów (2024); Portal danych (2024); Miasto Przemyśl (2024); Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej. Urząd Miasta w Sanoku (2024).

\* Years 2017–2019 – projects submitted by settlements rather than individual persons

\*\* Participatory budgeting implemented only in 2016–2018.

*Other mechanisms of local and regional democracy:* Some newer and more innovative tools were used by residents of the Subcarpathian province and the analysed cities. The first of these was the participatory budgeting. Although it was not introduced at the provincial level, it was implemented in the analysed cities, albeit in different forms and during different periods (Figures 2.4 and 2.5).

In Rzeszów, the participatory budgeting has been implemented continuously since 2014. The number of projects fluctuated between 2014 and 2021, followed by a steady increase after 2021, while the number of people voting for projects has been rising since 2019, with a substantial increase in 2020 and a decline in 2021, which is likely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Przemyśl, the participatory budgeting has been in place since 2014, although its format changed between 2017 and 2019. During this period, projects were submitted by settlement boards but were not voted by inhabitants. It was justified by accusation of fraud in 2015 (Ziętał, 2014) and too many expensive projects in the sport area submitted by schools (Ziętał, 2016). The number of projects rose steadily from 2014, with a decline only in 2022–2023, following an exceptional peak in 2021 when 80 projects were submitted. The number of votes increased after the reintroduction of standard rules for setting the budget in 2020, with only a slight decline in 2023 (from 21,132 to 20,595 votes).

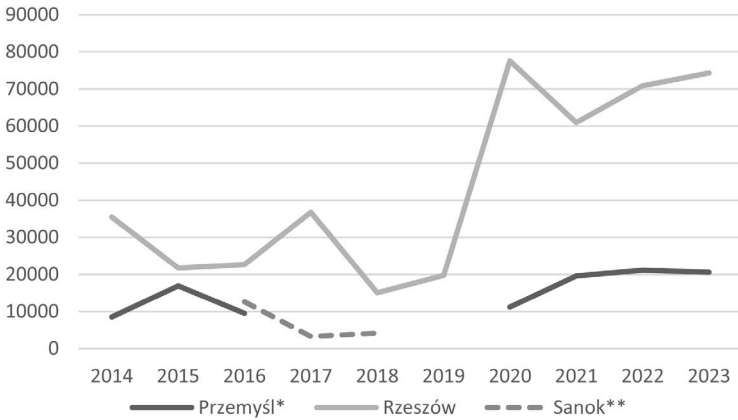


Figure 2.5 The number of votes cast for participatory budgeting projects – cities in the Subcarpathian province.

Source: Serwis informacyjny Urzędu Miasta Rzeszów (2024); Portal danych (2024); Miasto Przemyśl (2024); Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej. Urząd Miasta w Sanoku (2024).

\* Years 2017–2019 – projects submitted by settlements rather than individual persons.

\*\* Participatory budgeting implemented only in 2016–2018.

In Sanok, where there is no legal obligation to implement a participatory budgeting as the city does not have district rights, it was introduced only during the period 2016–2018, with a fluctuating trend. The discontinuation of the participatory budgeting thereafter was officially explained by the Sanok authorities with the need to complete the previously initiated investments (E-Sanok.pl, 2018) – a common justification for the suspension of participatory budgeting across Poland (Martela et al., 2023). However, the key obstacle appeared to lie in the attitude of the city authorities who referred to an alternative mechanism, saying that: “Each district, the district councils are piloting it, submitting their proposals to the budget, the general budget of the city, indicating what should be done in the district. And these proposals are taken into account” (Transcript of interview with R7, 2023).

Even though progress was observed in the development of the participatory budgeting, certain deficits remained and in some cases deepened in subsequent years. Firstly, some residents expressed dissatisfaction with the participatory budgeting, arguing that the approved projects were not implemented by the city authorities. This criticism was only partly justified. For instance, in Sanok, some winning projects were not implemented because of procedural shortcomings, such as delays in the publication of public procurement calls or changes to project conditions at the early stages of implementation (Majdosz, 2018). However, in many cases, the lack of implementation resulted from low quality

of projects due to incorrect cost estimates or inappropriate project locations (Transcript of interview with R2, 2023; Zielińska, 2015). Another issue was the submission of projects in a limited number of areas by well-organised interest groups, which were able to convince residents to vote for their projects or specific goals. In Rzeszów, an increasing share of funds was allocated to the purchase of new fire brigade vehicles or the construction of school sports facilities, effectively financing the implementation of the statutory tasks of local authorities (Transcript of interview with R3, 2023).

In the Subcarpathian province, various consultation mechanisms and forms of civic engagement developed in 2010–2023, particularly at the city level. Rzeszów appeared to be most advanced in this regard. The smart city movement, which emerged in 2015, played a significant role, partly by promoting the idea of smart governance (Szczepański, 2015). Even former President Ferenc was known from his visits to different parts of the city to listen to residents (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). However, as acknowledged by local authorities (e.g. Transcript of interview with R2, 2023), more substantial development of different forms of consultations occurred after 2021, when Konrad Fijolek became the president. The mechanisms that developed during this period included indoor consultations led by Urban Lab (a forum of consultation with hundreds of residents on different city issues, including spatial development plans) and different outdoor consultations, such as “consultation walks”, online/social media surveys and consultation points (Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeszów, 2021). Compared to previous consultations, these practices were also marked by improved quality. Prior to 2021, district-level consultations were often regarded as token gestures aimed at creating the impression that local authorities listened to the people. One member of a local NGO described it as follows: “it was done at 9:30 a.m. in the middle of the week, when basically no one could show up, or it was announced so far in advance that no one would be able to find out” (Transcript of FGI II, 2022). Consultations, particularly meetings with the president/mayor, also took place in the other analysed cities. Youth, senior and later women councils were established, first in Rzeszów and Przemyśl and then in Sanok, where the process began only in 2019 (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5 Consultation councils in the Subcarpathian voivodeship

Province or city/ council type	Youth council/ Sejmik	Senior council/ Sejmik	Women council/ Sejmik
Voivodeship	X (since 2019)	–	–
Rzeszów	X (since 1993)	X (since 2014)	X (since 2022)
Przemyśl	X (since 2010)	X (since 2014)	X (since 2021)
Sanok	X (since 2019)	X (since 2019)	X (since 2024)

Source: Samorząd Województwa Podkarpackiego (2024); Serwis informacyjny Urzędu Miasta Rzeszów (2024); Miasto Przemyśl (2024); Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej, Urząd Miasta w Sanoku (2024).

However, numerous shortcomings in the implementation of these consultation mechanisms were observed even after 2021. The Urban Lab discussion on spatial development plans was described as having “turned into a squabble of hundreds of people in non-air-conditioned rooms, some fainted, there were protests, pickets” (Transcript of FGI II, 2022). The consultation process then descended into one big row (Transcript of interview with R3, 202). Consultations were often treated by local politicians in the analysed cities as a necessary evil, so they did take place, but there was often no real intention to listen to people and then to amend the plans to reflect their opinions. In some instances, voting in surveys was suspended altogether (Kulczycka, 2021) or consultations continued until residents became fatigued and willing to compromise on virtually any outcome (Transcript of FGI II, 2022; Transcript of interview with R3, 2023).

All these issues contributed to low levels of public participation in consultations (Transcript of interview with R7, 2023), with varying trends across different locations. For instance, in Rzeszów, only 4.1% of eligible residents participated in important consultations on changing the city’s borders in 2016, 3.88% in 2017 and just 2.9% in 2021 (Rzeszów News, 2017, 2021). Consultations on the same issue in Sanok attracted 3.77% of eligible residents in 2021 and 4.4% in the following year (Zatwarnicki, 2021, 2022).

Between 2010 and 2023, the Citizens’ Resolution Initiative was used only once at the level of the Subcarpathian province – in 2019. However, a large majority of councillors rejected it due to logistical and legal shortcomings (Kulczycka, 2019, pp. 179–180; Podgórska-Rykała, 2021). It was used sporadically in Rzeszów and Przemyśl, with greater success in the former (Godos, 2015; Transcript of interview with R3, 2023).

## **2.3 The reasons behind the state of local and regional democracy**

The key question concerns the impact of the national and subnational levels on regional and local democracy in the Subcarpathian province.

### **2.3.1 Impact of the national level**

Regardless of the period, the national legal framework governing elections and the performance of self-government institutions and mechanisms have had an impact on local and regional democracy in the analysed voivodeship. As already mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter 1, this impact has always been ambiguous in terms of its effect on democracy. The general legal framework, created by this legislation and its reforms, was generally favourable for democracy in the Subcarpathian voivodeship (with some exceptions), but its implementation led to executive aggrandisement, electoral malpractices or deficiencies in the operation of local/regional democracy mechanisms.

Moreover, at both the provincial level and in bigger cities such as Rzeszów, the entire analysed period, irrespective of the political composition of the central government, was marked by the impact of intense political polarisation and conflict between PO/KO and PiS as well as the dominant position of these parties and political parties in general. Even though the local committee of the city president (Ferenc, followed by Fijolek) played an important role in Rzeszów, it still relied on the support of the PO/KO. This impact was reflected, firstly, in the low quality of debates and dialogue during the council sessions ([Transcript of interview with R3, 2023](#)). Secondly, it negatively affected the electoral prospects of smaller competitors ([Transcript of interview with R2, 2023](#)).

Apart from these issues, the national level's impact on the previously identified democratic deficits in the Subcarpathian province and its cities was much stronger and evident after 2015, when PiS came to power and embarked on the de-democratisation processes, than during the previous PO-PSL government. Similarly to other provinces, this impact was reflected in the centralisation policy pursued by PiS governments, aimed at regional and local authorities, and the reproduction of national-level undemocratic changes at the subnational levels through PiS "agents" and institutions controlled by this party. While KO/PO politicians (in Rzeszów) and members of local committees (in Sanok) criticised these developments as measures that undermined self-government ([Transcript of interview with R2, 2023](#), [R7, 2023](#)), PiS politicians tried to justify them on the grounds of security and the supervisory competences of the voivode ([Transcript of interview with R6, 2023](#)).

The analysed province did not differ from other voivodeships in terms of the areas affected by the centralisation policy of the PiS governments. Its first aspect involved the reduction of competences of local and regional governments which were taken over either by central institutions or the voivode. In addition to the aforementioned nationwide cases of the central government assuming subnational competences ([Chapter 1](#)), it is worth mentioning the transfer of certain tasks of the *marszałek* to the Subcarpathian voivode in areas where responsibilities are shared between self-government and central administration, particularly in the field of regional policy ([Transcript of interview with R8, 2023](#)).

The centralisation process reached its peak in April 2021, when PiS Prime Minister Morawiecki decided to postpone the date of the early presidential election in Rzeszów from 9 May to 13 June ([Serwis Samorządowy PAP, 2021](#)). The epidemiological situation was given as the official reason, but one representative of the local authorities in the city explained that the early election,

was delayed by five weeks so that the second round of this election would fall during the [summer] holidays, when it is known that the city's pro-democratic electorate is mostly away. It was an attempt to manipulate democracy in a central way.

([Transcript of interview with R4, 2023](#))

This decision appears to have been a clear attempt to influence, from the centre, the electoral outcome in Rzeszów in contradiction to the principle of electoral decentralisation, which stipulates that electoral decisions must be made without any interference from the central government (Siekłucki, 2022, p. 29).

Secondly, as in other voivodeships, recentralisation also affected financial matters. In the Subcarpathian province, both the PiS-affiliated voivode and the *marszałek* distributed public funds in a manner that favoured municipalities governed by their own party. For instance, *marszałek* Ortyl allocated PLN 460 million for water and sewage infrastructure but only to municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants, effectively excluding bigger cities, which were governed, with some exceptions, by parties other than PiS (Transcript of interview with R2, 2023). This often resulted in financial difficulties for those cities. A member of the local authority in Rzeszów described the situation as follows:

It is noticeable that the financial resources are given to their own people. We are not their own, so we can only count on some trace amounts, just so the voivode can claim that Rzeszów is also treated equally. But this is a scale of 1 to 10. Not to mention the funds from the *Marszałek* Office, where the Law and Justice party also governs independently. We practically cannot count on any funds there.

(Transcript of interview with R2, 2023)

In the Subcarpathian province, this phenomenon reached such an extent that a scholar specialising in the region described it as a *de facto* lack of separation between the party and public funds (Transcript of interview with R1, 2022). This also occurred during election campaigns after 2015. The aforementioned example of distributing funds from central ministries to support Leniart and Warchoł, the United Right coalition candidates for President of Rzeszów in 2021, clearly illustrated this trend. An expert on elections in the Subcarpathian province compared this situation with the previous elections in Rzeszów as follows: “I have been analysing elections since 2010 (...). I had not observed such tendencies concerning the excessive use of public funds (...), as was the case recently, especially in this election campaign in Rzeszów” (Transcript of interview with R1, 2022). This opinion highlights the intensifying negative impact of the central government on the democratic characteristics of local elections during the period of PiS rule.

In addition to the recentralisation process observed between 2015 and 2023, which negatively affected the state of self-government and democracy in the Subcarpathian province, undemocratic changes introduced at the national level were also reproduced at lower territorial tiers in this voivodeship. This process was highlighted by one of the experienced representatives of the Rzeszów authorities, who argued that the state of democracy at the national level translates into the local and regional level in terms of the performance of the institutional sphere and the main actors of the democratic system. He

clearly explained the underlying mechanism, stating that as a result of the undemocratic changes in national institutions since 2015, “the quality of the debate, the quality of participation, the quality of organisation [at the local level] (...) suffer in spite of everything” (Transcript of interview with R4, 202).

The previous section presented examples of actions by politicians, institutions and bodies affiliated with PiS, which clearly reflected the process of reproducing undemocratic changes from the national level in the Subcarpathian province since 2015, particularly in relation to the liberal model of democracy. From 2015 to 2023, this included the replication of practices such as the takeover of media outlets and transforming them into propaganda tools serving the incumbents at the central level. Censorship present in the national public media was observed also in the Subcarpathian province. Other channels of influence from the national level included PiS politicians operating at the provincial level and in the analysed cities. A notable example of this reproduction of undemocratic practices from the national level was the targeting of the LGBT+ community, extending beyond the previously discussed lack of support for its organisations. Discriminatory practices were also seen in the actions of PiS councillors in the Subcarpathian *Sejmik* and city councils, which adopted anti-LGBT+ resolutions establishing LGBT-free zones (Kędra, 2019).

### **2.3.2 *Impact of the local/regional level***

The identified impact of the national level on the state of local and regional democracy in the Subcarpathian province accounts for only part of the democratic deficits both at the provincial level and in the analysed cities, as outlined in Section 2.2. Moreover, this impact was often indirect, although direct interventions by the central government and its representatives, who belonged to or were linked to the governing party, were also observed, with a dysfunctional effect on the state of local and regional democracy. Other identified democratic deficits, particularly those concerning participatory and deliberative democracy, are better explained by factors rooted in local and regional politics and society.

The subnational sources of democratic deficits in the Subcarpathian province and their relationship to national-level influence were aptly summarised by an experienced councillor from Rzeszów who said that democratic mechanisms in cities,

result primarily from laws and culture or from local experiences. They are different in every city (...) Practically every local government, every city has developed its own customs, which seem obvious to us, but in another place they may seem strange. And this is beyond the control of central policy.

(Transcript of interview with R3, 2023)

Democratic institutions in the analysed province and its cities were thus developed within the national legal framework, with the functional and dysfunctional impact of local and regional political, economic and social conditions on the state of democracy.

A particularly relevant example in this regard, which was already discussed in [Chapter 1](#), involved the gradual consolidation of power and resources in the hands of executive bodies and their heads. This process stemmed from the introduction of direct elections for city presidents and mayors in 2002. However, both this consolidation and some accompanying deficits of the liberal model of democracy, such as the domination of the executive over the legislative bodies and the use of incumbency advantage during election campaigns, appeared to have local or regional origins.

With regard to the consolidation of power and resources in the hands of presidents/mayors and their parties/committees, the decentralisation theory says that the process of decentralisation, as advanced as that in Poland, can lead to the consolidation or even hegemonisation of power by local or regional elites ([Mbate, 2017](#), pp. 6–8). Their self-reliance and distance from the centre, combined with quite extensive competences and access to public resources, create fertile ground for such developments; this appears to have been the case in the Subcarpathian voivodeship. The domination of the executive branch over the legislative bodies, as a consequence of this consolidation of power and resources, was linked to the formation of clientelistic networks by executive leaders through the distribution of positions in the administration or local companies as well as some material benefits. The extent of this phenomenon depended on the political position of the president/mayor. A stable majority in the council, as in Rzeszów and Sanok, did not require as much effort as in cases of a weak majority or insufficient support in the council, as in Przemyśl between 2020 and 2022. A local journalist described this situation as follows:

In Rzeszów, we have a great system, so to speak, there is Together for Rzeszów, that is (...) a local association that governs the city indivisibly and the other councillors really do not have much to say. Whereas in Przemyśl, there is a different situation (...) The president has to make an effort to make the councillors feel comfortable. So clientelism is more active than in Rzeszów, where these frictions go from councillors to the president and from the president to councillors.

([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#))

It can be argued that this clientelism was a reproduction of the broader national phenomenon, but its practical manifestations were determined by local conditions, such as the role of the local Catholic church ([Transcript of interview with R1, 2022](#)).

Local and regional factors played also a role in the use of incumbency advantage during election campaigns. In addition to the consolidation of power

and resources by local authorities, we should mention the low level of local and regional democratic culture among both elites and society. Both groups saw benefits in this regard: politicians sought electoral success while residents anticipated material gains, such as investments in the city infrastructure shortly before elections. A clear example of the latter was the level of planned investments in Przemyśl for the election year 2024. While between 2020 and 2023 the city's budget expenditures fluctuated between PLN 412 million and PLN 473 million, this figure soared to PLN 599 million in the budget plan for 2024 as a result of new loans taken out by the local government to fund investments in roads, buses and a swimming pool (Solski, 2023).

A low level of political culture among both elites and society also contributed to the absence of certain key instruments of local/regional democracy in the Subcarpathian province, such as participatory budgeting and women and senior councils at the voivodeship level, the limited use of existing mechanisms such as the Citizens' Resolution Initiative or referendums, as well as the temporary lack of organisation of these instruments or change of their form to less democratic. These shortcomings can be explained only to some extent by financial and budgetary constraints. They appear to be largely determined by the attitudes of local and regional authorities, who often regarded participatory budgeting, consultations and other democratic instruments as unnecessary given the functioning of traditional self-government institutions, a view that clearly revealed a lack of understanding of the idea behind local/regional democracy mechanisms. The low level of democratic political culture among residents in the analysed cities further contributed to weak participation in mechanisms of local democracy, low quality of public consultations and the dominance of narrow interest groups in participatory budgets.

In the Subcarpathian voivodeship, media bias also appeared to be, to some extent, a result of local conditions. This was clearly described by a journalist in Rzeszów, who said:

Many local media outlets, at least in the Subcarpathian region, have some contacts with the state authority and, for example, the State Forests send press information to a portal, as they do to all other portals, but one portal is paid to publish this information and gets several thousand. And there are other portals in Rzeszów that get on very well with the Marszałek's Office and receive funding in exchange for specific content they publish about the office's activities.

([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#))

## **2.4 Conclusions**

The case of the Subcarpathian voivodeship provides further evidence that even relatively advanced decentralisation, as seen in Poland, does not always lead to progress in democratisation. Although, in terms of the electoral/liberal model, local and regional democracy in this province between 2010 and

2023 appeared relatively robust, with improvements in its institutions, various democratic deficits were also present, some of which even deepened in subsequent years, particularly after 2015. The exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 period did not significantly affect the state of liberal democracy. Regarding the participatory and deliberative models, many instruments of local/regional democracy in the Subcarpathian province were established, developed and improved, but their use was inconsistent, with frequent fluctuations and, in some cases, prolonged interruptions. A thorough analysis revealed some deficits in the effectiveness of these instruments, some of which became more pronounced in subsequent years. The COVID-19 period brought minor difficulties in the continuous application of these instruments of local and provincial democracy in the Subcarpathian voivodeship as well as in the level of civic engagement.

These deficits represent significant obstacles to describing the analysed cities as democratic enclaves within the de-democratising country during the period 2015–2023. Rzeszów appeared to come closest to such a status. It was a pioneer of many democratic initiatives in the province. One representative of the local authorities noted that,

Rzeszów is the only city in the Subcarpathian region where equality marches take place (...) We were the first to introduce the participatory budgeting, one of the first in the province, and other local governments took the regulations for this budget from us.

(*Transcript of interview with R2, 2023*)

However, the mere presence of democratic mechanisms is not sufficient – their effective implementation is equally important, and in this respect, much remained to be desired.

The analysis demonstrates that two sets of factors influenced the state of local and regional democracy in the Subcarpathian province – national and subnational. They sometimes jointly contributed to specific democratic deficits, such as electoral malpractices, the weakening of the checks and balances mechanism, the development of clientelistic networks and media bias. Similarly to the Masovian province, when both levels exerted influence, the dysfunctional national factor usually exacerbated the existing problems in local or regional democracy, particularly from 2015 onwards, or acted as a trigger for the development of negative impact of subnational conditions.

Regarding other democratic deficits, the analysis identified, on the one hand, the direct or indirect impact of national laws, policies and broader changes in the state of democracy at the national level on the health of democracy at the subnational levels in the analysed province. In a limited number of cases, this impact occurred regardless of which parties formed the government at the national level. Between 2010 and 2023, national legislation concerning elections and self-government determined the state of democracy,

although this influence was mostly indirect as the legal provisions created a general framework. The way it was implemented by elites and society ultimately shaped local and regional democracy. In some cases, broadly democratic provisions led to unintended undemocratic changes, as illustrated by the introduction of direct elections for presidents and mayors in 2002, which contributed to the “soft” executive aggrandisement in the analysed cities. The dysfunctional impact on the state of local and regional democracy in the Subcarpathian province was also not connected with the political profile of the central government in the case of the negative influence of political polarisation and domination of political parties.

In all other cases, the impact of the national level on the previously identified democratic deficits at the level of the Subcarpathian province and its cities became significantly more pronounced after 2015, when PiS came to power and embarked on the de-democratisation processes. Similarly to other provinces, this was reflected in the recentralisation policy of the central government and the reproduction of undemocratic changes from the national level, leading to the abuse of the principles of liberal democracy.

On the other hand, in some cases of abuse of the principles of liberal democracy and in the substantial majority of deficits concerning the participatory and deliberative model of democracy, local and regional determinants were the primary sources of these shortcomings. The abuse of the liberal model of democracy, attributable to subnational factors, was already present before 2015 and often only intensified thereafter. This was particularly evident in the domination of the executive at the expense of the council, resulting from the gradual consolidation of power and resources in the hands of city presidents (and their parties, which often held a majority in the council). This enabled the use of incumbency advantage in election campaigns, particularly during the period of PiS rule at the national level. The political culture of both authorities and residents, which contributed to the acceptance of such electoral malpractices, also played a key role in the deficits associated with the instruments of local and regional democracy discussed in [Section 2.3.2](#) of this chapter.

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# 3 Silesian Voivodeship

## 3.1 Introduction – Brief overview of the case

This chapter begins with a brief description of the Silesian voivodeship and the selected cities, i.e. Katowice, Częstochowa, Gliwice and Bielsko-Biała. The key demographical, geographical and political data are presented in this section.

### 3.1.1 Geographical and demographic data

The Silesian voivodeship is located in the southern part of Poland (see map in the Introduction). It's one of the smallest Polish voivodeships, with an area of 12,334 km<sup>2</sup> ([Województwo Śląskie, 2024a](#)). At the same time, it has the highest population density ([Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2023](#), p. 18). According to the Central Statistical Office, its population stood at 4.6 million in 2010 and 4.3 million in 2023, with 350 and 365 people per km<sup>2</sup> in those years, respectively. The Silesian voivodeship is known for heavy industry, especially mining and metallurgy, as well as the energy and coke industries ([Tkocz, 2015](#)).

The capital city is Katowice, located in the central part of the voivodeship. In terms of size it ranks 11th among the Polish cities. According to GUS data, the population of Katowice steadily declined between 2010 and 2023 – from 311,420 to 279,190. A similar trend can be observed in the other analysed cities. In Częstochowa, the population fell from 237,200 to 205,970, in Gliwice – from 187,830 to 169,920, and in Bielsko-Biała – from 174,760 to 165,770. This trend may be linked to unfavourable conditions, such as poor air quality ([Ślimko, 2019](#), p. 10).

### 3.1.2 Political data

In 2010, Poland was ruled by coalition partners – PO, which won the 2007 elections with 41.5% of the vote, and PSL, which secured 8% support ([Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2024](#)). At that time, a political conflict has already emerged between PO and PiS; in the following years, it intensified, resulting in growing polarisation and politicisation. At the voivodeship

level, the struggle for power primarily took place between the largest parties (Gagatek & Tybuchowska-Hartlińska, 2020, p. 475). PO performed better in the north-western part of the country and in most large cities, while PiS gained stronger support in the south-eastern regions. It should be noted that in Poland, due to the high degree of similarity in social expectations in the economic sphere, ideological issues constitute a more pronounced axis of division (Drozdowski, 2014, pp. 75–86; Marody, 2019, pp. 65–66).

In the Silesian *Sejmik*, during the 2010–2014 term, PO had 22 seats, twice as many as the electoral committee of PiS. Notably, the left-wing SLD had a relatively strong position in Silesia, which may be linked to the region's post-industrial character. In addition, the regional RAŚ movement was represented in the *Sejmik*. RAŚ advocated for the financial and organisational autonomy of the regions and, consequently, for a reduction in the central government's decision-making powers. This phenomenon has no equivalent in other parts of Poland. Between 2010 and 2014, the offices of the *marszałek*<sup>1</sup> and the voivode were held by PO representatives.

PO again won the regional elections in 2014, but the difference in seats between this party and its main political rival, PiS, was insignificant: PO held 17 seats in the *Sejmik* while PiS had 16. The SLD Left Together coalition experienced a huge drop in support, largely as a result of the party's political actions, which ultimately led to its failure to cross the electoral threshold in the 2015 parliamentary elections. The position of the *marszałek* between 2014 and 2018 was held by Wojciech Saługa from PO. Initially, the office of the Silesian voivode was assumed by the independent Piotr Litwa, who was supported by PO. But after PiS won the parliamentary elections in 2015, Prime Minister Beata Szydło appointed Jarosław Wieczorek from PiS to this post (Pustułka, 2015).

The results of the next subnational elections in 2018 in the Silesian voivodeship reflected the polarising tendencies that characterised Polish political scene – 42 out of 45 seats went to PiS and KO committees. Following the elections, a struggle for the majority in the *Sejmik* ensued (Jedlecki & Krzyk, 2018; Malinowska, 2018). Although PiS won the election with 22 seats, a coalition agreement between KO, PSL and SLD initially secured a majority of 23 seats. However, this arrangement was disrupted when Wojciech Kałuża from KO entered into an alliance with PiS and voted for the candidates put forward by PiS for managerial positions in the region. Then he changed his party affiliation. Jakub Chelstowski from PiS became the *marszałek* and held this post until 21 November 2022. After that, he announced his decision to leave the party, declaring his intention to cooperate with KO, SLD and PSL. Thus, the Silesian *Sejmik* was a political arena, with the balance of power shifting three times during a single term. Conflicts at the regional level mirrored divisions at the central level. The position of the voivode was held for most of the term by Jarosław Wieczorek (PiS), until December 2023, when he was replaced by Marek Wójcik (KO), following a change of government at the central level (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 The political situation in the Silesian voivodeship

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
<i>Sejmik – division of seats (45 in total)</i>	Civic Platform (PO) – 22 Law and Justice (PiS) – 11 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 10 Silesian Autonomy Movement (RAŚ)* – 3 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 2	Civic Platform (PO) – 17 Law and Justice (PiS) – 16 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 5 Silesian Autonomy Movement (RAŚ)* – 4 Democratic Left Alliance Left Together (SLD Left Together) – 3	Law and Justice (PiS) – 22 Civic Coalition (KO) – 20 Democratic Left Alliance Left Together (SLD Left Together) – 2 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 1
<i>Sejmik – governing majority</i>	Civic Platform (PO), Polish Peasant Party (PSL), Silesian Autonomy Movement*(RAŚ)	Civic Platform (PO), Polish Peasant Party (PSL), Democratic Left Alliance Left Together (SLD Left Together), Silesian Autonomy Movement*(RAŚ)	Law and Justice (PiS) from 21 November 2022 Civic Coalition (KO), Democratic Left Alliance Left Together (SLD Left Together), Polish Peasant Party (PSL)
<i>Head of Executive (marszałek)</i>	Adam Matusiewicz (PO) – from 2 December 2010 to 20 December 2012 Mirosław Sekuła (PO) – from 21 January 2013 to 1 December 2014	Wojciech Saługa (PO)	Jakub Chelstowski (PiS, then Local Government Movement “Yes for Poland!” (RSTDP)** cooperation with KO, New Left and PSL)
<i>Voivode</i>	Zygmunt Łukaszczyk (PO)	Piotr Litwa (non-partisan, recommended by Civic Platform (PO) – from 12 March 2014 to 8 December 2015 Jarosław Wieczorek (PiS) – from 8 December 2015	Jarosław Wieczorek (PiS) – to 2 November 2023 Marek Wójcik (KO) – from 2 December 2023

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

\* *Ruch Autonomii Śląska* (RAŚ); \*\* *Ruch Samorządowy “Tak dla Polski!”* (RSTDP)

When analysing the results of local elections in the selected Silesian cities, it's worth noting the diversity of political organisations supported by residents. Detailed information on this topic is presented in Tables 3.2–3.5. Each city had its own specific characteristics. Katowice and Gliwice are examples of cities with strong support for local committees concentrated around the leader – the city president. In Katowice, this was the Local Government Forum and Piotr Uszok, followed by the Local Government Forum and Marcin Krupa. Gliwice had the Zygmunt Frankiewicz Coalition for Gliwice. Częstochowa provided an interesting case. The office of the president had

Table 3.2 The political situation in Katowice

Body/authority – date	2010–2014	2014–2018	2018–2023
Council – division of seats (28 in total)	Civic Platform (PO) 13 The Local Government Forum and Piotr Uszok (FSiPU)* – 10 Law and Justice (PiS) – 4 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 1	The Local Government Forum and Piotr Uszok (FSiPU)* – 12 Civic Platform (PO) – 8 Law and Justice (PiS) – 6 Silesian Autonomy Movement (RAŚ) – 2	Civic Coalition (KO) – 12 The Local Government Forum and Marcin Krupa (FSiMK)** – 11 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5
Council – governing majority	The Local Government Forum and Piotr Uszok (FSiPU)* and Law and Justice (PiS)	The Local Government Forum and Piotr Uszok (FSiPU)* and Law and Justice (PiS)	The Local Government Forum and Marcin Krupa (FSiMK)** and Law and Justice (PiS), from December 2023 – The Local Government Forum and Marcin Krupa (FSiMK)** supported by Civic Coalition (KO)
President/mayor	Piotr Uszok (FSiPU)*	Piotr Uszok (FSiPU)* – till 8 December 2014 Marcin Krupa (FSiMK)** – from 8 December	Marcin Krupa (FSiMK)**

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

\* *Wspólnota Samorządowa i Piotr Uszok* (FSiPU); \*\* *Wspólnota Samorządowa i Marcin Krupa* (FSiMK).

Table 3.3 The political situation in Częstochowa

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (25 in total)	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 10 Civic Platform (PO) – 9 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5 Self-governing community (WS)* – 4	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 9 Civic Platform (PO) – 5 Residents of Częstochowa (MCz)** – 4	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 12 Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Coalition (KO) – 5 Together for Częstochowa (WdCz)*** – 1
Council – governing majority	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) supported by local committee	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and Civic Platform (PO)	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and Civic Coalition (KO)
President/mayor	Krzysztof Matyjaszczyk (SLD)	Krzysztof Matyjaszczyk (SLD)	Krzysztof Matyjaszczyk (SLD)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

\* *Wspólnota Samorządowa* (WS); \*\* *Mieszkańcy Częstochowy* (MCz); \*\*\* *Wspólnie dla Częstochowy* (WdCz).

been held by a representative of SLD since 2010. At the same time, SLD and PiS were the two most popular clubs in Częstochowa; they alternately secured the largest number of seats in successive terms. Between 2010 and 2023, PO/KO had lower support in Częstochowa than in other cities. Local committees such as Residents of Częstochowa and Together for Częstochowa also gained relatively low support. In Bielsko-Biała, against the backdrop of a worsening political conflict, a mobilisation of support for the two biggest rivals on the political scene, PO and PiS, was observed from 2014 onwards, reflecting broader trends seen at the voivodeship level. However, the 2018–2023 term was marked by dynamic political developments. In 2019, councillors formed a new club, Together for Bielsko-Biała (later renamed the Jarosław Klimaszewski Councillors' Club). It included councillors from KO, WJK (a local committee) and PiS. Interestingly, they justified this decision by emphasising the need for joint action.

### 3.2 The state of local and regional democracy in the Silesian voivodeship in 2010–2023

As part of our research, we asked respondents who took part in individual in-depth interviews (IDI) about how they assessed the state of democracy in the voivodeship and in their cities. Overall, the idea of self-government was

Table 3.4 The political situation in Gliwice

Body/authority – date	2010–2014	2014–2018	2018–2023
Council – division of seats (23 in total)	Civic Platform (PO) – 10 The Zygmont Frankiewicz Coalition for Gliwice (KdGZF)* – 9 Law and Justice (PiS) – 4 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 2	The Zygmont Frankiewicz Coalition for Gliwice (KdGZF)* – 10 Law and Justice (PiS) – 7 Civic Platform (PO) – 7 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 1	The Zygmont Frankiewicz Coalition for Gliwice (KdGZF)* – 11 Law and Justice (PiS) – 8 Civic Coalition (KO) – 6
Council – governing majority	No stable majority – most seats Civic Platform (PO)	No stable majority – most seats The Zygmont Frankiewicz Coalition for Gliwice (KdGZF)	The Zygmont Frankiewicz Coalition for Gliwice (KdGZF) supported by Civic Coalition (KO)
President/mayor	Zygmont Frankiewicz (KdGZF)	Zygmont Frankiewicz (KdGZF)	Zygmont Frankiewicz (KdGZF) – to 13 October 2019 Janusz Moszyński (KO) – from 22 October 2019 to 9 January 2020 Adam Neumann (KdGZF) – from 9 January 2020

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

\* Koalicja dla Gliwic Zygmunta Frankiewicza (KdGZF).

assessed very positively and perceived as genuinely democratic. According to most respondents, no specific provinces or cities should be regarded as “democratic enclaves”, but rather the local government itself. As one of local politician said,

the local government reform is one of the few that we have in fact succeeded in almost 100%, what we did in the 1990s, what our predecessors did. So, I absolutely believe that local government was, is and will remain an added value of democracy. It would be difficult for us today to understand the formula of governing the country without local government.

(Transcript of interview with R32, 2023)

Table 3.5 The political situation in Bielsko-Biała

<i>Body/ authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council - division of seats (23 in total)	The Jacek Krywult Voters (WJK)* – 11 Civic Platform (PO) – 8 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5 The Grażyna Staniszewska Voters** – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Platform (PO) – 8 The Jacek Krywult Voters (WJK)* – 5 The Independents BB (NBB)** – 2	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Coalition (KO) – 7 The Jacek Krywult Voters (WJK)* – 4 The Okrzesik and Independents BB (OiNBB)**** – 4 From 15.11.2019 change of clubs: Together for Bielsko-Biała (RdBB)***** (then from 7.02.2022 change of name to Jarosław Klimaszewski Councillors Club (KRJK)*****) – 14 Law and Justice (PiS) – 7 Independents BB (NBB) – 4
Council - governing majority	The Jacek Krywult Voters (WJK)* supported by Civic Platform (PO)	Civic Platform (PO) supported by The Jacek Krywult Voters (WJK)*	Together for Bielsko-Biała (WdBB)***** (from 7.02.2022 Jarosław Klimaszewski Councilors Club (KRJK)*****)
President/ mayor	Jacek Krywult (WJK)	Jacek Krywult (WJK)	Jarosław Klimaszewski (KO)

Source: *Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza* (2024)..

\* *KW Wyborców Jacka Krywulta* (WJK); \*\* *KW Wyborców Grażyny Staniszewskiej*; \*\*\* *Niezależni BB* (NBB); \*\*\*\* *Okrzesik i Niezależni BB* (OiNBB); \*\*\*\*\* *Wspólnie dla Bielsko-Białej* (WdBB); \*\*\*\*\* *Klub Radnych Jarosława Klimaszewskiego* (KRJK).

Another respondent confirmed that “local governments [in the Silesian province] are enclaves of democracy” ([Transcript of interview with R30, 2023](#)).

Experts’ assessment of the state of local and regional democracy varied depending on the criteria they considered most important. Most respondents assessed the state of democracy in the Silesian voivodeship positively. In their reasoning, they primarily referred to the ability to freely choose among the candidates, often contrasting it with the previous system. Another issue that was assessed positively was the decentralisation of power. One of the councillors highlighted the development of civil society as a key criterion, noting that the overall state of democracy in the Silesian voivodeship had steadily improved since the idea of the participatory budgeting was implemented in

2013. One expert cautioned that although the overall picture of the state of democracy may appear positive, any assessment should also consider the presence of deeply rooted negative phenomena such as nepotism and corruption.

Democracy was conceptualised in a specific way in the study. We adopted indicators drawn from both the liberal/electoral model and the participatory and deliberative models of democracy. In this context, the following section presents more detailed findings concerning the state of local/regional democracy in the Silesian voivodeship.

### 3.2.1 *Components of electoral and liberal democracy*

*Elections:* The first discussed issue is the freedom of choice and competitiveness. At both the voivodeship level and in the selected cities, elections were held in accordance with the established electoral calendar. An examination of the period 2010–2023 revealed no serious irregularities related to the process of organising and conducting elections, informing about candidates or publishing the results (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, Bielsko-Biała, Częstochowa, Gliwice, Katowice, 2010–2023). Instances of breaches of electoral silence and inconsistencies in election protocols were isolated. In 2014, problems with IT software, which were experienced nationwide, prolonged the vote-counting process and delayed the announcement of the results of the local elections (Lyubashenko, 2017, pp. 217–218; Michalak & Zbieranek, 2015, pp. 9–30; Partyła, 2014).

In the elections to the *Sejmik* in the Silesian voivodeship and to the city councils in Katowice, Częstochowa, Gliwice and Bielsko-Biała, residents could cast their votes for candidates from various electoral committees. The lists of candidates were publicly available. Some authors, such as Adam Gendźwiłł (2020, p. 210), highlight the shortcomings in the competitiveness of local elections, attributing them to the small number of local elites. However, the findings from the IDIs suggest that full picture of the situation requires greater attention to issues related to representation. The key issue was the use of the incumbent advantage, which restricted access to power for new candidates. This phenomenon may be described as the consolidation of power and resources, particularly financial, by local authorities. Depending on the situation of individual cities, this power was concentrated either in the hands of the major political parties or local committees. They often reinforced their control by building networks of social influence (Transcript of interview with R28, 2023). This topic will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections of this chapter.

*Media:* During the period under analysis, a significant part of local media was managed by local authorities. This allowed them to present information about their activities in a favourable light. As one respondent said,

The authorities in the city have these tools in the form of advertisements placed in a given publication or support for certain tasks commissioned

also in the media, mainly announcements, which makes it easier to access the media than the opposition, which doesn't have such an option. (Transcript of interview with R29, 2023)

Another issue was that local authorities also acted as clients commissioning publications in the media. Therefore, the financial condition of media outlets depended on the relationship between the editorial office and the ruling majority or city president. In such cases, financial pressure, though not always explicitly stated, acted as an incentive to avoid antagonising decision-makers and thus ensure financial stability. One of the interviewed experts said:

(...) There's a problem of buying advertisements in newspapers with the use of public money. (...) The president uses money from the city budget, from promotion, he buys pages in newspapers and these newspapers agree with him that if he buys a big page every month, they won't write anything about him.

(Transcript of interview with R28,2023)

One FGI respondent also noted:

In Bielsko-Biała, the largest newspaper is the one published by the city hall, which is registered as a newspaper, but in reality, it's the city hall propaganda. Information is when the position of the party protesting against some investment is also included. But there, everything looks great and beautiful. (...) We have a local radio station, the only one where for years it has been a practice that it's live on the radio, and they go there and record it in advance so that it looks nice. They cannot do it otherwise, because concerts organised by city institutions are advertised.

(Transcript of FGI I, 2022)

Experts also emphasised the important role of social media. On the one hand, residents could respond quickly via the Internet, posting their comments on individual decisions made by the authorities. This made it possible to express different perspectives, views and opinions (Transcript of interview with R31, 2023). On the other hand, the blurring of responsibility due to online anonymity and the widespread presence of fake news on the Internet shouldn't be underestimated.

*NGOs:* Another component of liberal democracy is the presence and freedom of operation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). According to data from GUS, the number of NGOs in the Silesian voivodeship gradually increased from 7,000 in 2010 to approximately 8,700 in 2022 (Figure 3.1).

In 2024, there were 1,773 NGOs in Katowice, 780 in Gliwice, 984 in Częstochowa and 721 in Bielsko-Biała (Klon/Jawor, 2024). The Silesian voivodeship's website provides information about opportunities for

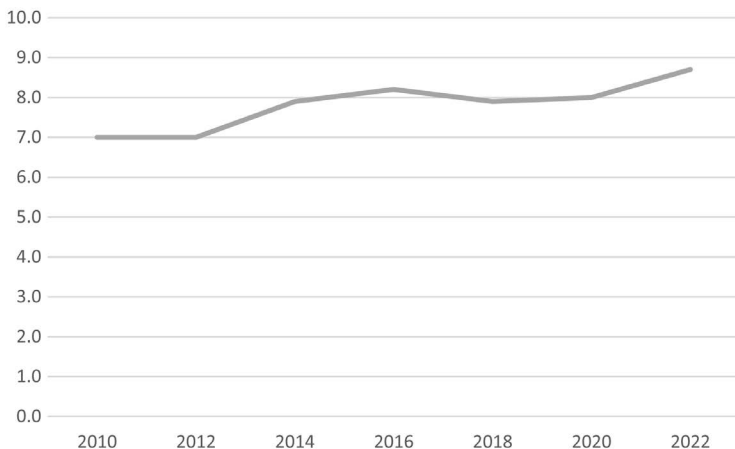


Figure 3.1 The number of NGOs (in 1,000s) – the Silesian voivodeship.

Source: Bank Danych Lokalnych Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego (2024).

cooperation between NGOs and local government in addressing socio-economic problems and meeting the collective needs of the region's inhabitants. Since 2004, the *Sejmik* has regularly published an annual cooperation programme. According to the document, local non-government organisations have the opportunity to enter competitions for the implementation of tasks in the field of education, promotion of physical culture, tourism and sightseeing, health and prevention, entrepreneurship, culture and cultural heritage; for example, 16 such competitions were organised in 2023 ([Województwo Śląskie, 2024b](#)). In 2016, a special body called the *Rada Działalności Pożytku Publicznego* (Public Benefit Activities Council) was established at the provincial level. Initially, it consisted of one representative of the voivode, five representatives of the *Sejmik*, six representatives of the *marszałek* and fifteen representatives of NGOs. In 2019, these proportions changed: the council was composed of one representative of the voivode, three representatives of the *Sejmik*, three representatives of the *marszałek* and seven representatives of NGOs ([Rada Działalności Pożytku Publicznego Województwa Śląskiego, 2024](#)). In practice, this means that NGOs have lost their privileged position in the council.

In the analysed cities, NGO centres operated while presidents announced open competitions and provided small grants. Moreover, since 2013, NGOs from Katowice have been able to participate in a micro-grants programme for cultural projects. In 2018, a competition was organised for music grants, followed by a competition for theatre grants in 2023 ([Instytucja Kultury im. Krystyny Bochenek, 2024](#)).

The involvement of NGOs in consultation processes was assessed positively by experts. They highlighted the links between the activities of associations and the broader development of civil society. As one of local politicians said,

NGOs and associations that deal with urban space, issues related to greenery, I assess it as an element that deepens democracy (...). First of all, citizens know that they should demand urban space, common space. Secondly, they know that their opposition brings positive consequences. And thirdly, it affects the need to engage in other areas where the voice of residents is both heard and taken into account in decision-making processes.

([Transcript of interview with R31, 2023](#))

Another local politician added that “This cooperation with NGOs is at a really high level. We also outsource quite a lot of our own tasks to NGOs” ([Transcript of interview with R30, 2023](#)).

However, a representative of the local media pointed out that this phenomenon can be interpreted in different ways – public funding can reduce the independence of NGOs, He said:

I wanted to talk about NGOs, because if we were to investigate which ones are active in my city (...) then unfortunately it often turns out that these are organizations that receive grants from the office and then the question is whether they're impartial, whether they are controlled.

([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#))

*Self-government institutions. The system of checks and balances:* Another set of issues that required attention concerned the decision-making process of local government bodies, their performance and the position of the opposition. IDIs with experts did not indicate that autocratic practices observed at the central level, such as night sessions or resumption of voting, occurred at the local/regional level during the entire analysed period. Resolutions were adopted in accordance with relevant regulations and were made publicly available, including online via the *Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej*, BIP [Public Information Bulletin]. The *Sejmik* of the Silesian voivodeship and the city halls of Katowice, Gliwice, Częstochowa and Bielsko-Biała, all maintained publicly accessible BIPs. Applications for access to documents could also be submitted in person at the respective offices. As one expert noted, access to public information has improved over the years, but her observations also showed that there were still ways to avoid sharing some data. For example, her request for access to public information during an inspection, as a representative of the opposition, was rejected ([Transcript of interview with R28, 2023](#)).

The interlocutors differed in their opinions on the extent to which the opposition could participate in decision-making. Councillors from the

governing majority assessed cooperation with the opposition as satisfactory. One of them stated:

Probably 80% of draft resolutions are adopted by all councillors, so it's not that the opposition torpedoes everything. I'd be absolutely lying, that's not the case, that's why I value them very much, I value their opinion, we often talk, we meet.

(Transcript of interview with R32, 2023)

However, a representative of the opposition highlighted the superficial nature of the mechanisms used to include the opposition in the decision-making processes in the analysed cities. His experience showed that changes proposed by the opposition were rarely considered. He said:

This majority usually doesn't see the possibility of cooperation with the opposition. (...) We even have a very nicely built structure here in the council, in that we have vice-chairmen from the opposition, chairmen from the opposition.(...) We can speak within the councillors' committee, but still (...) there were no situations in which we could introduce our significant amendments. So, in fact, the opposition at the level of local government has no real influence on the policy of this local government.

(Transcript of interview with R29, 2023)

As indicated in this statement, during the analysed period, positions within committees at both the provincial level and in the selected cities were divided between representatives of different political clubs. However, attention should also be paid to the relationship between the legislative and executive branches. As shown in Tables 3.2–3.5, in most cities, the presidents came from the governing majority. Similarly, the *marszalek* was a representative of the majority in the *Sejmik*. This political situation created a fertile breeding ground for the concentration of power among incumbents and for the strengthening of the executive branch vis-à-vis the council or the *Sejmik*, whose oversight competences over presidents or the executive board led by the *marszalek* were limited. Party divisions also proved to be important in the context of cooperation between the local government and the voivode. As one respondent noted,

the voivode is from PiS, we are not from PiS, we are not from PO either, but because the voivode only approves those who are from PiS, our resolutions are often questioned. And I know that this is a nationwide trend, where the legal supervision of the voivode unfortunately finds some minor things in resolutions and questions them in this way. Increasingly often in our country, this has a political dimension.

(Transcript of interview with R30, 2023)

### 3.2.2 *Components of participatory and deliberative democracy*

Information about ongoing and completed public consultations with residents of the analysed cities in the Silesian province was publicly available online ([Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Bielsko-Biała, 2024](#); [Decydujemy razem. Gliwicka Platforma Partycypacyjna, 2024](#); [Urząd Miasta Katowice, 2024](#); [Urząd Miejski w Bielsku-Białej, 2024](#)). Councillors stated that public consultations were conducted with residents before making important decisions concerning the cities. As one councillor noted,

of course, there are public opinion surveys. They're carried out once a year. We check how residents perceive what we are currently doing, what they expect, in which direction we should go. This year, we adopted a Resolution on the City's Strategy until 2040. It was also prepared with the participation of residents, NGOs.

([Transcript of interview with R32, 2023](#))

Advisory and consultative bodies representing various social groups operated in the analysed cities, including youth and senior councils ([Table 3.6](#)). It is worth noting that Częstochowa was a pioneer in involving young people in decision-making processes. A resolution establishing the Youth City Council was adopted in 1990; its first term began in 1991 ([Urząd Miasta Częstochowa, 2024](#)). There were no women councils in any of the other cities. Petitions to establish such councils were submitted in Bielsko-Biała in 2018 and 2022 and in Katowice in 2018 and 2020 but all were rejected ([bielsko.biala.pl, 2022](#); [Jedlecki, 2020](#)).

Attention was also drawn to a noticeable trend regarding social involvement. People often became involved not to develop beneficial solutions, but to express opposition. One councillor stated that: "Negative motivation for involvement in democratic matters dominated" ([Transcript of interview with](#)

*Table 3.6* Consultation councils in the Silesian province

<i>City/council type</i>	<i>Youth council/Sejmik</i>	<i>Senior council/Sejmik</i>
<i>Voivodeship</i>	<i>X (since 2017)</i>	<i>X (since 2015)</i>
Katowice	X (since 2012)	X (since 2014)
Bielsko-Biała	X (since 2003)	X (since 2015)
Częstochowa	X (since 1991)	X (since 2014)
Gliwice	X (since 2002)	X (since 2018)

*Source:* [Decydujemy razem. Gliwicka Platforma Partycypacyjna \(2024\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Katowice \(2024\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Częstochowa \(2024\)](#); [Urząd Miejski w Bielsku-Białej. Rada Seniorów \(2024\)](#); [Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Bielsko-Biała \(2024\)](#); [Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Województwa Śląskiego \(2024\)](#).

R30, 2023). This phenomenon has become more pronounced since the pandemic and the associated lockdowns:

Today, it's very difficult to engage people in favour of something, people are generally easier to engage against something, which means that it's easier to rally people to action if they have to protest than when they have to work out some good solutions.

(Transcript of interview with R30, 2023)

Residents submitted petitions to both provincial and city authorities in the Silesian voivodeship (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). At the provincial level, the highest number was recorded in 2020. At the city level, the peak occurred in Katowice in 2022, when residents submitted over 80 petitions, significantly more than in previous years. In addition, two local referendums took place during the analysed period. On 16 September 2012, residents of Gliwice voted on the dismissal of the city's president (*Krajowe Biuro Wyborcze Delegatura w Katowicach, 2012*). In Bielsko-Biała, on 6 April 2023, residents voted on several issues: the construction of a waste incinerator in the city, funding for in vitro procedures and restrictions on car traffic in the city centre (*Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Bielsko-Biała, 2024*). Both referendums were declared invalid due to low voter turnout.

Since 2019, residents of the Silesian voivodeship have had the opportunity to submit proposals to the *Marszałkowski Budżet Obywatelski* [*Marszałek's Participatory Budgeting*]. Katowice, Częstochowa, Gliwice and

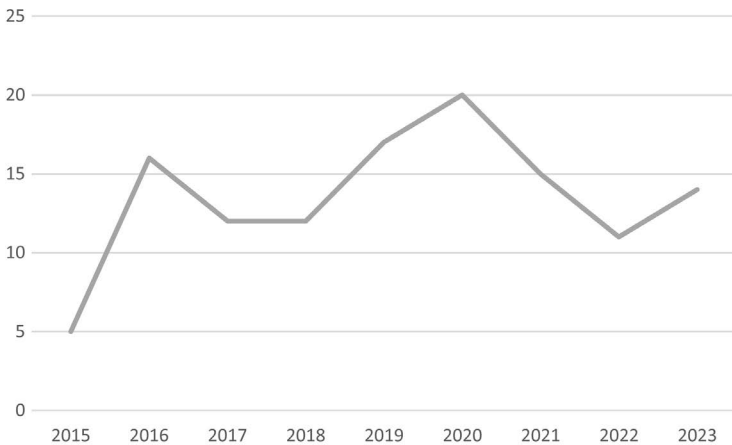


Figure 3.2 The number of petitions – the Silesian voivodeship.

Source: *Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Województwa Śląskiego* (2024).

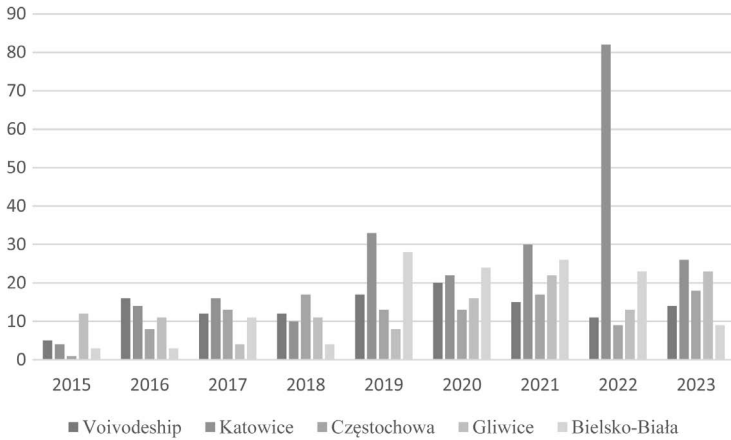


Figure 3.3 The number of petitions – the Silesian voivodeship and cities.

Source: [Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Województwa Śląskiego \(2024\)](#); [Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Bielsko-Białej \(2024\)](#); [Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Częstochowa \(2024\)](#); [Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Gliwice \(2024\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Katowice \(2024\)](#).

Bielsko-Biała, cities with district rights, have also implemented participatory budgeting for civic projects. The first edition of the participatory budgeting was introduced in Gliwice in 2013 ([Gliwicki Budżet Partycypacyjny, 2024](#)), followed by Katowice, Częstochowa and Bielsko-Biała in 2014 ([Budżet Obywatelski Bielska-Białej, 2024](#); [Budżet Obywatelski Katowice, 2024](#); [Budżet Obywatelski w Częstochowie, 2024](#)).

As shown in [Figure 3.4](#), turnout in voting for projects in participatory budgeting in Katowice and Gliwice increased over time: in Katowice, the highest number of votes was cast in 2019, in Gliwice – in 2021. In Częstochowa, the highest turnout was recorded in 2015, at the very beginning of the participatory budgeting. The situation in Bielsko-Biała was interesting - the largest number of votes was cast in 2017. In 2019, however, the number of votes decreased, possibly due to changes in the rules ([Bielsko-Biała Nasze Miasto, 2018](#)). Another drop in turnout was recorded in 2023, which the opposition attributed to the elimination of the division between city-wide and housing estate-level projects ([bielsko.info, 2024](#)). According to information from [partycypacjaobywatelska.pl \(Stokłuska, 2022\)](#), Bielsko-Biała was among the cities that suspended consultations on the participatory budgeting in 2022, citing a special act on assistance for refugees from Ukraine. In 2021, in response to growing environmental concerns, an ECO pool was added to the *Marszałkowski Budżet Obywatelski*. In Katowice, a *Zielony Budżet* [Green Budget] has been in place since 2020 ([Zielony Budżet, 2024](#)). As one respondent noted, the introduction of the

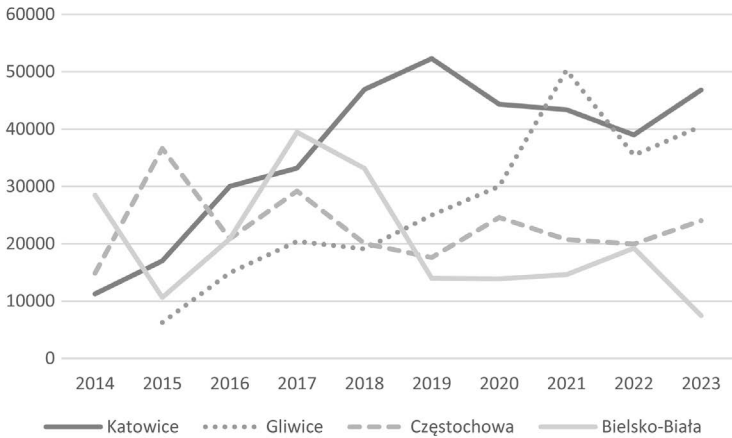


Figure 3.4 Participatory budgeting projects in Katowice, Gliwice and Częstochowa – the number of people voting.

Source: [Urząd Miasta Katowice \(2024\)](#); [Budżet Obywatelski w Częstochowie \(2024\)](#); [Decydujmy razem. Gliwicka Platforma Partycypacyjna \(2024\)](#); [Budżet Obywatelski Bielska-Białej \(2024\)](#).

In the case of Gliwice, data on participation has been available since the third edition in 2015.

*Zielony Budżet* reflected a broader trend of adopting solutions that enjoyed strong public support. He said:

We wrote a lot of green projects or interpellations and were met with either refusal or restraint. However, later, when the authorities saw that these green projects were very popular, they introduced the *Zielony Budżet*. So, this is exactly the process I'm talking about. It means that the authorities' decisions are made when they feel that it's safe, that they can introduce this change without losing the electorate or votes (...).

([Transcript of interview with R31, 2023](#))

This illustrates the potential for instrumental use of participatory budgeting in the Silesian province. The number of applications increased in 2020–2022 and declined only slightly in 2023 ([Figure 3.5](#)). There were no citizens' panels in the Silesian voivodeship between 2010 and 2023.

Another aspect of participatory and deliberative democracy is the citizens' legislative initiative. In the Silesian Voivodeship and most of the analysed cities, the possibility of submitting citizens' draft resolutions was introduced after the aforementioned Act of 11 January 2018 ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018](#)) came into force ([Uchwała II/25/2018, 2018](#); [Uchwała V/60/3/2018, 2018](#); [Uchwała VI/28/235/21, 2021](#); [Uchwała VII/128/19, 2019](#); [Uchwała XIII/289/2019, 2019](#); [Uchwała XLIV/869/2018, 2018](#)). Częstochowa was

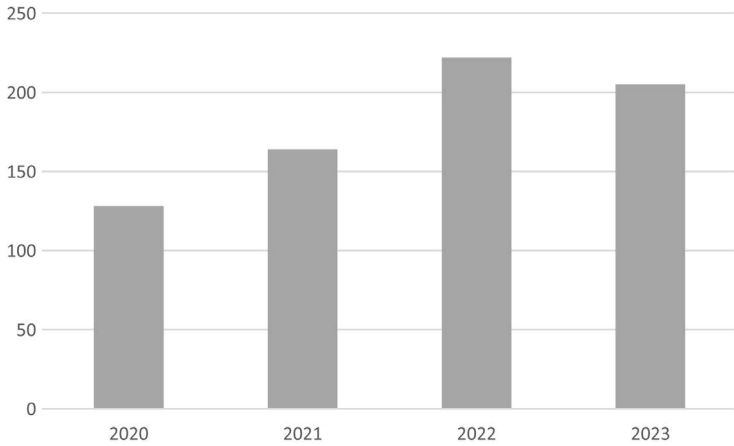


Figure 3.5 Green Budget – applications submitted in 2020–2023.

Source: [Urząd Miasta Katowice \(2024\)](#).

the only city where residents had the opportunity to submit citizens' draft resolutions earlier, having included this provision in the City Statute in 2013 ([Uchwała 579/XXXI/2013, 2013](#)). In 2021, a separate legal act concerning the citizens' legislative initiative was adopted ([Uchwała 543.XXXVIII.2021, 2021](#)). Gliwice was the only analysed city that maintained a dedicated online register of activities undertaken as part of this initiative. According to this list, six committees were established between 2019 and 2023, but only three drafts of resolutions were presented to the city council. The low popularity of this solution may be attributed to the level of effort required and the costs associated with promoting initiatives and collecting signatures in support of them by the committees.

### 3.3 The reasons behind the state of local and regional democracy

#### 3.3.1 *Impact of the national level*

It can be assumed that, despite the specific nature of decentralisation in Poland, the condition of democracy at the central level ([Bernhard, 2021](#)) may influence the developments at the local level. Both direct and indirect impacts were observed in the Silesian voivodeship in this regard.

Direct impact was seen in the concentration of seats in the *Sejmik* among the largest parties and the replication of conflicts present at the central level.

At the city level, it is also clear that where local committees enjoyed a strong position, they usually were supported by one side of the political conflict at the central level. Experts noted that these divisions and polarisation played a less prominent role at subnational territorial tiers than at the central level. However, they also acknowledged that representatives of the two largest parties, PO/KO and PiS, had expectations for the presidents of the analysed cities and animosities between them were visible. It is also worth noting that for some local government officials, involvement at the local or regional level served as the first step to a national political career. One local politician remarked:

My goal is to operate in the city. And my colleagues from the political party are probably aiming to enter the [national] parliament. (...) If they're punching each other in the face [PiS and PO/KO], we do not react, it's their business. They do it like in Warsaw, but it's their business.

([Transcript of interview with R30, 2023](#))

As a representative of the opposition pointed out, local committees were also becoming politicised, adopting characteristics similar to those of political parties. Polarisation was evident not only in competition for the city or the voivodeship assembly. In the Silesian voivodeship, the position of the voivode was held by a PiS representative throughout the period 2015–2023 ([Table 3.1](#)). According to statements from IDIs, during this time he often challenged decisions made by bodies that were not dominated by his political faction, using his authority to supervise resolutions of city councils. By questioning the compliance of these resolutions with national legislation, he was able to repeal them. These decisions were often perceived as politically motivated, confirmed view reinforced by the fact that, in many cases, the Supreme Administrative Court ultimately agreed with the councils ([Transcript of interview with R30, 2023](#)).

The central government also exerted financial influence over local governments, reducing their independence by refusing to allocate sufficient funds for the implementation of tasks. One local politician highlighted the difference between the period of PiS rule, particularly during its second legislative term, and earlier years, saying:

Local governments have never been the darlings of the government. Never. (...) There have always been this underfunding of local governments. But never on such a scale as now. (...) Never on such a scale have local governments lost such billions of zlotys as now, since the *Polski Ład* [Polish Deal – the government's economic and financial programme].

([Transcript of interview with R32, 2023](#))

Another respondent offered the following observation:

I see in this area of democracy, self-determination, self-management, self-creation, self-organisation, a big limitation arising from decisions made at the central level. They have a direct impact on financial issues, that is, as long as there is centralisation and decision-making from the central level, competences and financial resources won't be transferred to local governments; the level of democracy in this local government is getting worse and worse.

([Transcript of interview with R30, 2023](#))

Further statements indicate that the situation had already begun to deteriorate during the 2014–2018 period. It can be assumed that the further decline in recent years was influenced by objective factors, such as inflation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and then the war in Ukraine. However, decisions of the central authorities were also significant. The provisions of the *Polski Ład* (2022), which amended tax legislation, reducing the tax-free allowance and introducing tax reliefs for people under the age of 26, changed the structure of local governments' own revenues. A report by Łukasz W. Olejnik and Marcin Grygo from the Institute of Public Finance (2024) indicated that since 2015, the central government had sought to reverse the decentralisation achieved through legislation on local government in the 1990s. The authors linked these efforts to financial pressure exerted on local authorities that were associated with the opposition during the 2014–2023 period.

As previously mentioned, at the voivodeship level, the struggle for power took place between representatives of the largest Polish parties rather than local movements. Thus, the central political struggle was reproduced at the regional level and opponents were subordinated through financial pressure. As discussed in the previous chapters, local government legislation in Poland granted a wide range of powers to local authorities. However, the lack of adequate funding made it impossible to properly implement these tasks. This underfunding increased the dependence of local authorities on the central government, undermining the very principle of self-governance. This process can be described as “creeping recentralisation”. Paweł Swianiewicz (2024, pp. 318–321) characterises the rolling back of decentralisation as a threat to the position of Polish local government. Statements by experts from the Silesian voivodeship indicate that this problem was also evident in their region.

In addition, it is important to note that the central government transferred responsibility for certain tasks to local governments, which further exacerbated their financial difficulties. At the same time, in public discourse, additional tasks, even those falling outside the competence of the local government, were portrayed as its duties. Failure to fulfil them was framed as a

failure to meet the local government's obligations towards residents. This was illustrated by one respondent as follows:

Maybe this issue of coal, this coal seems to me really extreme (...) the moment when there was a shortage of coal and it was the local governments that were mobilised to supply coal. No one gave money for that and the rhetoric from the government was that if you don't have coal, it's the fault of your president.

([Transcript of interview with R28, 2023](#))

Since 2015, a conservative turn has been evident at the central level. This has resulted in the tightening of abortion laws and a deterioration in the situation of minority groups, especially sexual minorities ([Bednarek, 2021](#); [Kośmiński, 2021](#)). A clear indicator of this shift at the subnational levels was the adoption of anti-LGBT laws. These did not concern the analysed local government units; such resolutions were adopted in the Bielsk district and Istebna in 2019 ([Uchwała UVI/10/086/19, 2019](#); [Uchwała X/78/2019, 2019](#)). These laws were considered homophobic and stigmatising. They were subsequently invalidated following a judgment of the Supreme Administrative Court (14 July 2020, Istebna) and as a result of financial pressure (25 May 2023, Bielsk district).

Additionally, indirect impact was related to the eroding culture of political debate. In Poland, it is almost impossible to conduct a deliberative debate on contentious issues. As a result, there have been no discussions on ideological issues at the subnational levels. Marginalising such debates may undermine the ability of various groups of citizens to express their interests ([Horonziak, 2022](#), pp. 216–221). Several interviewed councillors mentioned the unwritten rule of avoiding so-called ideological topics as a part of discussions in city councils. As one of them said,

even if someone came up with the idea of preparing such a project, a strictly ideological resolution, I'd not put it to a vote, because we would not allow ourselves to be brought down to this level with the rank of the City Council.

([Transcript of interview with R32, 2023](#))

This suggests that the intention behind avoiding such topics was to prevent conflicts that could undermine the effectiveness of local government. However, this trend demonstrated the difficulty of engaging in meaningful debate on contentious issues and reflected the vitality of divisions at the central level.

One reaction to de-democratisation at the central level was the strengthening of local groups of influence. However, this phenomenon can be interpreted in various ways. On the one hand, a stronger local authority can introduce solutions for the benefit of its community in a more effective manner and it can also be more assertive in expressing resistance to autocratic actions at the national level.

On the other hand, there is a risk that support for the local population could be provided in a way that is inconsistent with democratic rules, for example when positions are allocated to trusted individuals, which may amount to nepotism. As one respondent commented with reference to the Silesian province,

they all cooperate together, take pictures with each other, stick together and form a group holding power (...) they do a great job, but at the same time no one else has access to power (...). And this is absolutely such a bastion against authoritarianism, you can see that local government is strong. But, on the other hand, it also creates this network – including all the wives, all the friends.

([Transcript of interview with R28, 2023](#))

According to the statement by respondent R28, it was a common practice to distribute positions according to a political scheme. In her view, this was not a new phenomenon specific to any particular political party, but rather a widespread pattern. She described it as follows:

The PO did it in a different way, in white gloves (...). In PO, there were mainly our local businessmen. These were educated people. So, if someone got a job through an acquaintance, they usually actually had an education in the relevant field. So, in general, it was like these were people who had proper knowledge. They were colleagues, right? But they generally had qualifications, while in PiS, they simply do not have qualifications.

([Transcript of interview with R28, 2023](#))

The widespread nature of political staff replacement was also highlighted by one of the councillors:

At the moment (...) after the elections and with the predominance of PiS ... I was asked to agree to join the *Rada Społeczna* [Social Council] of one of the health centres. It was interesting, because most of the people were from PiS, but there were also people from PO. After there was a volte-face at the *marszałek* in December [2023], in January I received the information that I had been removed from this Social Council. And the Council doesn't have any representative from PiS.

([Transcript of interview with R29, 2023](#))

### **3.3.2 *Impact of the local/regional level***

The Silesian voivodeship has its own distinct social and political characteristics. It is characterised by higher support for the left and the centre-right parties, trends that can also be observed in the northern and western parts of the

country. In Silesia, the regional party RAŚ has had a significant voice in local politics. This reflects a certain uniqueness rooted in the historical co-presence of communities with different national identities and affiliations. Silesia also has a long-standing tradition of local government, dating back to the Prussian period (Małota, 2020, p. 37). Moreover, the industrial character of the region contributed to the development of a strong trade union tradition. All these factors are reflected in the understanding of the need to include various groups of citizens in decision-making processes. A special case in this context is Częstochowa, where certain local initiatives to involve residents in decision-making, such as the Youth Council and the citizens' legislative initiative, preceded regulations introduced at the national level.

Due to the post-industrial nature of Silesia, the need to invest in ecological projects has also become increasingly evident. This has been reflected in the introduction of a special ecological pool within the participatory budgeting in the voivodeship and the establishment of the Katowice Green Budget (Zielony Budżet, 2024).

However, there are other issues related to the negative influence of the local level on democracy, such as the aforementioned use of the incumbent advantage. Firstly, candidate recognition was an important element in the struggle for votes, supported by their presence in the local media, on billboards, leaflets and on social media. In practice, significant inequalities were observed in access to the resources necessary to gain public recognition. This primarily concerned financial resources, but also access to media coverage and decisions providing opportunities for committees to present themselves in public spaces. Candidates affiliated with the ruling majority were often promoted even before official election campaigns through their public involvement in various initiatives. This played a particularly important role in local elections, where candidates typically receive less media exposure than politicians at the national level (Grzyb & Gendźwiłł, 2019, pp. 96–97).

Secondly, larger committees had access to money, which they used during election campaigns. The legal changes adopted in January 2018, including the introduction of a two-term limit for mayors and city presidents, guaranteed a rotation of power (Suska, 2021, pp. 258–259). However, in the Silesian province, a phenomenon emerged that can be described as the “designation of the successor” (portalsamorządowy.pl, 2017). In practice, the change of government was often only partial, as elections involved competition between the most popular, previously promoted candidates. In extreme cases, this change was even illusory. Although power was formally handed over to another person, little changed in reality due to their close connections. This was described in one interview as follows:

Yes, incumbent, there's such a word. (...) Simply, the person who is already in charge uses the tools at their disposal to continue governing. (...) So how can we talk about free and equal elections, if in fact it's possible

to create someone's character by paying for it with public money? How can someone else become a mayor or councillor if the person in charge uses municipal sources, uses events, uses city billboards? He uses the city newspaper. So, it's like they have been running an election campaign for four years before these elections.

([Transcript of interview with R28, 2023](#))

A representative of an organisation expressed a similar view during a focus group interview, saying:

For example, in Gliwice there was a change of president; for a very long time, there was one president and he nominated the person who would succeed him and that person was elected. There was no rotation, even though there were several people who wanted to run and it would have been refreshing.

([Transcript of FGI II, 2022b](#))

The majority also determined whether candidates could present themselves in public spaces. One local politician stated that local authorities showcased their own achievements in public spaces while prohibiting other political meetings there. In his view, this created a sense of inequality ([Transcript of interview with R29, 2023](#)).

### **3.4 Conclusions**

The analysis shows that between 2010 and 2023, in the selected cities in the Silesian voivodeship, there was a noticeable increase in initiatives aimed at encouraging civic engagement and involving communities in decision-making processes, for example through participatory budgeting projects and mini-grant schemes. Local authorities saw an opportunity in cooperation with local non-government organisations, assigning some tasks to them, and acknowledged the importance of conducting public consultations on various projects. There were noticeable improvements in access to public information and clearer procedures allowing residents to express their views and identities.

However, statements from respondents showed that, particularly in recent years (from the COVID-19 pandemic onwards), community involvement has often been driven by dissatisfaction, discontent with the current situation and a sense of deficiencies. At the same time, there were tendencies that could be seen as problematic for the state of local/regional democracy.

It should be noted that in recent years, de-democratisation processes at the national level had an impact on the regional government level in the Silesian voivodeship and in the cities. Most notably, a phenomenon described as creeping recentralisation emerged, driven by the central government's policies,

particularly in relation to unequal financing of local governments. This pressure increased further as new tasks were assigned to local governments, often outside the scope of their statutory competences or resulting from decisions and promises made by politicians at the central level.

The state of democracy was also influenced by growing political polarisation, which was reflected in the relationships between electoral committees and political clubs both during election campaigns and throughout legislative terms. The quality of communication between political parties at the national level had a direct impact on the nature of public debate, contributing to the avoidance of topics that were particularly divisive along party lines.

Local and regional factors also had a significant impact on the state of democracy in the voivodeship. Control over local and regional media – not only those directly published by local or regional authorities – and the ability of those in power to set the rules governing the presence of political movements and parties in public spaces influenced the electoral choices of residents. These negative tendencies also contributed to the emergence of practices such as nepotism. The research further indicates that the position of the opposition varied between cities and, in many cases, did not ensure any real influence over decision-making processes at the subnational levels.

## Note

1 In December 2012, Adam Matusiewicz resigned from his position due to the improper functioning of “Koleje Śląskie” [Silesian Railways] (Mylec, 2012).

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# 4 Lublin Voivodeship

## 4.1 Introduction – Brief overview of the case

This section provides an overview of the Lublin voivodeship and the selected cities of Lublin, Biała Podlaska, Chełm and Zamość. It offers a brief description of each case to clarify the rationale behind their selection for the analysis. It also provides the essential contextual background for the sections that follow.

### 4.1.1 Geographical and demographic data

The Lublin voivodeship, located in eastern Poland near the Ukrainian border, spans 25,122 km<sup>2</sup> and had a population of about 2 million in 2022, with 46.4% living in urban areas. It ranks as the third-largest voivodeship by area and ninth by population in Poland ([Rocznik Statystyczny Województwa Lubelskiego, 2023](#)).

This analysis focuses on Lublin (328,000 inhabitants), the regional capital, along with Zamość (62,000), Biała Podlaska (59,000) and Chełm (56,000). These cities reflect the province's diversity, comprising one large city and three mid-sized towns, each with distinct political and governance dynamics.

### 4.1.2 Political data

Local elections to the Lublin *Sejmik* (2010–2023) revealed a dynamic political landscape, with Law and Justice (PiS) consistently leading in both votes and seats, followed by PSL, PO and the Left. Despite this, PSL and PO formed ruling coalitions from 2010 to 2018, preventing PiS from securing the *marszałek's* office. This changed in 2018 when PiS won 17 out of 33 seats, gaining a majority and appointing the *marszałek*.

Executive power in the Lublin voivodeship generally mirrored the national political balance, fostering cooperation. One exception was the period from 2014 to 2018, marked by tensions between PSL's *marszałek* Sławomir Sosnowski and PiS's voivode Przemysław Czarnek. After 2018, PiS held both

Table 4.1 Overview of the political landscape in the Lublin voivodeship (regional level)

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
<i>Sejmik</i> (Voivodeship Assembly) – division of seats (33 seats in total)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 11 Civic Platform (PO) – 9 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 9 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 4	Law and Justice (PiS) – 13 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 12 Civic Platform (PO) – 7 SLD Left Together – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 18 Civic Coalition (KO) – 7 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 7 SLD Left Together – 1
<i>Sejmik</i> – governing majority	PSL-PO	PSL-PO	PiS
Head of Executive ( <i>marszałek</i> )	Krzysztof Hetman/ Sławomir Sosnowski (PSL)	Sławomir Sosnowski (PSL)	Jarosław Stawiarski (PiS)
Voivode	2007–2011 Genowefa Tokarska (PO) 2011–2014 Jolanta Szołno-Koguc (PO)	2015 Wojciech Wilk (PO) 2015–2018 Przemysław Czarnek (PiS)	2018–2019 Przemysław Czarnek (PiS) 2019–2023 Lech Sprawka (PiS)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2010, 2014, 2018).

positions, aligning regional and central governance, which facilitated political agreements. The composition of the Lublin *Sejmik* mirrors national political trends, with PO, PiS, PSL and the Left dominating and replicating national divisions (Table 4.1).

Local politics in the region was diverse, with multiple electoral committees and varied election outcomes. Local candidates often outperformed those affiliated with major parties, reflecting distinct political preferences across municipalities.

Local elections in Lublin and the medium-sized cities of Biała Podlaska, Zamość and Chełm showed varied dynamics and relatively high voter turnout – around 49% in 2010 and 2014, rising to 51% in 2018 (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2010, 2014, 2018). While some cities experienced frequent leadership changes, Lublin remained stable, with Krzysztof Żuk winning three consecutive elections (in 2010, 2014 and 2018). His influence shaped the city council's dynamics, leading to a 2012 split within the PiS councillors' club and the formation of Common Lublin (*Wspólny Lublin*), which cooperated with Żuk and PO (Table 4.2).

During the analysed period, a different, much less stable political situation unfolded in Biała Podlaska (Table 4.3), a city in the north-eastern part of the Lublin voivodeship. Each election in this city produced a new president, while PiS and PO (KO) gradually consolidated power in the city council, reducing the representation of smaller parties.

Table 4.2 The political situation in Lublin

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (31 in total)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 16 (since 2012 – 6) Civic Platform (PO) – 14 Since 2012: Common Lublin – 9 Non-affiliated (SLD) – 1	Civic Platform (PO) – 15 Law and Justice (PiS) – 13 Wspólny Lublin (Common Lublin) – 3	KWW Żuk (Electoral Committee of a Candidate for the Office of City President) – 19 Law and Justice (PiS) – 12
Council – governing majority	PO + Wspólny Lublin (Common Lublin)	PO + Wspólny Lublin (Common Lublin)	KWW Żuk (Electoral Committee of a Candidate for the Office of City President)
President	Krzysztof Żuk (Non-affiliated/ PO)	Krzysztof Żuk (PO)	Krzysztof Żuk (PO)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2010, 2014, 2018).

Table 4.3 The political situation in Białą Podlaska

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (23 in total)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 7 Civic Platform (PO) – 5 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 5 Self-government Action (local committee) – 4 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 1 Our City Common Good (local committee) – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Platform (PO) – 5 Self-government Action (local committee) – 4 SLD Left Together – 2 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 1	Law and Justice (PiS) – 11 Civic Coalition (KO) – 9 “Biała Self-government” (local committee) – 3
Council – governing majority	PO, SLD and local committee	PiS and local committee	KO and local committee
President	Andrzej Czapski (non-affiliated)	Dariusz Stefaniuk (PiS)	Michał Litwiniuk (KO)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2010, 2014, 2018).

Biała Podlaska illustrates how presidents without strong political backing must navigate cooperation in a fragmented city council. Andrzej Czapski (independent, 2010–2014) cohabited with a PO-PSL coalition, followed by Dariusz Stefaniuk (PiS, 2014–2018) and Michał Litwiniuk (PO, 2018–2023). Each adopted pragmatic strategies, with Litwiniuk appointing a PiS deputy in 2018 to maintain national-level cooperation and secure funding.

A different political situation emerged in Chełm (Table 4.4), a city in the eastern part of the Lublin voivodeship. Agata Fisz (SLD) governed Chełm from 2010 to 2018, leading the local committee Back Chełm, which brought together various political groups. This reflected a broader trend of candidate-centred committees downplaying party ties. In 2018, Jakub Banaszek (Agreement, a PiS ally) won an unexpected victory despite the presence of an SLD-dominated council. In 2021, he renounced his party affiliation, citing the need for nonpartisan local governance (PAP, 2021).

In Zamość (Table 4.5), a city located in the southern part of the voivodeship, Marcin Zamoyski, a nonpartisan descendant of the city's founder, served as president from 2002 to 2014, governing alongside a fragmented city council and facing contentious cohabitation. In 2014, he narrowly lost to PiS candidate Andrzej Wnuk. Wnuk's first term also required cooperation with an

Table 4.4 The political situation in Chełm

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (23 in total)	The Agata Fisz (SLD) Back Chełm Committee – 9 Civic Platform (PO) – 7 Law and Justice (PiS) – 4 Polish Peasant Party – 1 Association “Development and Democracy” (local committee) – 2	The Agata Fisz (SLD) Back Chełm Committee – 8 Law and Justice (PiS) – 6 Civic Platform (PO) – 5 Polish Peasant Party – 4	The Agata Fisz (SLD/Lewica) Back Chełm Committee – 8 Law and Justice (PiS) – 8 Civic Coalition (KO) – 5 Polish Peasant Party – 2
Council – governing majority	Local committees Back Chełm + Association Development and Democracy	Local committees Back Chełm + PSL	PiS (minority)
President	Agata Fisz (SLD)	Agata Fisz (SLD)	Jakub Banaszek (PiS, since 2021 as non-affiliated)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2010, 2014, 2018).

Table 4.5 The political situation in Zamość

<i>Body/authority – date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (23 in total)	Law and Justice (PiS) – 8 SLD – 4 Civic Platform (PO) – 6 The Marcin Zamoyski Committee (local committee) – 5	Law and Justice (PiS) – 10 Civic Platform (PO) – 4 The Marcin Zamoyski Committee (local committee) – 5 The Jerzy Nizioł Committee (local committee) – 4	Law and Justice (PiS) – 9 The Andrzej Wnuk Committee) – 4 The Marta Pfeifer Committee (local committee) – 4 KO (local committee) – 6
Council – governing majority President	PO – with support of local committees Marcin Zamoyski (non-affiliated, with support of PO)	PiS – with support of local committees Andrzej Wnuk (non-affiliated, with support of PiS, since 2017 member of Jarosław Gowin’s Agreement)	PiS – with support of local committees Andrzej Wnuk (PiS)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2010, 2014, 2018).

opposition-dominated council. Re-elected with PiS support, he later secured a majority through a combination of councillors from his own committee and PiS.

## 4.2 The state of local and regional democracy in the Lublin voivodeship in 2010–2023

This section presents the findings from an in-depth assessment of the state of local and regional democracy in the Lublin voivodeship between 2010 and 2023.

Local and regional democracy in the Lublin voivodeship reflects national trends, with a generally positive assessment contrasting with increasingly critical views of national democracy. While subnational reforms remain crucial for democratic consolidation (Regulski, 2003; Sześciło, 2018), detailed analyses point to a number of concerns and dysfunctions. Increasing politicisation of regional politics, particularly at the voivodeship level, has introduced national-style party rivalry and more aggressive election campaigns (O’Dwyer & Stenberg, 2022; Sidor et al., 2017, p. 213). However, there was limited evidence of significant political polarisation at the local level. As one respondent noted: “This local and regional elite intermingles. There are sometimes jabs or disputes, but it’s not a real fight at the local-regional level. The polarisation at the central level doesn’t translate here; it’s not observed” (Transcript of interview with R23, 2023).

At the same time, attention was drawn to the increasing professionalisation of local and regional government politics, which can contribute to the weakening of genuine self-governance and grassroots social engagement ([Transcript of interview with R24, 2023](#)).

This section is structured into two distinct parts. The first focuses on the core components of electoral and liberal democracy. The second examines the selected mechanisms of local and regional democracy, with an emphasis on participatory and deliberative models.

#### **4.2.1 Components of electoral and liberal democracy**

*Elections:* No significant violations of the law or irregularities in the electoral process were generally observed in local and regional government elections. The relevant legal frameworks included legal acts concerning elections to legislative and executive bodies from 1998 and 2002 for the 2010 elections; the Electoral Law of 5 January 2011 for the 2014 and 2018 elections ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 2002](#); [Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 1998; 2011](#)). The number of electoral protests in regional and local elections was relatively low ([Kielin-Maziarz, 2023](#)). Those related to elections in the region fell into five main categories of complaints: the use of complex “booklet-style” ballots, the lack of voting instructions, the counting of invalid votes, allegations of “zero votes” (cases where voters claimed their votes were not recorded for a candidate), vote-buying practices (such as exchanging votes for alcohol in Zamość) and lengthy vote-counting processes ([Adamaszek, 2015](#)).

Local elections were affected by issues such as unequal competition and electoral malpractices. Firstly, electoral laws tended to favour political organisations, reducing the presence of local committees ([Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2012](#)). The political framework also often restricted the formation of independent committees, limiting grassroots initiatives and reducing competition. A local politician and activist from Lublin stated: “The current political set-up made forming independent electoral committees practically impossible, depriving local activists of the opportunity to build competitive grassroots structures” ([Transcript of interview with R27, 2024](#)).

Secondly, term limits were only introduced in 2018 to encourage alternation in power; however, long tenures remained common: for example, the president of Lublin’s served throughout the entire period ([Table 4.2](#)). The prolonged tenure of subnational authorities contributed to reduced electoral competition. This was highlighted by one Focus Group Interview respondent, who also referred to the domination of the main parties, saying:

We have less competitiveness even though we have PiS and PO as two opposing poles. However, in Lublin, a PO-affiliated president has been in power for years, even though the Lublin region is more associated with PiS. For years, PiS has struggled to put forth a strong candidate, and there

are rumours that this arrangement is convenient for them. Furthermore, I now observe a warming of relations between PiS at the regional level and PO at the local level, which reduces competitiveness. Additionally, in Lublin, smaller parties practically don't exist at this point.

([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#))

Thirdly, the key challenges in the electoral process lie in the advantages held by incumbents ([Bartnicki, 2017](#); [Mazurkiewicz, 2021](#)). These included access to public resources for self-promotion, media manipulation and the ability to leverage relationships with local businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A common pre-election tactic involved announcing or inaugurating infrastructure projects, as seen in Lublin with promises such as a speedway stadium or a bid for the European Capital of Culture. One respondent described this as “not nepotism or corruption, but a form of buying future voters” ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)). Other strategies included forming pre-election alliances focused more on securing council seats than building future coalitions, as well as agreements between party representatives regarding the post-election allocation of positions in local government and municipal companies ([Bartnicki, 2019](#)).

*Media:* Local and regional media in the Lublin voivodeship faced both political pressure and financial difficulties during the analysed period. While media pluralism was formally guaranteed by law, a number of weaknesses in local/regional media freedom could be observed in practice.

Major regional newspapers in the Lublin voivodeship included *Dziennik Wschodni* and *Kurier Lubelski* (Polska Press). The latter was perceived as sympathetic to the provincial and city authorities of Lublin ([Transcript of interview with R24, 2023](#)). The regional media landscape was further supplemented by local editions of the nationwide *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Agora), which was aligned with political parties such as PO and the Left. Meanwhile, regional television and radio stations, including TVP3, *Telewizja Lublin* and *Radio Lublin*, formed part of the public media system and operated under the influence of the central government ([Wiejak, 2023](#)). In addition, local newspapers such as *Tygodnik Zamojski* and *Gazeta Chelmska* were active in individual cities.

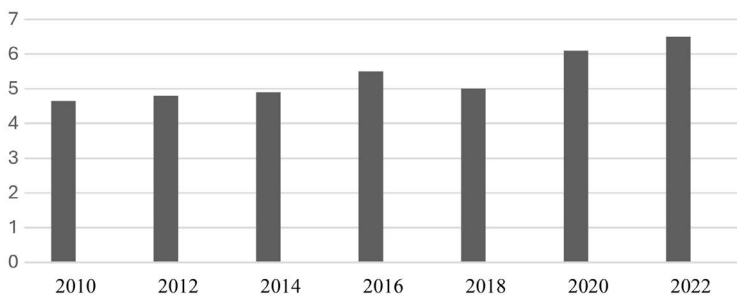
The turning point in the regional and local media system in the province was shaped by two key events. The first, of nationwide significance, was the takeover of Polska Press by the state-owned company PKN Orlen. This also affected the newspaper *Kurier Lubelski*, resulting in the imposition of a uniform, pro-government editorial line ([Glusman, 2014](#)). The second, of regional and local significance, was the purchase of the newspaper *Dziennik Wschodni* by a private entrepreneur, a property developer closely connected to the president of Lublin. This acquisition led to major editorial changes and the dismissal of independent journalists who had been critical of local authorities and the developer lobby ([Brzuszkiewicz, 2020, 2021](#); [Transcript of interview with R23, 2023](#)).

In 2023, the regional website *Jawny Lublin*, founded by the Freedom Foundation, was recognised as the only independent outlet providing constructive criticism of policies at both the municipal and regional levels ([Transcript of interview with R25, 2023](#), R27, 2024).

The local media landscape was further influenced by municipal press outlets, which primarily served as information tools but often promoted the perspectives of local authorities, pushing propaganda rather than presenting alternative viewpoints. A recurring challenge involved unequal access to public information. Independent journalists reported that pro-municipal media received preferential treatment, gaining faster and easier access to information, while independent outlets had to pursue such data actively and often repeatedly ([Gajdos, 2022](#)). Local governments also resorted to legal actions against critical journalists. For instance, in 2018, *Tygodnik Zamojski* faced a lawsuit after reporting on financial decisions made by the president of a municipal company, resulting in a court injunction prohibiting further coverage ([Brzuszkiewicz, 2022](#)). Similarly, in 2022, a journalist who reported on alleged false statements by PiS-affiliated president Andrzej Wnuk was ordered by a court to issue an apology, even though subsequent investigations confirmed the allegations ([Brzuszkiewicz, 2023](#)).

In smaller cities such as Biała Podlaska, Chełm and Zamość, independent media faced difficulties in sustaining their presence due to limited resources compared to those available to state-affiliated or municipally controlled outlets ([Transcript of interview with R24, 2023](#)).

*NGOs:* Approximately 6,500 NGOs operate in the Lublin voivodeship ([Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2022](#)). This number increased slightly over the analysed period ([Figure 4.1](#)). However, a major weakness of NGOs in this region was the significant fragmentation of civic groups, which resulted in their underrepresentation in interactions with local government administration ([Arczewska & Dudkiewicz, 2019](#)). Moreover, the limited presence of the NGO sector in social oversight bodies and the reluctance of local/regional



*Figure 4.1* The number of NGOs – the Lublin voivodeship (in 1,000s).

*Source:* [Główny Urząd Statystyczny \(2022\)](#).

authorities to consult civil society organisations when drafting legal acts restricted their influence on decision-making processes regarding civic matters (Dec, 2009).

Most NGOs were concentrated in the metropolitan area of Lublin, accounting for nearly one-third of all such organisations in the region. The city also demonstrated the highest level of engagement in cooperation with the third sector.

An analysis of official data available on the Lublin city council's website suggests a high level of openness to cooperation with NGOs and adherence to the principle of pluralism. To enhance transparency, Lublin incorporated public consultations into its annual programme for supporting civil society organisations (Program współpracy, 2023). However, insights from interviews revealed a less uniformly positive picture of this cooperation (Balaban, 2017). One concern raised by respondents was the practice of co-opting local leaders and activists, particularly those in opposition to or critical of local authorities, by offering them positions within municipal structures or administrative offices (Transcript of interview with R23, 2023). Respondents also highlighted the risks associated with financial and organisational support from local authorities, noting that such patronage could undermine the autonomy of NGOs and weaken their capacity to provide effective social oversight of municipal administration (Bogacz-Wojtanowska & Meisel-Dobrzański, 2017; Transcript of interview with R25, 2023). One interviewee emphasised that “without external funding independent of the government and local authorities, we would not have this pluralism” (Transcript of interview with R27, 2024).

*Self-government institutions. The system of checks and balances:* The introduction of direct elections for executive bodies in municipalities led to the growing dominance of presidents in the analysed cities. One FGI participant from the region explained:

The problem, particularly visible in metropolitan cities, is that over many years, certain fiefdoms or kingdoms have been created, where the president wields significant power, while city councils are of little importance. Presidents have been in office for many years, hold substantial power, and control appointments. This results in situations where, for example, in Lublin, the influence of ruling presidents outweighs that of political parties, and changes are rare.

(Transcript of FGI II, 2022)

Lublin illustrates how long-term incumbency reshaped the president's role and relations with the city council. Over successive terms, Żuk weakened party loyalty, forming a non-party support group through political bargaining and exchanges of benefits.

During his successive terms in office, Żuk built a strong political base, weakening both PO and PiS. He formed a cross-party bloc, Common Lublin,

often referred to as the “Lublin arrangement” (Transcript of interview with R24, 2023). By 2018, the relationship between the executive and legislative branches shifted from cohabitation (2010–2018) to “municipal presidentialism” (Pokladecki, 2014, p. 297), with Żuk dominating local governance and increasingly marginalising the city council (Transcript of interview with R23, 2023).

When mayors/presidents lacked a majority in the city council, various forms of cohabitation emerged, ranging from peaceful cooperation to open conflict (Sidor et al., 2017). Political conflicts between the executive and legislative branches often disrupted local governance (Dzieniszewska-Naroska, 2016). This was the case in Biała Podlaska and Zamość between 2010 and 2014, when the executive branch faced either an opposition majority or a highly fragmented council. In-depth interviews also frequently pointed to informal arrangements between major political parties that helped entrench the *status quo* in some cities (Transcript of interview with R27, 2024).

Relations between city authorities and the voivodeship government in the Lublin province were generally characterised by a compromise-seeking approach, even when these bodies were controlled by opposing political majorities. As one respondent noted:

During the previous term [2010-2014], it was simpler because the Voivodeship Assembly and the city government were controlled by the same political faction. Today, Lublin is governed by the Civic Coalition [KO], while the Voivodeship Assembly is led by PiS. This naturally creates potential for conflict, though in practice, both sides seem to cooperate effectively at the administrative level, finding compromises when necessary.

(Transcript of interview with R26, 2023)

However, the nature of these relationships was determined not only by party affiliation but also by local/regional arrangements, including personal and business connections. Another respondent highlighted this issue as follows:

The previous voivode, Czarnek, had significant conflicts with the current president. However, the current voivode, also from PiS, has a more conciliatory approach, likely influenced by personal ties [...]. This has reduced criticism of the president and decreased scrutiny over city council resolutions.

(Transcript of FGI I, 2022)

#### **4.2.2 Components of participatory and deliberative democracy**

*Traditional mechanisms:* Between 2010 and 2023, 19 local referendums were held in the Lublin voivodeship, including one on the dismissal of a municipal council, 12 on the dismissal of executive authorities and 6 on other matters.

There were no referendums on local self-taxation (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2023).

A notable example was the 2019 Lublin referendum on the spatial development of the Górkki Czechowskie (Czechowskie hills) area. Although 67.7% of voters opposed the proposed development plan, turnout reached only 12.97%, falling short of the 30% threshold required for the result to be binding (Domagała, 2019b). Consequently, the outcome had no impact on municipal decision-making, prompting environmental organisations and residents to criticise the authorities for disregarding the public's expressed will (Domagała, 2019a). This case also reflected the broader trend of low participation in local referendums. The absence of binding outcomes often allowed local authorities to arbitrarily interpret the residents' preferences, undermining trust in the institution. One local activist was particularly critical of this: "Since the Górkki Czechowskie referendum, this instrument has not been used because the failure of that referendum was so significant that attempts to revive it have been futile" (Transcript of interview with R27, 2024).

Another participatory tool is the institution of petitions, which was used between 2010 and 2023 at both the voivodeship and local levels (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). While data indicates relatively low public interest in petitions, some cities have seen a gradual increase in their use.

An examination of the analysed cities in the Lublin region reveals varying patterns in the use of petitions (Figure 4.3). They are most frequently submitted in Lublin, both to the president and the city council. However, the trend was inconsistent over time. Regarding the outcomes, most responses involved the routine provision of information related to the issues raised.

The number of petitions fluctuated over time. A slight increase in public interest could be observed in subsequent years, but the overall experience with the use of petitions was less than promising due to limited effectiveness

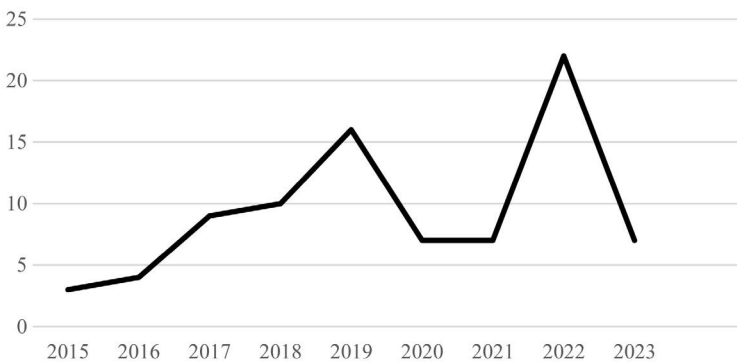


Figure 4.2 The number of petitions – the Lublin voivodeship (*Sejmik + marszałek*).

Source: Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Lubelskiego w Lublinie (2024).

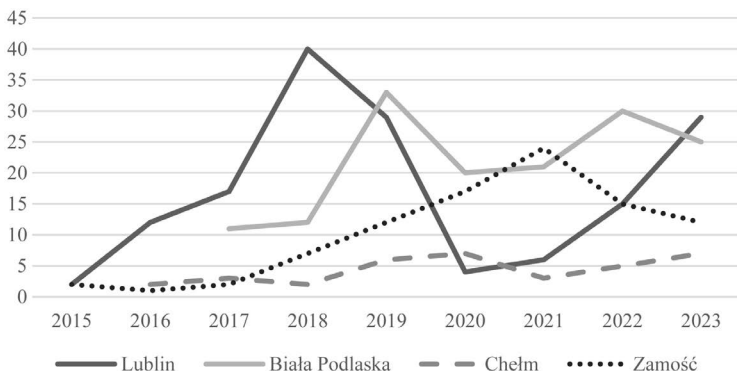


Figure 4.3 The number of petitions in the selected cities (council + president).

Source: *Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej w Lublinie*, *Petycje* (2024); *Urząd Miasta Chełm*, *Petycje złożone do Prezydenta Miasta Chełm* (2024); *Urząd Miasta Zamość* (2024); *Serwis Urzędu Miasta Biała Podlaska*, *Petycje* (2024).

and an unresponsive attitude from the authorities. Until now, petitions have largely had a de-mobilising effect, discouraging residents from submitting new ones (*Transcript of interview with R23, 2023*).

*Other mechanisms:* Beyond traditional forms of local democracy, innovative tools such as participatory budgeting have gained prominence (Dąbrowska, 2024; Górąj, 2023). Introduced in Lublin in 2013 as an experimental, voluntary initiative, participatory budgeting later expanded and evolved. Legal reforms introduced by the Act of 11 January 2018 (Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018) made participatory budgeting mandatory for cities with district rights, with decisions becoming legally binding (Kociuba & Bielecka, 2021; Sroka & Podgórska-Rykała, 2021; Sześciło, 2018).

In the Lublin voivodeship, a Regional Participatory Budgeting (RBO) was proposed in 2019, with plans to implement it in 2020 and an allocation approximately 3 million PLN. However, the project was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic and has not been implemented in subsequent years (*Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Lubelskiego, 2024*).

Meanwhile, several cities in the region, particularly Lublin, have a relatively long history of implementing participatory budgeting. In 2023, the city organised its 10th edition of the participatory budgeting, with record participation from 34,000 residents (15% of eligible voters), compared to 17,600 in 2022 and 18,000 in 2021. Participation in most editions ranged around 17,000, representing 7–8% of eligible voters (*Budżet partycypacyjny Lublina, 2024*). This relatively high level of engagement reflected a rising trend over the past few years. Despite this, some criticism remained, particularly from residents who felt that the instrument allowed for only minor investments in

their neighbourhoods and the city as a whole ([Transcript of interview with R27, 2024](#)).

Other cities in the region (incomplete data - no figure) experienced declining participation in participatory budgeting. For instance, in Chełm, voter turnout dropped from 3,000 in 2021 to 1,800 in 2023. Similarly, the number of submitted projects decreased from 107 in 2021 to 43 in 2023 ([Budżet partycypacyjny Chełma, 2024](#)). Despite a stronger legal framework, public engagement in participatory budgeting remained uneven and often declined, indicating the need for further reforms ([Brol & Derlukiewicz, 2023](#)).

A local politician and activist emphasised the mixed evaluations of urban participatory budgeting:

If you ask members of the Lublin Urban Movement, they'll say it's a complete facade and fiction. If you ask some district council representatives linked to the Civic Platform, they'll say it works. As for me, I'm critical of the participatory budgeting model in Lublin; I believe it doesn't fulfil its purpose.

([Transcript of interview with R27, 2024](#))

In addition to the standard participatory budgeting, Lublin introduced School Participatory Budgeting (SBO) in 2021 and a Green Participatory Budgeting (ZBO) in 2017. The ZBO has since become a key component of Lublin's participatory strategy ([Kozłowski, 2019](#)).

Additional deliberative mechanisms, such as local consultations, were also implemented in the region in the analysed period, as provided for by the Local Government Act of 1990 and the Regional Government Act of 1998 ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 1990, 1998](#)). These consultations were mandatory for matters such as boundary changes, spatial development plans and environmental investments ([Regulski, 2003](#)). Although intended to enhance legitimacy and foster consensus on contentious issues, consultations were often perceived as symbolic or co-opted by local interest groups. Respondents pointed to low public awareness of consultations, arbitrary handling of their outcomes and insufficient efforts by municipal authorities to inform and engage residents ([Transcript of interview with R23, 2023, R24, 2023](#)). Nonetheless, certain institutional changes, such as the establishment of social consultation offices in city halls, demonstrated efforts to support these processes, though the broader challenges related to consultation culture remained unresolved.

Local governments in the Lublin voivodeship established consultative bodies for specific groups, such as youth, seniors and women ([Table 4.6](#)). Lublin's Youth Council (established in 2006), Women Forum (2013) and Senior Council (2015) were created by executive order, with a Student Council added in 2021. However, their composition was often determined arbitrarily by the authorities ([BIP Lublin, 2013](#)). For example, in Biała Podlaska, the Women's Council consisted of individuals affiliated with the president's electoral

Table 4.6 Consultative councils in the Lublin voivodeship

<i>Lublin Region or city/ council type</i>	<i>Youth council/Sejmik</i>	<i>Senior council/Sejmik</i>	<i>Women council/Sejmik</i>
Voivodeship	–	–	–
Lublin	X (since 2006)	X (since 2015)	X (since 2013)
Biała Podlaska	X (since 2004)	X (since 2014)	X (since 2024)
Chełm	X (since 2019)	X (since 2016)	X (since 2019)
Zamość	X (since 2009)	X (since 2015)	X (since 2024)

Source: [Urząd Miasta Lublin \(2024\)](#); [Miasto Chełm. Urząd Miasta \(2024\)](#); [Serwis Urzędu Miasta Biała Podlaska \(2024\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Zamość \(2024\)](#).

committee (PO), prompting criticism over the lack of representativeness of such bodies, particularly when their composition reflected partisan criteria ([Burda, 2024](#)).

The analysis of the studied cases suggests that participatory mechanisms were predominantly used instrumentally by municipal authorities ([Pomarański, 2019](#)). The primary motivation for adopting these mechanisms was self-promotion, with authorities aiming to demonstrate openness to dialogue and citizen participation in decision-making processes, which were often announced during election campaigns ([Transcript of interview with R23, 2023](#)). A secondary motivation was to legitimise decisions that had already been planned by authorities but, due to their controversial nature or importance to residents, required additional justification ([Transcript of interview with R25, 2023](#)).

An unintended consequence of such consultations may be an increase in conflicts, polarisation of opinions and growing scepticism regarding the authorities' intentions and decision-making directions, rather than enhanced legitimacy and public trust. As one respondent noted: "The Czechów Hills [subject to both a referendum and a citizens' panel recommendation] exemplify the major conflict between the president of Lublin and certain activists opposing the development plans" ([Transcript of interview with R24, 2023](#)). A municipal office employee also expressed scepticism about the value of public consultations:

Do they lead to sound substantive solutions? I wouldn't say so. Does the verification of expert opinions by the public make sense? I'm not sure. (...) Public consultations, which are obligatory, often reveal that people simply don't know what they want.

([Transcript of interview with R26, 2023](#))

The Lublin authorities organised consultations at different levels but later proceeded with their own projects. However, such an approach may, in some cases, have been justified by the pursuit of the common good, particularly

when the local authorities perceived the consultation outcomes as lacking in quality, excessively particularistic or driven by emotional reasoning ([Transcript of interview with R27, 2024](#)).

A frequent issue was the lack of adequate information about upcoming consultations ([Transcript of interview with R24, 2023](#)). In addition, consultations often focused on relatively minor issues, while key decisions continued to be made at the administrative level. This problem was aptly captured by one respondent:

On the other hand, we often see examples where the authorities consult trivial matters. For instance, in Lublin, instead of discussing whether to extend access to city bikes, the authorities decided to do so, while leaving the choice of colour to the residents.

([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#))

The new participatory mechanisms of a deliberative nature include citizens' panels ([Podgórska-Rykała, 2024](#)). Lublin was one of the few cities in Poland to implement these. The 2018 panel in Lublin addressed the critical issue of air quality and smog, a key concern in urban policy and environmental protection ([Gerwin, 2019](#)). The process involved 60 randomly selected citizens, reflecting the city's demographic structure. The panel consisted of two stages: an informational phase and a deliberative phase. Participants formulated 55 recommendations, which were then subjected to voting. Those that received at least 80% support from the panelists were granted binding status for the city authorities ([Górski, 2023](#)). By 2024, Lublin had implemented only half of the recommendations (47%), indicating ongoing challenges. The shortcomings of this instrument included the absence of mechanisms to monitor the implementation of recommendations, insufficient transparency in reporting progress and a lack of deadlines for implementing panel decisions. These limitations highlighted the need to strengthen procedural frameworks for participatory actions at the local level and to introduce evaluation mechanisms. Without such measures, public disappointment and disillusionment with participation are likely to grow ([Bałaban, 2017](#)).

A respondent from an NGO in Lublin emphasised the counterproductive nature of poorly organised participatory mechanisms: "I must protest when I hear calls to organise citizens' panels, because in Lublin, the panel was poorly managed, the referendum was mishandled, and this further discouraged people from any form of participation" ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)). One of the most contentious issues was the authorities' disregard for recommendations concerning the allocation of green spaces, specifically the Czechów Hills. As noted in the previous section, this issue was later subjected to a local referendum, which failed to produce a binding outcome due to low voter turnout. The decision to organise a local referendum after the conclusion of the citizens' panel and subsequently to ignore the referendum's outcome, despite its

alignment with the panel's recommendations, drew widespread criticism from residents. Although two different participatory instruments were employed, the main issue was the city authorities' unwillingness to engage in genuine dialogue with the public (Górski, 2023).

Another mechanism of local democracy that was strengthened after 2018 is the Citizens' Resolution Initiative, available at both the local and regional levels. The Act of 11 January 2018 extended the use of this initiative and mandated that residents be guaranteed the right to submit draft resolutions (Banat, 2020; Sześciło, 2018), alongside the implementation of specific local regulations. However, the procedural requirements associated with exercising the right to the citizens' resolution initiative remain highly formalised, which makes it difficult for residents to elaborate draft resolutions (Barczyński, 2015; Dec-Kielb, 2022).

### **4.3 The reasons behind the state of local and regional democracy**

Searching for the causes of the state of local and regional democracy requires an examination of various groups of factors. These will be analysed from two perspectives: exogenous factors, reflecting the influence of system dynamics at the central/national level, and endogenous factors, arising from local/regional specificities. In practice, when analysing the case of the Lublin voivodeship and cities within the region, it is necessary to recognise the frequent interplay between these two categories of factors.

#### **4.3.1 Impact of the national level**

The impact of democratic dynamics at the central level on the development of local and regional democracy is shaped by the establishment of legal, institutional, political and financial frameworks. However, the key aspect is the practical implementation of governance, which encompasses dynamics, local context, operating styles, political culture and social capital. In other words, it is essential to focus on "local democracy in action" (Trutkowski, 2024).

An analysis of the development of territorial self-governance between 2010 and 2023 reveals two distinct phases broadly corresponding to the periods of governance by two coalitions: PO-PSL (2010–2015) and the United Right coalition led by PiS (2015–2023). The first phase was characterised by relative adherence to the principle of decentralisation and the introduction of further elements of democratic multi-level governance (Sześciło, 2018). The second phase marked a reversal of these trends, with a gradual shift towards re-centralisation. Between 2015 and 2018, government actions increasingly focused on centralising public management, strengthening control and centralising the allocation of financial resources for tasks carried out by local governments (Sześciło, 2018, 2019). In the subsequent years (2019–2023),

partially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these tendencies were reinforced through further top-down and discretionary forms of territorial governance, particularly non-transparent and arbitrary financial transfers for development purposes (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2024; Sześciło et al., 2021). This practice was accompanied by the allocation of financial support to local governments based on political affiliation, resulting in visible disparities (Flis & Swianiewicz, 2022).

Assessing the impact of PiS governance on the state and developmental dynamics of self-governance and local democracy is inherently complex and ambiguous. During this period, new regulations were introduced to support participatory mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting, legislative initiatives and debates on municipal performance reports. These institutional changes should be evaluated positively. However, the implementation and practical application of these measures has been far less satisfactory. One of the challenges stems from the weakened financial autonomy of local governments (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2024). As local governments struggle to balance their budgets, their focus has shifted from development to survival and subsistence, leaving little space for citizen-led initiatives to take root.

On the one hand, these practices reflected PiS's programmatic vision of a strong state, expanded statism and the politicisation of various spheres of social life. On the other hand, centralisation served to strengthen the party's influence at the local level (Krysiak, 2018a). These practices drew criticism from local governments and experts, who warned of an erosion of self-governance and the introduction of dysfunctional solutions that hindered the effective execution of tasks. As a result, municipal councillors began to re-emphasise the principle of autonomy in local governance, which appeared to be increasingly threatened in recent years (Swianiewicz, 2024).

Interviewed respondents also highlighted the unequal and unjust allocation of financial resources based on party affiliations (Transcript of interview with R26, 2023, R27, 2024). The case of the Lublin voivodeship illustrates this mechanism in an extreme form. From 2015 to 2018, the Lublin voivodeship had one of the lowest levels of financial independence in the country, averaging just 30%. Consequently, it was heavily reliant on central transfers, which led to underfunding and the abandonment of development plans, investment projects and, in some cases, even basic operational tasks (Transcript of interview with R26, 2024). In 2019, a sharp increase in subsidies was observed under new support programs for local governments, such as *Sportowa Polska* [Sport Poland], the Public Transport Development Fund and the Local Roads Fund. The largest grants were allocated to municipalities in the Lublin region, a PiS electoral stronghold. The establishment of the COVID-19 Counteraction Fund (FPC) created new opportunities for financial transfers by the government. Operating outside the public sector's standard framework and fiscal rules, this state special-purpose fund was effectively controlled by the Prime Minister's Office. Through the FPC, the

*Table 4.7* Funding allocated to cities in the Lublin province from the Government Fund for Local Investments (three tranches)

<i>City</i>	<i>Party affiliation of the city president</i>	<i>Amount of funding (in million PLN)</i>	<i>Amount of funding (per capita) in PLN</i>
Chełm	PiS	52.1	858
Lublin	PO	35.7	105
Zamość	PiS	24.9	401
Biała Podlaska	PO	10.9	190

*Source:* Szemraj (2022).

government launched the Local Investments Fund (RFIL), which in practice disproportionately benefited municipalities governed by PiS affiliates, while opposition-led municipalities were overlooked (Flis & Swianiewicz, 2021, 2022; Rudka & Kocemba, 2021; Sześciło et al., 2021). For example, Chełm and Zamość received disproportionately higher allocations, while Lublin and Biała Podlaska, governed by opposition presidents, received no funding. Chełm obtained the highest amount at PLN 52 million, amounting to PLN 858 per capita, compared to Lublin’s PLN 35.7 million, or just PLN 105 per capita (Szemraj, 2022). Table 4.7 summarises these disparities.

Chełm provides a case study of “new centralism” policies. After PiS scored victory in the 2018 presidential victory in Chełm, the ruling party began presenting the city as a model of “local government under PiS” to encourage similar electoral outcomes elsewhere (Glapiak, 2021). This was echoed by one interview respondent:

For me, a classic example (...) is the city of Chełm and the investments made by the Law and Justice Party in Chełm. There is (...) a massive disparity in how Chełm, governed by a president from the Law and Justice camp or its various affiliates, is treated compared to how Biała Podlaska is treated in terms of investments.

(*Transcript of interview with R27, 2024*)

The voivode, a territorial representative of the central administration, played a significant role in the central government’s impact on local governance. The voivode had the authority to annul local decisions made by local governments, a power that could be used as a means of exerting pressure and limiting local autonomy. The politically motivated use of such practices undermined the constitutionally guaranteed principles of self-governance and broader democratic norms. These practices were particularly pronounced between 2015 and 2018, when Przemysław Czarnek (PiS) served as the voivode (*Transcript of interview with R23, 2023*). Our analysis reveals that party interests and political polarisation at the central level permeated regional and local governance structures.

As previously noted, in 2021 the state-owned company PKN Orlen acquired Polska Press, a media group comprising regional and local publishing outlets. The new ownership gained control over a significant portion of the regional and local media market, leading to various operational changes such as editorial staff reorganisations, the recruitment of new personnel and modifications to employment conditions. These developments had a detrimental impact on journalistic freedom, enabling greater political influence over editorial content, undermining the media's independence and diminishing its capacity to hold those in power to account (Nowicka et al., 2023). An example of this trend was the aforementioned *Kurier Lubelski*, a Polska Press newspaper. After the acquisition, a new editor-in-chief was appointed, a former manager at public Radio Lublin, in an apparent effort to ensure a political narrative favourable to PiS.

The increasingly conflictual atmosphere and strained relations between different institutions at the local and regional level as well as the functioning of these institutions were often overlooked by local and regional politicians, particularly in relation to the quality of debate (Transcript of interview with R23, 2023). In some cases, proposals were put to a vote without any discussion, because decisions had already been made within internal committees prior to plenary sessions (Transcript of interview with R25, 2023).

Polarisation at the central level and the politicisation of LGBT+ minority issues led local authorities to adopt a strategy of avoiding confrontation with the government's political agenda, even among officials affiliated with opposition parties. This was evident in Lublin, where president Żuk (the Civic Platform) banned the Equality March, viewing it as a potentially conflict-inducing event. Meanwhile, voivode Czarnek (2015–2018), an advocate of conservative and national values, awarded medals to local government officials for their efforts in “combating gender ideology”<sup>1</sup> and “LGBT movements” (Kozłowski, 2020; Krysiak, 2018b).

Between 2010 and 2023, the mechanisms of local and regional democracy generally expanded developed in the Lublin province. However, in many cases, their quality was gradually deteriorating. The year 2015 marked a critical turning point, coinciding with the rise to power of a coalition centred around the Law and Justice Party (PiS) at the central level. Actions undertaken by the central government, which undermined the rule of law, dismantled democratic safeguards and fostered growing polarisation, gradually affected the state of the local/regional governance system and local/regional democracy.

Political conflicts at the central level did not have a significant direct impact on the local level. However, certain elements of ideological conflict, such as issues related to LGBT+ minorities, did emerge. In addition, deteriorating standards of political competition, a “relaxed approach” to the rule of law, weakened mechanisms of accountability and the partisan allocation of financial support for local governments trickled down from the centre to the subnational levels (Transcript of interview with R23, 2023, R27, 2024).

The case of the Lublin region illustrates the “pragmatic adaptation” of local authorities to processes occurring at the central level. At the same time, endogenous factors may reinforce local phenomena and trends – both those that support democratic practices and those that contribute to dysfunction and the degradation of local democracy. Interviews also highlighted that the impact of central-level processes on cities was not uniform. Much depended on the specific characteristics of each city. For instance, respondents noted in interviews that in Lublin, the city’s academic profile contributed to sustaining democratic standards, openness and inclusivity ([Transcript of interview with R23, 2023](#), R26, 2023).

#### **4.3.2 Impact of the local/regional level**

The state of local and regional democracy in Poland has been shaped not only by national political dynamics but also by systemic conditions within the Polish subnational government. One of the most significant factors was the distinctive nature of representative democracy, characterised by the weakness of councils, particularly in comparison to the strong executive authority of municipalities. To identify the potential local and regional sources of weakened democratic mechanisms, it was crucial to highlight the risks associated with the concentration of power and resources in the hands of executive authorities within subnational governments ([Kuć-Czajkowska et al., 2017](#)). Another systemic issue was the declining role of councillors and the absence of effective accountability mechanisms ([Węglarz, 2023](#)).

Another challenge was the *de facto* lack of transparency and openness in local government operations. In practice, opposition councillors often reported limited access to information, insufficient specialised knowledge in specific areas and a reliance on materials or documentation prepared by municipal officials who were directly subordinate to the mayor ([Kuć-Czajkowska et al., 2017](#), p. 35). Interviews also highlighted concerns over opaque relationships between local government officials and representatives of local interest groups, including entrepreneurs, civil society organisations and the media ([Bogacz-Wojtanowska & Meisel-Dobrzański, 2017](#); [Skomra, 2023](#); [Transcript of interview with R26, 2023](#), R27, 2024)

Another key factor that contributed to the weakening of democratic mechanisms at the local level was the gradual reduction in electoral competition. This was reflected in a shrinking pool of candidates, unequal opportunities for challengers compared to incumbent mayors and similar deficits affecting council elections and candidates running on lists not affiliated with mayoral candidates. Limited competition in local elections, particularly in big cities, was identified as a pressing issue in both academic research ([Bartnicki, 2019](#); [Mazuś, 2024](#)) and interviews (e.g., [Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#); [Transcript of interview with R23, 2023](#)).

Furthermore, there appeared to be a specific resistance among local and regional elites to broader citizen participation in decision-making processes

concerning local and regional matters (Pomarański, 2019, p. 75; [Transcript of interview with R23, 2023](#), R25, 2023). This resistance reflected both a weak democratic political culture among local and regional elites and their limited understanding of the principles of participatory and deliberative democracy.

Finally, it is necessary to underscore the impact of the local social environment, particularly low levels of citizen participation in decision-making processes, a weak social capital and a lack of trust in public institutions (Konieczna-Salamatin, 2024; Ślarzyński, 2022). These factors created a fertile ground for dysfunctions in governance at the local and regional levels, particularly in the Lublin voivodeship.

#### 4.4 Conclusions

The case of the Lublin voivodeship and its selected cities provides a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on the evolution of local and regional democracy between 2010 and 2023. Based on the analysis, the overall assessment of the state of liberal democracy, as well as the mechanisms of participatory and deliberative democracy in the Lublin region, is generally positive, albeit with some ambiguities.

The analysis of the Lublin voivodeship and its selected cities (2010–2023) reveals a complex picture of local and regional democracy. While there were advances in decentralisation, particularly political and administrative, this did not consistently translate into democratic progress. Within the model of liberal democracy, elections were conducted without major irregularities, but electoral competition remained unequal due to regulations and systemic factors favouring major parties and incumbents. Media pluralism was maintained in quantitative terms; however, its quality and independence declined. This was partly due to the acquisition of regional weekly newspapers by Orlen after 2021 and the takeover of other press outlets by local entrepreneurs who imposed their editorial lines on newsrooms and journalists, as seen in Lublin. In the Lublin voivodeship, non-governmental organisations operated freely, and their number did not change significantly throughout the analysed period. Some benefited from financial support from local governments, but others, such as those advocating for LGBT+ rights, faced unequal treatment and occasional discrimination from institutions controlled by PiS. Executive dominance weakened councils and the political opposition, despite legislative reforms introduced in 2018 that sought to address these deficits. In the realm of participatory and deliberative democracy, mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and public consultations were developed but implemented inconsistently. Some instruments, such as referenda and citizens' panels, were rarely used. In some cases, authorities instrumentalised these tools or failed to act on their outcomes, leading to a gradual decline in citizen engagement, particularly in participatory budgeting and local/regional consultations.

During the analysed period, local and regional governments in Poland served as safeguards against far-reaching interference by the central government in subnational matters. However, mounting pressure from the centre, particularly after 2015, underscored the need to protect and strengthen the position and competences of local government units to uphold the principles of genuine local/regional democracy (Jakubek-Lalik, 2020). Throughout this period, political parties represented in parliament constantly sought to co-opt local government as part of their broader political struggles. The rhetoric employed by party representatives was often combative and divisive, framing election outcomes as the “shares” of individual parties within local governments. These dynamics were particularly evident in the Lublin voivodeship, where PiS’s enduring influence remained a defining feature across the entire region. The increasing “politicisation” of local government was a notable trend. The higher the level of local government, the greater the degree of politicisation, affecting both legislative and executive authorities (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2012). An important element of the local/regional democratic landscape was the deteriorating quality of public debate. The style of national politics and its portrayal in nationwide media heavily influenced the tone of local/regional debate. Regional and local media, often mirroring the style and rhetoric of national outlets, also contributed to the decline of public discourse. The radicalisation of public debate, particularly during election campaigns, was evident from 2010 and became more pronounced after 2015. The quality of this debate directly impacted electoral engagement and, by extension, the broader interest in local governance.

However, the state of local and regional democracy was influenced not only by national political dynamics but also by systemic conditions within the Polish subnational government, often described as specific “diseases of local government authority” (Związek Powiatów Polskich, 2023).

Overall, while indicators of liberal democracy continued to function and participatory mechanisms advanced, democratic deficits persisted in the Lublin province, particularly in the context of Poland’s national de-democratisation between 2015 and 2023. Problems such as executive dominance, political polarisation and the exclusion of opposition and residents from decision-making often predated 2015 but intensified under PiS’s centralising governance. National policies, including PiS’s recentralisation, exacerbated liberal democracy deficits, but local/regional factors were more influential in shaping the outcomes of participatory and deliberative democracy. Many issues, such as the marginalisation of the opposition and the instrumental use of democratic tools, stemmed from both local and national dynamics, highlighting the persistent difficulties in achieving democratic consolidation at the local level.

## Note

- 1 Between 2019 and 2021, several local governments passed resolutions discriminating against LGBT minorities. Świdnik was the first to do so in 2019, followed by Kraśnik, Puławy and Biała Podlaska. In total, 17 municipalities and 11 districts

adopted similar measures, supported mainly by PiS and some PSL councillors. The Lublin *Sejmik* also passed an anti-LGBT resolution in 2019 but revised it in 2021 for financial reasons.

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# 5 Lubusz Voivodeship

## 5.1 Introduction – Brief overview of the case

The beginning of the chapter outlines the basic characteristics of the Lubusz voivodeship and the selected cities: Zielona Góra, Gorzów Wielkopolski and Nowa Sól. This section is intended to help readers understand the selection of cases and provide them with relevant background for the following parts of the chapter.

### 5.1.1 Geographical and demographic data

The Lubusz voivodeship is located in the western part of the country. It covers an area of about 13,988 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for 4.5% of Poland's territory, which places it 12th in the country in terms of size ([Polska w liczbach. Lubuskie, 2024](#)). According to 2023 data, the Lubusz voivodeship has a population of about 979,976, ranking 15th in Poland by population size ([Rocznik Statystyczny Województwa Lubuskiego, 2023](#)). It is one of the smallest and least populated voivodeships, with a population density of about 73 people per km<sup>2</sup>, compared with the national average of 123 people per km<sup>2</sup> ([Polska w liczbach. Lubuskie, 2024](#)).

The Lubusz voivodeship has two capitals: Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski; they are home to 60% of the region's population.<sup>1</sup> The voivodeship comprises 12 districts, 2 cities with district rights and 82 municipalities ([Rocznik Statystyczny Województwa Lubuskiego, 2023](#)). The three largest cities were selected for further analysis: Zielona Góra (138,932 inhabitants), Gorzów Wielkopolski (115,847 inhabitants) and Nowa Sól (38,191 inhabitants).

### 5.1.2 Political data

The administrative structure of the voivodeship is unusual, as it features two centres of power: the subnational government in Zielona Góra and the central government in Gorzów Wielkopolski. According to the Law on Provincial Self-Government, the regional decision-making body is the Lubusz Voivodeship Assembly (*Sejmik*), composed of 30 councillors who elect the executive body – the province board, consisting of five members, with the *marszałek* as its head ([Table 5.1](#)).

Table 5.1 The political situation in the Lubusz voivodeship

Body/authority– date	2010–2014	2014–2018	2018–2023
<i>Sejmik</i> – division of seats (30 in total)	Civic Platform (PO) – 11 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 9 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 5 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5	Civic Platform (PO) – 10 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 8 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 5 Better Lubusz – Non-partisan Self-government (local committee) – 2	Civic Coalition (KO) – 11 Law and Justice (PiS) – 9 Non-partisan Self- government (local committee) – 4 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 4 SLD Left Together – 2
<i>Sejmik</i> – governing majority	PO-PSL	PO-PSL	KO-PSL-SLD
Head of Executive ( <i>marszałek</i> )	Elżbieta Polak (PO)	Elżbieta Polak (PO)	Elżbieta Polak <sup>2</sup> (KO)/Marcin Jabłoński (KO)
Voivode	Helena Hatka (PO) 29 November 2007–26 October 2011 Marcin Jabłoński (PO) 12 December 2011–02 April 2013 Jerzy Ostrouch (PO) 29 April 2013–19 December 2014	Katarzyna Osos (PO) 26 January 2015–11 November 2015 Władysław Dajczak (PiS) 8 December 2015–11 November 2019	Władysław Dajczak (PiS) 15 January 2019–2 November 2023 Marek Cebula (PO) since 22 December 2023

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

An analysis of data indicates that the political situation in the *Sejmik* between 2010 and 2023 was quite stable (Table 5.1). The results of regional elections show that between 2010 and 2018, the PO-PSL coalition, which also held power at the national level from 2007 to 2015, had a majority in the *Sejmik*. The situation changed in 2018 when representatives of KO and PSL secured only 15 seats, which was insufficient for a stable majority and led to the formation of a broader coalition with the SLD. As a result, political power at the regional level remained in the hands of parties opposed to those that formed the United Right coalition at the national level (Law and Justice, Solidarity Poland and Jarosław Gowin's Agreement).

The political situation in Zielona Góra reflects the evolving political background of the city's president, Janusz Kubicki, who was first elected in 2006 as a candidate supported by the broader left-wing Democratic coalition (Left and Democrats). In each election until 2018, President Kubicki won in the first round, securing a significant share of votes while continuously shifting his political affiliation (Iłciów & Hładkiewicz, 2019).

At the city level, the governing majority between 2010 and 2015 was formed by councillors of KO and SLD who formed a stable coalition that guaranteed the effective functioning of the local government (Table 5.2). However, the growing popularity of “local” committees brought change in 2015, when two such committees gained representation in the city council. From that moment, a stable majority in the council was no longer evident. However, the president skilfully exploited the fact that the United Right coalition came to power at the central level, seeking support for his actions either from local committees or PiS councillors. Nevertheless, coalitions were formed on an *ad hoc* basis. There were a few situations, in which a coalition was formed against the president (Transcript of interview with R21, 2024).

The situation was different in Gorzów Wielkopolski. Between 1998 and 2014, Tadeusz Jędrzejczak served the president of the city. He belonged to SLD until 2007. At the city level, this party governed in coalition with the president's club, often with support from PO councillors. At times, even broader coalitions were formed against the incumbent (Transcript of interview with R22, 2024).

Table 5.2 The political situation in Zielona Góra

Body/authority – date	2010–2015 <sup>3</sup>	2015–2018	2018–2023
Council – division of seats (25 in total)	Civic Platform (PO) – 10 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 10 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5	The Janusz Kubicki Committee (local committee) – 11 The Jacek Budziński Law and Solidarity (local committee) – 7 Civic Platform – 6 SLD Left Together – 1	The Janusz Kubicki – Non-partisan (local committee) – 11 Civic Coalition (KO) – 7 Law and Justice – 5 SLD Left Together – 1 The Zielona Góra city movement (local committee) – 1
Council – governing majority	PO-SLD	No stable majority	Informal coalition KWW Janusz Kubicki Bezparyjni – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość
President	Janusz Kubicki (SLD/non-partisan)	Janusz Kubicki (PO/non-partisan)	Janusz Kubicki (non-partisan)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

Jędrzejczak ran as an independent candidate in the 2014 elections, but lost the presidential race with Jacek Wójcicki, who was supported by urban movements and defeated the incumbent in the first round, securing 60.61% of the vote.

The election results indicated a shift in political preferences among residents and a turn towards new local activists who wanted to introduce a new style and quality of city governance ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)). After urban movements entered the city council, an informal coalition was formed. However, councillors from PiS and some from PO supported President Wójcicki's major initiatives. In practice, there was no opposition at that time ([Transcript of interview with R22, 2024](#)) and the president could reach out to everyone. Soon after, urban movements withdrew their support for the president's actions, because his policies diverged from their agenda and values ([Barański, 2015](#)). As a result, the president formed his own committee, which won 10 seats in the 2018 elections and formed a coalition with the I Love Gorzów committee. His initiatives were often backed by PiS councillors and indirectly by the abstaining KO councillors ([Table 5.3](#)).

*Table 5.3* The political situation in Gorzów Wielkopolski

<i>Body/authority– date</i>	<i>2010–2014</i>	<i>2014–2018</i>	<i>2018–2023</i>
Council – division of seats (25 in total)	Civic Platform (PO) – 9 Law and Justice (PiS) – 6 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 5 The Tadeusz Jędrzejczak Committee – Gorzów XXI w. (local committee) – 5	Civic Platform (PO) – 8 The People for City (local committee) – 7 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5 SLD Left Together – 3 The Tadeusz Jędrzejczak Committee (local committee) – 1 Polish Peasant Party (PSL) – 1	The Jacek Wójcicki Committee (local committee) – 10 Civic Coalition (KO) – 7 Law and Justice (PiS) – 5 I love Gorzów (local committee) – 3
Council – governing majority	No stable majority - informal SLD-The T. Jędrzejczak Committee – Gorzów XXI w.	No stable majority PO-SLD-PSL- Jędrzejczak	The Jacek Wójcicki Committee – PiS
President	Tadeusz Jędrzejczak (The Tadeusz Jędrzejczak Committee – Gorzów XXI w.)	Jacek Wójcicki (Agreement for City Movements People for the city)	Jacek Wójcicki (The Jacek Wójcicki Committee)

*Source:* Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

Table 5.4 The political situation in Nowa Sól

Body/authority– date	2010–2014	2014–2018	2018–2023
Council – division of seats (21 in total)	The Wadim Tyszkiewicz Committee (local committee) – 13 Civic Platform (PO) – 6 Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) – 2	The Wadim Tyszkiewicz Committee (local committee) – 19 <i>Nowosolanie</i> Together (local committee) – 2	The Wadim Tyszkiewicz Committee (local committee) – 17 Law and Justice (PiS) – 4
Council – governing majority	The Wadim Tyszkiewicz Committee	The Wadim Tyszkiewicz Committee	The Wadim Tyszkiewicz Committee
President	Wadim Tyszkiewicz (local committee)	Wadim Tyszkiewicz (local committee)	Wadim Tyszkiewicz till 14 November 2019 Jacek Milewski from 5 January 2020 (The Wadim Tyszkiewicz Committee)

Source: Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2024).

The political situation was somewhat different in Nowa Sól (Table 5.4), where Wadim Tyszkiewicz has served as the city’s president since 2002. In the early 2000s, he founded the Nowa Sól Alliance of Independents, which was later transformed into his own committee. Effective governance was facilitated by cooperation with city councillors from the presidential committee, who had a stable majority between 2010 and 2023, enabling the implementation of long-term goals. The case of Nowa Sól is one of the few examples demonstrating that high support does not have to be accompanied by affiliation with a political party, as local democracy can develop through the actions of local leaders.

## 5.2 The state of local and regional democracy in the Lubusz voivodeship in 2010–2023

Respondents offered differing assessments of the state of local democracy in the Lubusz region, with opinions largely determined by party affiliation and attitudes towards the ruling party. Individuals affiliated with PiS were more likely to view local democracy as functioning properly. While acknowledging that certain areas were in need of improvement, they emphasised the overall stability of democratic processes and their alignment with public expectations (Transcript of interview with R21, 2024). In contrast,

respondents affiliated with the opposition tended to formulate critical opinions. In their view, there were notable democratic deficits at the local level, including a lack of transparency in decision-making, insufficient mechanisms for public consultation and instances of nepotism ([Transcript of interview with R17, 2024](#)).

This part of the chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the state of local and regional democracy in the Lubusz voivodeship between 2010 and 2023. It examines both the components of electoral and liberal democracy as well as the participatory and deliberative models.

### **5.2.1 Components of electoral and liberal democracy**

*Elections:* All elections examined in the Lubusz voivodeship were conducted in accordance with electoral law and democratic principles. However, certain shortcomings were noted in terms of citizens' understanding of electoral mechanisms, particularly regarding how electoral law translates into individual outcomes, for example at the level of the *Sejmik* and its elected councillors ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)).

Between 2010 and 2023, the analysed cities experienced only limited alternation of power. In both Zielona Góra and Nowa Sól, incumbent presidents consistently won elections, usually in the first round, with overwhelming support from the local community. In Gorzów Wielkopolski, Jacek Wójcicki won the 2014 election and was then re-elected in the first round in 2018.

The greatest disadvantage was the practical inability of local committees to win seats in city councils, primarily due to electoral laws that disadvantage small organisations ([Gendźwiłł, 2020](#)). To secure a seat in the city council, a committee needed significant recognition and had to obtain 15–17% of the vote in a given electoral district. Achieving such a result required funding and the creation of local structures capable of supporting broader-scale activities. The involvement of candidates and their personal networks was often insufficient and could not guarantee electoral success. Although many local activists were popular and contributed significantly to their cities, they had little chance of securing seats when running under nonpartisan, independent committees. They lacked the resources available to candidates affiliated with political parties. In addition to financial and organisational advantages, parties benefitted from recognition at both central and subnational levels, expressed through party identification and logos – factors that often played a decisive role in voter behaviour ([Gendźwiłł et al., 2015](#)). Another obstacle was the tendency of local and regional incumbents to use the full institutional capacity of the offices they held ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)). The use of informal power created an environment in which new political leaders struggled to compete on equal terms, making genuine electoral competition increasingly difficult ([Flis et al., 2018](#)).

A related issue was the financing of local election campaigns and the limited funds that local committees were able to raise. The disparity between political parties and local committees directly affected their capacity to carry out campaign activities, prepare promotional materials, organise meetings in electoral districts and, ultimately, influence the results of elections ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)).

The lack of a level playing field was also evident in the unequal access to local media. At the regional level, media outlets were taken over and subordinated to the central government, while at the city level they were often aligned with incumbent presidents. Without additional resources and genuine access to media channels, candidates running on local lists struggled to communicate their programmes to a wider electorate.

*Media:* The media market in the Lubusz voivodeship was relatively small. The most prominent regional media outlets were based in the province's two capital cities. Local online news platforms also enjoyed great popularity. *Gazeta Lubuska*, originally published as *Gazeta Zielonogórska* and *Gazeta Gorzowska*, has been the leading local media outlet since its founding in 1952 ([Wasilewski, 2015](#)). *Gazeta Wyborcza* also had branches in both Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski.

Their role became particularly significant following the 2021 takeover of the regional daily press market by Polska Press Group, owned by the state-controlled oil company Orlen. This effectively stripped regional media of their oversight function over those in power, both at the subnational and central levels ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)). The official message of the ruling party increasingly shaped public consciousness, presenting a one-dimensional view of reality in which all the actions of United Right politicians were portrayed positively, while the opposition was consistently depicted in a negative light. A notable example of this was one of Poland's and the region's best-known politicians, Senator Tyszkiewicz. As public radio, public television and regional media came under government control, he was entirely excluded from media coverage and no longer received any invitations ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)).

Local radio stations also remained popular, including *Radio Zachód*, a public regional station, *Radio Zielona Góra* and *Radio Gorzów*. However, these outlets were taken over and staffed with journalists subordinated to public authorities ([Transcript of interview with R19, 2023b](#)). Similar developments occurred in the regional branches of public television, *TVP Gorzów* and *TVP Zielona Góra*. In response to the increasingly one-sided message coming from regional media, the *Sejmik* authorities established an Information Centre during the 2018–2024 period. This initiative included a local television channel and the newspaper *Nasza Lubuska*. These media outlets provided information on activities undertaken at the provincial level by the *Sejmik* and its councillors. The project was intended to reflect European democratic values and promote respect for local self-government. However, it could hardly be

described as politically neutral or independent ([Transcript of interview with R19, 2023](#)).

Local government newspapers published by city presidents or city councils were another important source of information. Such examples could be found in all the analysed cities. In Zielona Góra, President Kubicki launched *Łącznik Zielonogórski* shortly before the 2014 referendum – a free local government newspaper delivered directly to residents' homes. Its stated purpose was to inform residents of neighbouring villages about the benefits of merging the Zielona Góra municipality with the city. However, after the successful merger, the president continued to publish the newspaper, recognising its value as a communication tool. From then on, *Łącznik Zielonogórski* became a propaganda tool for President Kubicki ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)). Content portraying opposition councillors in a positive light or supporting their actions was rare ([Transcript of interview with R21, 2024](#)). Although it was financed from the city budget, the newspaper could not be used by councillors to promote their own activities, even in the form of paid advertisements, as access to its content was entirely controlled by the president ([Transcript of interview with R17, 2024a](#)). In cooperation with the University of Zielona Góra, the city also established *Radio Index*, which enjoyed a large audience. However, some of its editors adopted a policy of either speaking positively about the president or not mentioning him at all ([Transcript of interview with R17, 2024](#)). This led to the censorship of councillors who criticised the president – they were either not invited to participate in broadcasts or appeared only occasionally. Regarding the presence and development of traditional media in the Lubusz voivodeship and the selected cities, online news portals emerged as an important source of information on key issues for the region's residents.

*NGOs:* As the Lubusz voivodeship is one of the smallest in terms of population, the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in this region is also limited. Nevertheless, a noticeable increase in the activity and development of civil society institutions has been observed, particularly since 2018 ([Figure 5.1](#)).

The figure presents the increase in the number of NGOs from 2010 to 2022 in the Lubusz region.

Available data and analysis suggest that cooperation between the first and third sectors generally proceeded smoothly, without significant obstacles or difficulties. Cooperation programmes between the Lubusz voivodeship and NGOs were adopted on an annual basis. This practice stemmed from the obligations imposed on public administration, including local government, by the Law on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism. The aim was to involve social partners in decision-making and to activate citizens ([Bejma, 2020](#)).

Similar programmes were adopted at the city level. However, their actual impact and the nature of relations between local administrations and third-sector organisations varied. This was illustrated by the example of Zielona

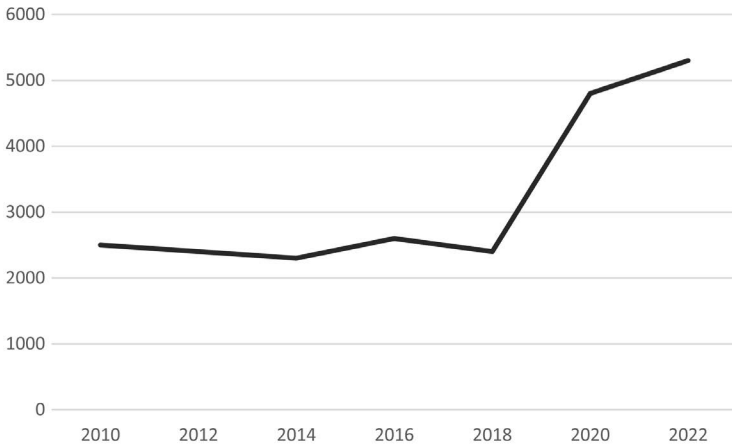


Figure 5.1 The number of NGOs in the Lubusz region.

Source: Główny Urząd Statystyczny (2023).

Góra, where procedures for allocating funds were not entirely transparent or clear to all organisations that applied for support. The situation was particularly difficult for newly established entities, which practically could not rely on support from the city hall. Unless they secured backing from city councillors, who could allocate funds from resources at their disposal granted by the president in the form of so-called “pocket money”, such initiatives had little chance of being implemented (Kalinowski, 2018). The councillors’ budget was introduced during the 2014–2018 term and amounted to approximately PLN 120,000 per councillor (Hekman, 2015). In the following term, President Kubicki formally abolished this form of funding for civic initiatives. However, this move was largely symbolic, as councillors aligned with the president had their own informal budgets (Transcript of interview with R17, 2024). Throughout the analysed period, there was a noticeable lack of openness towards grassroots civic initiatives, as the administration often perceived local civic leaders as a threat to its functioning. Moreover, there was a widespread belief, also among NGOs, that everything ultimately depended on the president or the *Marszałek’s* Office, making it necessary to maintain good relations with both of them (Transcript of interview with R18, 2023).

Difficulties in the functioning of NGOs were also primarily linked to the limited resources available to subnational authorities. Despite the existence of cooperation frameworks, NGOs faced insufficient funding or a complete lack of funds, which made it difficult for them to implement tasks across all areas of public benefit. Gorzów Wielkopolski has never organised a competition to support civic involvement. Most initiatives aimed at activating

residents were financed through funds allocated by regional authorities (Transcript of interview with R20, 2024). City authorities failed to recognise the potential of NGOs as partners capable of supporting the administration in fulfilling its key tasks. This was particularly evident in relation to active urban movements: the authorities perceived their growing influence in decision-making processes as a political threat that could determine future electoral outcomes. Nonetheless, there was a visible growth in environmental organisations, which aimed to raise public awareness of climate change (Transcript of FGI I, 2022).

A persistent challenge in the functioning of NGOs in small local communities was the lack of space for third-sector organisations to act as a check on public authorities while receiving municipal funding. NGOs that cooperated with local government, at any level, but also expressed criticism of its policies or actions were often aware that this could jeopardise their future access to public funds, for example through the absence of competitions or the introduction of criteria designed to exclude certain organisations from participating (Transcript of interview with R20, 2024).

*Self-government institutions. The system of checks and balances:* The relationship between the executive and legislative branches of the subnational government in Poland is a key factor in the effective functioning of subnational administration. Rooted in the principles of separation of powers, balance and cooperation, this relationship reflects democratic mechanisms that enable the delivery of public tasks. The legislative authority, whether a municipal/district council or the *Sejmik*, plays a key role in local legislation. It is responsible for adopting the budget, setting the direction of local development, establishing local zoning plans and making decisions on other major issues.

Unfortunately, during the analysed period, city councils in the Lubusz province had no authority to amend the budget or initiate budgetary proposals. At most, they could propose adjustments or modifications to the draft budget presented by the president, but they could not introduce their own amendments. This limited the council's powers in relation to the executive bodies (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). The executive branch was responsible for implementing resolutions adopted by the legislative body, managing municipal assets and overseeing the day-to-day operations of the local government unit. Another key function of the legislative body was exercising oversight over the executive, primarily by approving budget execution reports and taking decisions to grant or withhold discharge (Balcerek-Kosiarz, 2017).

From the residents' perspective, the most significant shortcoming of the local governance system between 2010 and 2023 was the lack of real political or legal accountability for decisions taken. This was particularly true of Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski. While presidents or city councillors could be removed from office through a referendum, such efforts were usually rendered invalid due to low turnout. Moreover, those in power were well aware that, in practice, they were secure in their positions until the next elections, especially

if they held a majority in the city council and controlled the local political landscape. Throughout the analysed period, there were no attempts to remove a president from office before the end of their term.

A significant problem in the functioning of local government was the limited capacity of audit committees to perform their functions. A clear example of this could be seen in Zielona Góra. Although the committee was intended to include councillors from various political groups, in practice councillors affiliated with the president's committee formed three separate clubs, thereby securing a majority in the five-member body ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)), or the chairman of the audit committee came from the president's club. As a result, the only formal oversight mechanism within the city council was effectively subordinated to the authorities ([Transcript of interview with R17, 2024](#)), thus eliminating the council's control function. This undermined democratic standards, which were tailored to serve the political interests of the local power elite ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)). At the provincial level, the Regional Audit Office was responsible for monitoring and reviewing the finances of local governments. However, it lacked the tools necessary to assess the rationality and effectiveness of specific investments, which further limited its role ([Transcript of interview with R19, 2023](#)).

### 5.2.2 *Components of participatory and deliberative democracy*

*Traditional mechanisms:* Direct democracy encompasses various forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes, such as local referendums, citizen initiatives and public consultations. In the Lubusz voivodeship, the popularity of these mechanisms depended on local problems, social activity and the availability of tools to support civic participation.

The best-known form of direct participation in democracy is voting in elections and referendums. During the analysed period, no referendums on the dismissal of the executive or decision-making bodies were held in the surveyed cities or at the regional level. One notable exception was a referendum initiated by residents of the Zielona Góra municipality concerning its annexation to the city of Zielona Góra. Held on 18 May 2014, the referendum saw a turnout of 55.18%, with 53.45% of voters supporting the incorporation ([Dziennik Urzędowy Województwa Lubuskiego, 2014](#)). In total, 11 recall referendums were held across the Lubusz voivodeship between 2010 and 2023 (National Electoral Commission), indicating that it was not a widespread socio-political practice.

A particular form of civic engagement was the exercise of the right to petition, guaranteed by Article 63 of the Polish Constitution of 2 April 1997. Under the Law of 11 July 2014 ([Kancelaria Sejmu, 2014](#)), public authorities must consider submitted petitions and respond to the petitioner. Additionally, the authority responsible for handling the petition is obliged to publish relevant information on its website. As shown in [Figure 5.2](#), the use of this form

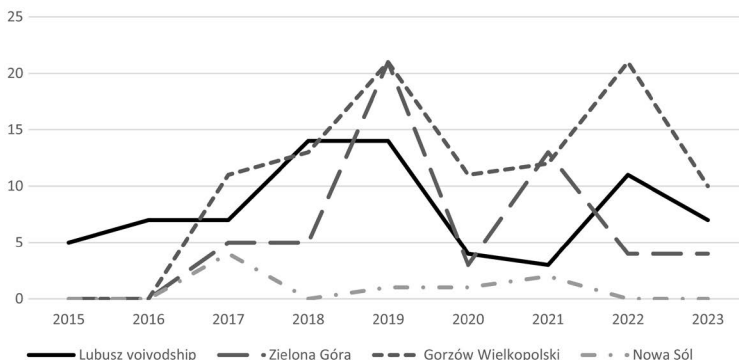


Figure 5.2 The number of petitions – the Lubusz voivodeship (*Sejmik*) and its three cities.

Source: [Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Lubuskiego \(2024b\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Gorzowa Wielkopolskiego \(2024b\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Zielona Góra \(2024b\)](#); [Urząd Miejski w Nowej Soli \(2024b\)](#).

of direct democracy varied across the analysed units. Between 2015 and 2023, 72 petitions were submitted at the regional level, addressing issues such as transportation, the restoration or modification of inter-city connections within the province and municipal waste management. Fifty-five petitions on city matters were filed in Zielona Góra, 89 in Gorzów Wielkopolski and only 8 in Nowa Sól.

Figure 5.2 presents the number of petitions submitted in Lubusz region and its three cities: Zielona Góra, Gorzów Wielkopolski and Nowa Sól from Lubusz region.

*Other mechanisms:* Citizen involvement and participation in decision-making at the local/regional level have been neglected in Poland for years. This began to change with the introduction of the participatory budgeting under the amended Law on Municipal Self-Government. Since 2018, cities with district rights have been required to implement participatory budgeting and allocate 0.5% of the municipality's expenditure for this purpose, based on the most recent budget execution report. As a result, participatory budgeting programmes were implemented in Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski, but not in Nowa Sól. At the provincial level, a Civic Initiative Fund was established for a similar purpose, targeting selected groups such as youth and seniors.

In 2013, Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski were among the first cities in Poland to introduce participatory budgeting programmes ([Martela et al., 2023](#)). From year to year, the funds allocated for this purpose increased and the number of project submissions and participating residents varied. It has been presented in the tabular form, which offers a more suitable format for capturing available details and enabling a nuanced comparative analysis. However, the application of this instrument differed between the two cities. In Zielona Góra, significant changes were introduced to the bylaws between 2013 and 2018.

Some of these provisions proved unfavourable and contributed to a decline in the number of applications submitted by residents (Table 5.5). Amendments to the bylaws were also prompted by the Act of 11 January 2018 (Dubicki, 2021). In 2021, the city commission decided that all investment proposals submitted for public consultation and the participatory budgeting would be rejected if they lacked a completed executive project. City officials argued that the city was unable to carry out such projects within a single year (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). For many petitioners, preparing an executive project carried a considerable financial burden, so this requirement was perceived as a way to eliminate certain proposals from consideration. In addition, an increasing number of projects submitted by schools, concerning their facilities or surroundings, led to a situation in which real social needs were overlooked. This occurred because smaller grassroots initiatives were unlikely to attract sufficient public support (Transcript of interview with R18, 2023). There was

Table 5.5 Participatory budgeting in Zielona Góra in 2013–2023

<i>Year</i>	<i>Budget in PLN</i>	<i>The number of projects</i>	<i>Positively assessed projects</i>	<i>The number of the project indicated for realisation</i>	<i>Percentage share – the number of winning tasks in proportion to the number of tasks positively reviewed</i>	<i>The number of participants in voting</i>
<b>2013</b>	3,000,000	181	117	14	11.96%	11,640
<b>2014</b>	6,000,000	202	197	17	8.62%	80,757
<b>2015</b>	6,000,000	273	218	27	12.39%	125,190
<b>2016</b>	6,000,000	241	180	11	6.11%	87,628
<b>2017</b>	6,000,000	250	199	26	13.06%	55,843
<b>2018</b>	6,000,000	216	143	23	16.08%	18,051
<b>2019</b>	6,000,000	166	117	22	18.80%	36,593
<b>2020</b>	6,500,000	80	65	16	24.62%	48,497
<b>2021</b>	6,500,000	68	42	15	35.71%	26,578
<b>2022</b>	6,500,000	43	30	10	33.33%	16,505
<b>2023</b>	Councillors decided to suspend public consultations in the form of a participatory budgeting for projects scheduled for implementation in 2023 and not to conduct public consultations in the form of a participatory budgeting for projects scheduled for implementation in 2024.					
<b>Total amount</b>	<b>58,500,000</b>	<b>1720</b>	<b>1308</b>	<b>181</b>		

Source: Dubicki (2021); Budżet obywatelski ponownie dostępny w Zielonej Górze (2023).

also no way to verify the results of the participatory budgeting, as voting was conducted both in person using paper ballots and online and only some city officials had access to the results. As a result, public confidence in this form of activity declined ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)).

The data in [Table 5.6](#) confirms that thanks to social oversight of public spending and the associated public accountability of local government leaders, interest in participatory budgeting among the residents of Gorzów Wielkopolski increased, particularly in the early years. In 2014, 273 projects were submitted, of which 140 were positively evaluated, but only 10 were implemented. In the following years, the number of submitted projects declined, but the number of projects selected for implementation and the number of participants increased.

Nevertheless, the range of participatory tools used to engage residents remained relatively limited. Other forms of direct citizen participation that developed in the Lubusz voivodeship and the analysed cities included public consultations ([Table 5.7](#)). At the provincial level, these concerned development strategies, cooperation with NGOs and environmental issues, while at the city level they related mainly to spatial planning and participatory budgeting decisions. However, such initiatives were not very popular among residents, who rarely participated in these processes ([Transcript of interview with R19, 2023](#)). The [Table 5.7](#) presents a dataset comprising unique and rarely accessible material that provides significant analytical insights.

*Table 5.6* Participatory budgeting in Gorzów Wielkopolski in 2013–2023

<i>Year</i>	<i>Budget in PLN</i>	<i>Number of projects</i>	<i>Positively assessed projects</i>	<i>Number of projects indicated for implemen- tation</i>	<i>Percentage share – the number of winning tasks in proportion to the number of tasks positively reviewed</i>	<i>The number of participants in voting</i>
<b>2013</b>	1,000,000	38	38	15	39.47%	4,419
<b>2014</b>	2,000,000	273	140	10	7.14%	15,774
<b>2015</b>	2,000,000	228	125	5	4.00%	50,216
<b>2016</b>	2,000,000	160	104	9	8.65%	23,676
<b>2017</b>	4,080,000	138	98	14	14.29%	15,340
<b>2018</b>	5,730,000	150	109	47	43.12%	6,364
<b>2019</b>	6,180,000	191	103	36	34.95%	9,227
<b>2020</b>	6,388,139	218	155	37	23.87%	14,127
<b>2021</b>	6,999,185	180	130	49	37.69%	11,547
<b>2022</b>	7,455,276	169	106	34	32.08%	7,922
<b>2023</b>	7,366,011	140	88	50	56.80%	3,150
<b>Total amount</b>	<b>44,898,611</b>	<b>1,885</b>	<b>1,196</b>	<b>306</b>		

*Source:* [Budżet obywatelski w Gorzowie Wielkopolskim \(2024\)](#).

Table 5.7 Public consultation in the Lubusz voivodeship and its two biggest cities

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>Lubusz voivodeship</b>	5	4	2	5	3	–	4	9	7
<b>Zielona Góra</b>	Lack of available data						9	3	3
<b>Gorzów Wielkopolski</b>	14	18	15	13	33	20	21	23	18

Source: [Konsultacje społeczne w Gorzowie Wielkopolskim \(2024\)](#); [Konsultacje społeczne w Lubuskim \(2024\)](#); [Konsultacje społeczne w Zielonej Górze \(2024\)](#).

The presented data indicate that the authorities in Gorzów Wielkopolski made greater use of this form of participation than those in Zielona Góra or at the provincial level. A special unit – the Office of Social Consultation and Revitalisation – was established to carry out the process of public consultation, engaging residents through online tools. A lack of experience in other units led to situations where no comments, suggestions or critical voices were submitted to the environmental programme. This was not an expression of ill intent or an attempt to conceal certain things, but rather an example of administrative carelessness – in this case, the announcement of public consultations was published in the Public Information Bulletin during the holiday period, without the use of diverse communication channels to reach a wider audience ([Transcript of interview with R20, 2024](#)).

Residents made relatively limited use of their right to submit citizens' legislative initiatives. There were few examples of this form of political participation at both the provincial and city levels.

Subnational governments in the Lubusz voivodeship created also consultative bodies for specific groups, such as youth, seniors and women ([Table 5.8](#)). Lubusz's youth councils were established both at the regional and local level. Senior councils are present at the regional territorial tier and in the capitals of the Lubusz voivodship. Women council operates only at the voivodeship level. It is the first such body established at the regional level in Poland.

Table 5.8 Consultation councils in the Lubusz voivodeship and its three cities

Province or city/ council type	Youth council/ Sejmik	Senior council/ Sejmik	Women council/ Sejmik
<b>Lubusz voivodeship</b>	X (since 2021)	X (since 2016)	X (since 2019)
<b>Zielona Góra</b>	X (since 2015)	X (since 2014)	–
<b>Gorzów Wielkopolski</b>	X (since 2019)	X (since 2016)	–
<b>Nowa Sól</b>	X (since 2022)	–	–

Source: [Urząd Miasta Gorzowa Wielkopolskiego \(2024a\)](#); [Urząd Miejski w Nowej Soli \(2024a\)](#); [Urząd Miasta Zielona Góra \(2024a\)](#); [Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Lubuskiego \(2016, 2019, 2024a\)](#).

### **5.3 The reasons behind the state of local and regional democracy**

Democratic deficits at the subnational level were driven largely by local circumstances, but also reflected a broader tendency of the ruling party to consolidate power. This process involved the concentration of decision-making in a narrow group, which limited political pluralism and reduced space for both the opposition and independent civic initiatives. It also encouraged the development of clientelistic relations, resulting in the favouritism of selected groups (Transcript of Interview with R18, 2023). Similar trends were observed at the central level, where the concentration of power in the hands of a single ruling party affected the functioning of state institutions, weakening their independence and adherence to democratic principles.

While the erosion of democratic norms at subnational levels progressed independently of developments at the national level, these changes also influenced how power was exercised at the regional and local territorial tiers (Bakselowicz, 2020b; Łukasiewicz, 2020; Transcript of FGI I, 2022).

#### **5.3.1 Impact of the national level**

The policy of the PO-PSL coalition between 2010 and 2014 towards self-government focused on supporting decentralisation and strengthening the role of local governments. To this end, the central administration delegated new tasks to subnational governments, including responsibilities related to the implementation of infrastructure investments. Regional governments were also granted greater influence over the allocation of EU cohesion policy funds. However, the transfer of new tasks was not always accompanied by the provision of adequate funding for their implementation, which frequently became a source of tension between central and subnational governments.

From 2015 onwards, the United Right coalition pursued the opposite policy. A key objective was to increase the central government's influence over the functioning of subnational government units and to restrict or remove existing competencies. The growing role of central administration in state governance was evident in the expansion of supervisory powers (Aksztejn & Lackowska, 2023). Voivodes were granted greater control over local/regional government resolutions, which significantly undermined the autonomy of subnational authorities (Podgórska-Rykała et al., 2020). It is worth noting that many of these revocations were overturned by administrative courts, demonstrating the lack of substantive grounds for such decisions (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). This centralisation was also reflected in reduced funding for provinces from central sources (Flis & Swianiewicz, 2022). New financial instruments were introduced, such as the Government's Fund for Local Investment, intended to support infrastructure development in the regions. The situation was challenging for the Lubusz provincial government, as it could no longer rely on financial

support from the central government. The allocation of national resources for objectives such as infrastructure development in the region was effectively curtailed as priority was given to provinces governed by representatives of right-wing parties, such as Subcarpathia and Lublin. Moreover, the distribution of these funds was discretionary and lacked transparent spending criteria (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). The central government also sought to limit the role of provincial authorities in managing EU funds, attempting to centralise their distribution (Sześciło, 2018).

The replication of practices from the central level was also evident in the erosion of public debate and the declining quality and standards of discussion within legislative bodies. This included restricting or reducing speaking time for councillors and preventing representatives of opposition parties from chairing committees (Transcript of interview with R17, 2024). In Zielona Góra, despite the end of the pandemic, council sessions continued to be held in online or hybrid formats and were marked by “majority violence” (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). Once the president built a coalition, every resolution was passed without debate, as it was clear how councillors would behave. Draft resolutions were often not published in advance; in some cases, they appeared in the Public Information Bulletin only half an hour before the city council session. Councillors were thus unable to review documents or prepare for discussion. In this way, President Kubicki limited opportunities for participation in debates. There were no instances of overnight sessions, but council sessions were frequently convened at the last minute (Bakselerowicz, 2020a). While the opposition questioned such practices, it remained irrelevant (Transcript of FGI I, 2022).

Undemocratic changes at the national level were also reflected in the media landscape of the Lubusz province. The takeover of public media in 2015 resulted in a situation where politicians from parliamentary opposition parties were no longer invited to appear in provincial or local public media, in contrast to politicians from the ruling party, who featured in every broadcast, often without the presence of opposing voices (Transcript of interview with R18, 2023). As a result, the media message became one-sided and fully controlled.

Local free newspapers were also published by city presidents and the *Marszałek's* Office. However, their content was dominated by messaging favourable to the publisher. In theory, media pluralism was maintained, but in practice, citizens needed to consult multiple sources to obtain a complete and balanced picture (Transcript of interview with R18, 2023). Without doing so, this picture was heavily distorted. Broadcasts of the day and all *TVP* news were transferred to regional branches. Experienced journalists were removed and replaced by new staff loyal to those in power. This loyalty often resulted in an extremely one-sided portrayal of national, provincial and local affairs. Regional media ceased to perform their function as the fourth estate. Rather than holding public authorities to account, they focused on

discrediting political opponents, primarily representatives of PO/KO. They showed little interest in scrutinising the actions of President Kubicki, including some questionable investments, and offered no criticism of the central government.

The replication of certain practices from the central level was also visible in the operation of the prosecutor's office. The district prosecutor's office did not initiate a single proceeding against the president of Zielona Góra, despite notifications submitted by various groups and individuals suggesting that he may have committed a crime. Proceedings were either never initiated or, if they were, they were mostly not pursued, postponed or quickly discontinued ([Transcript of FGI II, 2022](#)).

The period before 2015 was not without shortcomings or irregularities, but access to information and media by committees and parties who were then in opposition was preserved. Politicians from across the spectrum were invited to broadcasts and given the opportunity to speak; journalists of the public media maintained a degree of neutrality. This changed entirely after 2015, impacting local elections. Although they were conducted according to slightly different rules than national elections, they were still strongly influenced by the centre. Based on the analysis and interviews conducted, it can be confirmed that national political parties dominated local government and transferred central-level dynamics, such as politicisation and political polarisation, to the local level ([Transcript of interview with R17, 2024](#)).

### **5.3.2 *Impact of the local/regional level***

The other previously discussed deficits of subnational democracy are largely the result of the specific nature of local and regional politics. Elections are among the most important instruments shaping the local political landscape. Since the introduction of direct elections for presidents and mayors in the legal system, local elections have taken on a different character. According to some experts, they have come to resemble something of a beauty contest or a television series. In practice, once elected, a president or mayor could remain in office for life ([Drzonek, 2019](#)). The long-standing tenures of the presidents of Nowa Sól and Zielona Góra confirmed this trend, although the assessments of their performance vary. The strength of incumbency was not necessarily due to exceptional performance or a weak opposition, but rather to the fact that, under Polish subnational conditions, a strong alternative candidate was unlikely to emerge ([Gendźwiłł et al., 2015](#); [Ilciów, 2021](#)). In the 2018 local elections, the incumbent president/mayor faced no challengers in around 500 self-government units across the country. In smaller local governments in particular, elections were neither competitive nor equal, as incumbents effectively ran a permanent campaign while in office, using public funds to do so ([Transcript of FGI I, 2022](#)).

The decline in the standards of public authority was also evident in the lack of concern for the quality and mechanisms of democratic governance, reflecting the low level of democratic political culture among subnational elites. Those in power showed little interest in empowering residents or involving them in decision-making processes. This was particularly visible in Zielona Góra in issues related to the implementation and subsequent suspension of the participatory budgeting programmes (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). Another pathological phenomenon in the city was clientelism. A certain pattern of relationships developed in which both offices effectively became a “storehouse” for party activists (Transcript of FGI II, 2022). New positions were created within departments or units that had not existed before. All officials working in the *Marszałek’s* Office also served as city councillors, while councillors from Zielona Góra held positions in the *Marszałek’s* Office (Transcript of interview with R18, 2023). This pathology was further exacerbated by the absence of fair competition for senior positions, which were *de facto* filled exclusively by party members.

Another pathological subnational feature was the practice of hiring friends through personal recommendations for jobs in the city office or municipal companies. In Zielona Góra, at least three families were employed by the city council and its subordinate units (Transcript of interview with R19, 2023). While such practices were not unique to the Lubusz province, they had been entrenched in this region for at least 16 years. It was an open secret that party activists were given positions in public offices in exchange for political loyalty and support during election campaigns (Transcript of interview with R18, 2023).

The democratic deficit and abuse of local power were also visible in the treatment of two sports clubs central to the city’s identity: the speedway club Falubaz Zielona Góra and the basketball club Zastal Zielona Góra (Dobrowolski, 2021). Both were national champions. As a result of political conflict, they became subjects of rivalry between the provincial authorities and the city president, who refused to fund the basketball club and excluded it from access to city funds while continuing to support the other club (Transcript of FGI I, 2022). This was linked to the city president’s personal conflict with the former president of the basketball club, a PO senator. As a result, the two sports clubs became part of a political bidding war. Their success translated directly into political capital and electoral outcomes. Consequently, the election campaign and the ongoing struggle for residents’ support were fought using public funds controlled by the provincial and municipal governments.

Another key deficit in the state of local democracy in the Lubusz region was the lack of strong leaders and public figures whose attitudes were widely recognised and respected. Local leaders often viewed politics as a sphere for securing short-term benefits and privileges for themselves, their families or friends (Transcript of interview with R18, 2023). To make this

possible, it was essential for them to win elections. In pursuit of this goal, those in power engaged the entire administrative apparatus, including formal and informal meetings with residents and other tools at their disposal (Transcript of FGI I, 2022).

## 5.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, several important points should be noted. Firstly, during the 2015–2023 period, and particularly from 2019 onwards, the central government did not treat local governments in the Lubusz province as equal partners. Instead, it sought to appropriate and subordinate them, influence their decisions and limit their capacity to perform their duties by restricting the transfer of budgetary funds.

Secondly, there was no political will in the interactions between the provincial government, elected by the region's residents, and the voivode – the central government's representative in the region. Between 2015 and 2023, the PiS-appointed voivode failed to attend a single meeting of the *Sejmik* (Transcript of interview with R19, 2023). The absence of cooperation and communication difficulties with the voivode were particularly critical during emergencies, such as the environmental disaster on the Oder River or the fire at a hazardous materials storage site in Przylep (Salwacka, 2023). One notable exception occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the voivode willingly cooperated with *marszałek* Polak by using a newly built facility, the Maternal and Child Health Centre in Zielona Góra, as a temporary hospital. This showed that cooperation was possible, but remained limited and largely one-sided.

Thirdly, the state of local and regional democracy was also influenced by the quality of civic education and the broader culture of political behaviour at the local level. The fact that the same party or committee had been running a regional or municipal government for many terms did not improve the state of democracy, but rather weakened it. Although regular, competitive elections were formally held between 2010 and 2023, and there was formal alternation of power, in practice the same representatives were repeatedly re-elected. However, these patterns were not specific to the Lubusz region but reflected broader trends in the modern world.

Fourthly, the democratic deficit was also reflected in the proliferation of small, locally active parties and committees which were not independent. Their independence often ended once their members were appointed to a particular office or position, whether at the provincial, district or municipal level, as such activity required informal contacts. The more such connections were developed, the harder it became to remain committed to original goals and demands. In many cases, the activity of urban movements and independent committees was limited to a single term. A lack of funding effectively constrained the operations and influence of non-party organisations. In the analysed cities,

such movements either lost public support or were absorbed into committees formed by incumbent presidents.

To sum up, Lubusz voivodeship has not escaped the process of takeover by the central government, often replicating or creatively adapting practices that undermine democratic standards. However, to a large extent, these were “soft” measures, stemming more from a decline in political culture and the quality of public debate than from the imposition of “hard” solutions. Certainly, the deterioration of democracy was driven partly by local conditions, particularly the dilution of political and legal accountability, but it was also fuelled by actions taken at the central level. One of the fundamental problems of Polish subnational governments, including in the Lubusz voivodeship, was that many units functioned only thanks to the flow of structural funds, the distribution of which was managed at the regional level. In the absence of such funding, there would be little reason to maintain many of these local government structures. They were intended to serve as mini-local assemblies engaging in debate on the future, modernisation and development. The fact that this did not happen was less the result of behaviour adopted from the central level and more a consequence of apathy.

The analysis of civic participation at the local level indicates that, year after year, knowledge and awareness of direct forms of political participation increased among residents of the Lubusz voivodeship. However, the actual level of engagement remained relatively low. Beyond electoral participation, there was an increase in interest in co-decision, particularly in implementing projects within the framework of participatory budgeting, as reflected in the number of submitted projects and the number of participants. Other forms of civic involvement, such as petitions, public consultations and resolution initiatives were used only to a limited extent.

## Notes

- 1 Zielona Góra serves as the main administrative centre of subnational government. It is home to the headquarters of the *Marszałek's* Office of the Lubusz voivodeship, which is responsible for managing the region within the scope of self-government competencies and making key decisions on issues such as regional development, cultural and educational policy, transportation infrastructure, environmental protection and EU funds. Gorzów Wielkopolski serves as the administrative headquarters of the region, housing the Lubusz Voivodeship Office headed by the voivode, the government's representative in the province. Gorzów's role as an administrative capital involves overseeing tasks delegated by the state central administration. The division of competencies between Zielona Góra and Gorzów Wielkopolski is based on the principle of balancing roles.
- 2 Elżbieta Polak served as the *marszałek* of the province until 13 October 2023. She won a parliamentary seat in the national election and thus resigned from her position at the regional government level.
- 3 Elections to the Zielona Góra city council and the office of city president were held on 15 March 2015, a date that differed from the elections in the rest of Poland, which took place on 16 November 2014.

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# Conclusions

Many languages have the saying that “the fish rots from the head down”. This indicates that negative trends originate within the leadership of organisations and institutions before permeating lower levels. Is this a valid metaphor to describe multilevel democracy, particularly the relationship between the central (national) and local/regional levels? The case of Poland, characterised in our study, would probably fit this metaphor, albeit with several caveats.

This book examined the quality of local and regional democracy in Poland between 2010 and 2023 through an in-depth qualitative analysis of five regions (voivodeships) and several towns and cities within them. In particular, it focused on tracking democratising or autocratising tendencies during this period and assessing the impact of the national government, specifically the PO-PSL coalition (2007–2015) and the Law and Justice party (PiS) in coalition with smaller parties (2015–2023). The study was founded on a two-pillar theoretical framework: (1) democracy and its evolution, and (2) the territorial aspect of politics. Building on the Introduction, the conclusions revisit our research questions and address them in turn. Our central research question—how national-level political dynamics, particularly during the PiS governance and the associated democratic backsliding, affected the quality of democracy at the subnational level—is addressed in the first two sections. The next section examines the role of pre-existing local and regional factors in shaping these outcomes; the subsequent section assesses whether the analysed cities functioned as “democratic enclaves” despite national-level backsliding; and the final section considers whether the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated de-democratisation. We close with broader implications and avenues for further research.

## Key findings

This comparative approach, which analysed both common trends and variations in different contexts, was essential for understanding the complex dynamics of subnational democracy in Poland. The application of our two-pillar theoretical framework proved highly valuable. It allowed us to dissect the multi-layered interactions between national policies, local contexts and the

resulting quality of democracy, revealing both the direct impact of national-level actions and how local factors mediated and, in some cases, amplified these effects. We believe that this approach significantly contributes to addressing the research gaps highlighted in the book's Introduction, specifically by integrating local, regional and national government perspectives into the analysis of democratisation and de-democratisation processes.

### *The state of subnational democracy*

The following section presents a comparative overview of the state of subnational democracy, structured according to the models of electoral, liberal, participatory and deliberative democracy we outlined in the Introduction.

In all the voivodeships and cities studied, elections were formally conducted according to the law, but informally there were widespread problems that undermined the quality of political competition. A common issue was the incumbency advantage, where those in power used public resources and media access for self-promotion. For example, in Otwock (Masovian voivodeship), President Margielski (PiS) used city infrastructure projects to enhance his public image. Similar patterns were observed elsewhere, such as in Płock (Masovian voivodeship) and Bielsko-Biała (Silesia), indicating a consistent trend across different political contexts, irrespective of the political affiliation of incumbents. Orleń's 2020 takeover of Polska Press greatly exacerbated the already prevalent issue of media bias, transforming newspapers such as *Gazeta Lubuska*, *Kurier Lubelski* and *Tygodnik Płocki* into platforms for PiS government propaganda. Local power dynamics also played a role; for instance, in Otwock, the previously relatively independent *Linia Otwocka* was effectively replaced by publications aligned with PiS and a local committee.

The politicisation of local institutions manifested itself in various ways, including the marginalisation of the opposition in city councils. In Warsaw, where PO/KO played a leading role, the opposition was denied leadership positions in key committees; a similar situation was observed in the Lublin *Sejmik*, where PiS held a clear majority. This exclusion severely limited the ability of the opposition to hold the executive to account and represent alternative viewpoints within the subnational political system. In bigger towns and cities as well as at the provincial level, major nationwide parties dominated local/regional politics, which strongly limited the role of local committees and independent candidates, a dominance reinforced by electoral laws that favour larger parties, particularly in multi-member districts, as seen in Warsaw. Financial disparities between major parties and smaller groups further exacerbated these inequalities; larger parties could utilise resources that were unavailable to local city movements, creating an uneven playing field, as was clearly the case in Rzeszów (Subcarpathian voivodeship). These structural imbalances also affected marginalised groups, particularly LGBT+ communities, which under PiS faced institutional discrimination through local

government resolutions and funding disparities. In some cases, local authorities actively resisted minority rights initiatives, limiting the representation of these groups in public discourse and policymaking, as evidenced in the Lublin region and several smaller municipalities.

However, the strength of local committees varied significantly. In Katowice and Gliwice (Silesia), their relatively strong position derived from the popularity of their leaders. In Sanok (Subcarpathian voivodeship), local committees had considerable influence, forming a coalition with PiS, which demonstrated the capacity of local actors to engage with and even benefit from the national political landscape. This contrasted with their marginalisation in Warsaw and Bielsko-Biała (Silesia), where the dominance of national parties, reinforced by the electoral system, left little space for independent local forces. In Radom (Masovian voivodeship), political instability and frequent coalition changes demonstrated that even with strong PO-PiS polarisation, local arrangements could matter and national-level divides did not always translate directly into stable local power structures. The degree of media politicisation also varied, ranging from extreme propaganda in local media following Orlen's takeover of Polska Press to remnants of independence in smaller centres (Lubusz), though often constrained by financial problems. In Lublin, the situation deteriorated after the takeover of *Dziennik Wschodni*. These differences stemmed from local power dynamics, the presence or absence of strong, independent media, and the political histories of individual cities and regions. These variations underscore the fact that while national trends created a broader context, specific manifestations of democratic deficits were heavily influenced by local factors.

Turning to participatory and deliberative democracy, all regions introduced formal participatory mechanisms, including participatory budgeting, which has been mandatory in cities with district rights since 2018, public consultations, petitions and councils of seniors, youth and, in some cases, women. However, their real impact on decision-making processes was often limited. Participatory budgeting was sometimes used instrumentally, for example to “patch investment gaps” in Warsaw or to promote incumbent authorities, as seen in Otwock. Consultations were often superficial and actually ignored residents' opinions. Low turnout was a recurring issue, with declines in Warsaw, fluctuations in Płock and abandonment in Otwock. This trend was driven by factors such as a lack of trust, low quality of proposed projects and “participation fatigue”. Referendums remained rare and largely ineffective due to low turnout, as seen in the 2019 Lublin referendum, where participation reached only 12.97%, rendering the result non-binding. Petitions were more common, but their quality varied, leading to frequent rejections by local councils. Citizens' panels, such as the 2018 Lublin Air Quality Panel, showed potential but suffered from weak follow-up, public distrust and sceptical attitudes of local authorities. This widespread disillusionment with participatory mechanisms highlights a deeper issue of the disconnect between formal democratic procedures and genuine citizen empowerment.

Some cities introduced innovations, such as the Green Budget in Katowice (Silesia) and the Urban Lab in Rzeszów (Subcarpathian voivodeship). Forms of consultation varied and included meetings, surveys and “consultation walks”. Differences also existed in the functioning of councils for seniors, youth and women: in some cities, such as Otwock, and at the voivodeship level in regions such as Subcarpathia and Silesia, women’s councils were not established, which can be attributed to a more conservative political culture as well as a simple disregard of such mechanisms on the part of subnational politicians. The success or failure of these institutions was often determined by the attitudes of local authorities, the level of civic participation and the pre-existing democratic political culture. In general, although there were efforts to increase citizen participation, these initiatives were often hampered by the absence of genuine commitment from local authorities, low levels of trust and engagement among residents and the persistence of traditional top-down decision-making practices.

### *Impact of the national level*

During the studied period, the local/regional democracy environment was strongly shaped by the national political context. This period can be broadly divided into two phases, each with distinct characteristics, but both contributing to the overall trends observed at the subnational level. The PO-PSL coalition government, while generally supportive of decentralisation, pursued policies that had mixed effects. The introduction of direct mayoral elections in 2002, a PO initiative at the time when it was in opposition (Kasiński, 2015), strengthened local executive power. While the aim was to enhance local accountability and responsiveness, the reform, combined with weak council oversight, also facilitated the concentration of power, inadvertently laying the groundwork for later challenges. Furthermore, the ongoing political rivalry between PO/KO and PiS, a defining feature of national politics, permeated local political dynamics, fuelling polarisation and hindering cooperation across different levels of government. This national-level conflict set the stage for more overt interference in the subsequent period. The pre-existing tension and the established framework of direct mayoral elections provided a foundation upon which the PiS government could pursue its strategy of influencing local politics in the following phase.

The PiS government (2015–2023) marked a distinct shift towards “creeping recentralisation” and a gradual erosion of democratic norms, intensifying pre-existing tendencies and mirroring the party’s broader view that mechanisms of liberal democracy represented obstacles to be overcome. This impact manifested itself in several key ways, both directly and indirectly influencing the subnational level. Directly, the central government undertook legal and administrative measures that reduced the tax revenues of local governments without decreasing, and sometimes even increasing, the scope of their

competences. Thus, it built a system largely based on subsidies from the national government, creating a situation of financial dependence that made local governments more vulnerable to pressure from the central government. Other forms of direct intervention included postponements of local elections based on dubious arguments, officially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but with clear political motivations, as in the case of Rzeszów. Another clear example involved the preferential allocation of central government funds to local governments led by presidents/mayors with ties to PiS or those located in eastern Poland, which is a PiS stronghold, a pattern extensively detailed in our research. The disparities in funding between cities like Chełm and Lublin (both in the Lublin voivodeship), or between Płock and Otwock (both in the Masovian voivodeship), provide a clear evidence of this politically motivated allocation of resources.

Indirectly, the national level exerted influence by transferring the strongly polarised competition between PiS and PO to the local/regional arena. Electoral laws already favoured nationwide electoral committees over local ones in many aspects of election campaigns, such as finances and access to media, prior to the PiS government, but these trends further intensified under its rule. The party's national-level rhetoric and actions created an environment where such tactics became increasingly normalised at subnational levels. PiS's narrative, portraying itself as the advocate of "ordinary people" against the "elites" of large cities, further fuelled this polarisation and shaped the political landscape at the local and regional territorial tiers.

Furthermore, PiS's actions at the national level, including the executive aggrandisement, the subjugation of the judiciary and the use of public media for propaganda, created a climate where similar practices became more acceptable, or at least less likely to be challenged, at subnational levels. Although PiS initially discussed the idea of reverting to a system of indirect presidential/mayoral elections ([portalsamorzadowy.pl](https://portalsamorzadowy.pl), 2017), driven by concerns over the strength of opposition presidents/mayors in large cities, the party ultimately opted for a strategy of pursuing control and influence through other means. The Act of 11 January 2018 introduced a number of positive changes, including term limits for presidents/mayors, the right of councillors to submit interpellations and enhanced transparency measures, but it can also be interpreted as an attempt to limit the power of local and regional politicians who were critical of the national government.

This multipronged approach, which combined direct financial and administrative pressure with the indirect effects of a deteriorating national political climate, significantly affected the quality of subnational democracy. The "creeping recentralisation" was a consistent theme, but its specific manifestations varied depending on the local/regional context. In regions where PiS already had a strong presence, such as Subcarpathia, financial favouritism towards aligned municipalities was particularly blatant. In regions with stronger opposition, such as the Masovian voivodeship, the

national government's influence was exerted through the voivode, who actively interfered in local and regional decision-making. The takeover of Polska Press by Orlen and the subsequent transformation of regional newspapers into pro-government outlets further narrowed the space for independent media and critical voices. Taken together, these actions created a system where subnational governments were increasingly dependent on the central government and where dissent and independent action were discouraged.

### *Impact of local and regional factors*

Although the national political context, particularly the actions of the PiS government, exerted a strong influence, it is crucial to recognise that the quality of subnational democracy was also significantly shaped by local and regional factors, many of which predated the PiS era. The consolidation of power in the hands of directly elected presidents/mayors, combined with weak city councils, created a system prone to abuse. This concentration of power fostered the development of clientelistic networks, where access to resources and influence often depended on personal connections and loyalty to the president/mayor, as documented, for example, in Zielona Góra in the Lubusz voivodeship. This environment enabled the widespread use of incumbency advantage in elections, where presidents/mayors used public resources, media access and their control over local institutions to promote themselves and their allies. Examples of this were abundant across the cities studied, from Otwock (Masovia) to Rzeszów (Subcarpathia) and Zielona Góra (Lubusz).

Furthermore, a widespread lack of democratic political culture, both among local/regional elites and the broader citizenry, contributed significantly to the observed deficits. This was not merely a matter of apathy, but a deeper issue concerning how democracy was understood and practised. It was reflected in the instrumental use of participatory mechanisms and the acceptance of unfair electoral practices. Consultations and participatory budgeting were often treated as mere formalities, with decisions predetermined and citizen input disregarded, as demonstrated by numerous examples across Warsaw, Radom (Masovia), Rzeszów (Subcarpathia) and many other cities included in this study. This led to widespread disillusionment and low participation rates. The acceptance of undemocratic practices, such as the blatant misuse of incumbency advantage, as "normal" politics further eroded the foundations of fair competition.

Local and regional specificities also had a vital impact. The presence of strong, long-serving presidents, such as Kubicki in Zielona Góra (Lubusz) and Żuk in Lublin (the Lublin voivodeship), created distinct local political environments, where their personal influence often overshadowed national party politics, contributing to the consolidation of power and posing challenges to political alternation. The economic situation also played a role, although its

impact was complex and varied. While financial constraints could limit the scope of local government activity, their specific consequences depended on local political choices and priorities. Differing traditions of civic engagement, for example the relatively long-standing Youth City Council in Częstochowa (Silesia), also contributed to the variations observed across the studied cases.

### *The question of “democratic enclaves”*

Based on the comprehensive analysis presented in this book, the evidence does not definitively support the claim that cities studied functioned as true “democratic enclaves” during the period of national-level democratic backsliding under the PiS government. Although formal democratic institutions, such as elections and local councils, continued to operate, all cases exhibited significant deficits in the quality of democracy. These included restricted electoral competition, biased media environments, the instrumentalisation of participatory mechanisms, limited influence of opposition parties and civil society, and the widespread problem of executive dominance. While Rzeszów (Subcarpathia), with its Urban Lab and somewhat more active civil society, came closest to exhibiting the characteristics of a “democratic enclave”, even there significant problems were evident, particularly in the implementation of participatory budgeting and the influence of national-level political polarisation. The experiences such cities as Otwock (the Masovian voivodeship), where local politics became increasingly dominated by national party agendas, clearly illustrate the vulnerability of local democracy to both national pressures and pre-existing local weaknesses. The other analysed cities and towns showed a much higher degree of vulnerability to national-level pressures and inherent local weaknesses. Therefore, while pockets of resistance and resilience (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Tomini et al., 2022) existed, the overall picture is one of compromised and at times hollow local democracy rather than fully protected democratic spaces. National-level trends acted as a strong current against which local actors constantly struggled, with varying degrees of success. No city has fully insulated itself from these pressures.

### *The impact of COVID-19 crisis*

Preliminary observations suggest a potential, though not yet conclusive, link between the COVID-19 pandemic and a decline in public activism locally and regionally. The inherent variability in local activism, with declines in some areas and growth in others in 2020–2021, precludes definitive conclusions regarding causality. In some parts of the Silesian province, observers reported a more pronounced sense of negativity within local communities, which they attributed to the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on indicators derived from the four models of democracy, our analysis concludes that the

overall impact of COVID-19 was relatively insignificant. While some local governments used the pandemic as a convenient excuse to avoid mechanisms such as participatory budgeting (Otwock) or were slow to resume full operations of city councils (e.g. Plock), the overall impact was minimal.

Of paramount importance is the observation that the Polish government's early response to COVID-19 was based on a centralised, discretionary and top-down strategy. The ruling party demonstrably employed pandemic-related measures for partisan gain. For example, the allocation of grants from the COVID-19 Counteraction Fund was manifestly biased, opaque and arbitrary. These funds disproportionately benefited political allies and strongholds of PiS, as illustrated by the Lublin province.

### **Broader implications**

The case study of Poland yielded insights that extend far beyond the Polish context. First of all, it must be recognised that decentralisation alone cannot resolve all the challenges facing local and broader democratic governance. This is a necessary, but insufficient condition for a thriving subnational democracy. Even a positive change, such as the 2002 introduction of directly elected presidents/mayors, can produce negative, unintended consequences. Although decentralisation can create opportunities for local participation and responsiveness, it also carries inherent risks, particularly the potential for the concentration of power locally and the capture of institutions by dominant and less accountable actors (Kuhlmann et al., 2025; Mbate, 2017). This finding aligns with the existing literature on decentralisation, referenced in the book's Introduction, which highlights the importance of strong institutional safeguards and a vibrant civil society to prevent such negative outcomes (Sellers et al., 2020; Sisk, 2001). Perhaps this is a somewhat distant analogy, but this reminds us of academic discussions on the conditions under which democracy can be installed in countries with no prior democratic experience (O'Donnell et al., 1986). Formal changes, institutions and norms imposed from above must be actively shaped by elites, but also understood and cherished by citizens. These findings confirm the study's working hypothesis that decentralisation processes can create opportunities for both democratisation and autocratisation at the subnational level.

Secondly, our book clearly demonstrates that the weaknesses of democracy and de-democratisation at subnational levels are not always the result of actions, or inaction, by undemocratic and populist political forces at all territorial tiers. Political parties and local committees, which are generally regarded as pro-democratic, can also behave in similar ways, aiming to consolidate their power and protect their own short-term interests. The difference often lies only in how far they go in their undemocratic activities. Our analysis reveals that sometimes even self-declared democrats can act similarly to autocrats. This conclusion certainly applies to the national territorial tier, but the

aforementioned conditions related to decentralisation may create a particular fertile breeding ground for such tendencies to take root at subnational levels.

Thirdly, our study shows how fragile democracy can be and how easy it can be for a forceful national government to rot it from the top, referring to the metaphor used at the beginning. The “creeping recentralisation” pursued by the PiS government through both direct interventions (such as financial controls and legislative changes) and indirect pressures (including media capture and the politicisation of institutions), significantly eroded the autonomy of local governments and undermined democratic practices at the local level. This underscores the vulnerability of subnational democracies to authoritarian tendencies. Fortunately, in some localities, thanks to a combination of local political configurations and past democratic experience, this creeping recentralisation encountered strong resistance. Nonetheless, its overall impact remained significant. Broadly speaking, this highlights the need for proactive measures and vigilance to safeguard subnational democracies, particularly in countries with weak democratic foundations or those experiencing political polarisation and the erosion of democratic norms.

### **Limitations and future research**

Our research examined five of Poland’s 16 provinces, along with a range of towns and cities of varying sizes. While the inclusion of additional cases, particularly from Lower Silesia, where an independent regional movement has emerged as a pivotal player, could enrich these findings, we believe the overall results would remain largely unchanged. Firstly, this is because our case selection strategically targeted well-known patterns of division within the country, such as the east-west divide and urban-rural differences. Our cases also represented various sizes, levels of involvement of local committees and degrees of cooperation between regional governments and the voivode. Secondly, the uniformity of local and regional election rules and dates across Poland makes variations due to differing timelines unlikely. Levels of civic participation and knowledge of local and regional politics are also similar across the country. In short, case selection is not a limiting factor. But methodologically, this research underscores the importance of case studies in understanding the complexities of subnational governance. Democratic backsliding, as shown by our within-case analysis, is not consistent across territories. Instead, it is shaped by a combination of national policies, local agency and specific regional/municipal structural constraints.

Avenues for future research emerge clearly from this study. To better isolate the effects of PO-PiS political polarisation on subnational politics and assess the role of direct presidential/mayoral elections in either fostering or exacerbating incumbency advantages, it is necessary to conduct a more thorough examination of the 1990s. However, given that both local and national democratic systems were in their formative stages during that period, such an

examination may offer only limited insights into causal mechanisms. On the other hand, studying this issue from a comparative international perspective could help us identify unique contextual factors, discern common patterns and comprehensively analyse the factors that contribute to both the vulnerability and resilience of local and regional democratic systems. A wider international comparison is needed to ensure that our assessment of Polish local/regional democracy is balanced and avoids over-criticism by considering its achievements alongside its shortcomings. Several respondents and experts highlighted local and regional democracy as a major accomplishment of post-1989 Poland; some even regarded the entire system of local government as a democratic enclave amidst broader national issues.

Several additional pathways point to where our research should go next. First, improving our understanding of how local/regional democracy is perceived requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Why do many Poles value local elections so highly while so few actively participate through other means than elections? Secondly, the primary methodological objective is to quantify the extent and nature of subnational democracy as well as the degree of central government intervention.

Revitalising Polish local/regional democracy requires a multi-pronged approach, including national-level reforms and local/regional adjustments. Independent subnational governments, the media and engaged citizens are crucial. We need a political culture of dialogue, transparency and accountability. This presents a considerable challenge for Poland's post-2023 election government, particularly in the context of deepening polarisation and political conflict at the national level. In the long run, the quality of Poland's democracy hinges on both national reforms and the strength of its local and regional governments. The "fish" may be rotting from the head, but the health of the entire body depends on the strength and resilience of all its parts. Therefore, protecting and nurturing subnational democracy is not just a matter of local/regional concern, but a crucial component of safeguarding the general health of the Polish democratic system.

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