Understanding Rural (Dis)Content

Methodological Approach for the Project ‘Social and Political Consequences of Spatial Inequality‘

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Abstract

The prevailing socio-economic disparities within numerous European nations are becoming increasingly pronounced. However, our understanding of their social and political implications, particularly with respect to the rise of populism and the sentiment of being 'left behind', remains limited. The project, titled 'Social and Political Consequences of Spatial Inequalities: A Case Study of Central-Eastern Europe' (SPC Spatial) aims to address these issues through empirical verification, international comparison, a focus on East-Central Europe, and a mixed-method approach. This Working Paper is part of the project's qualitative work package, which specifically targets the perceptions and perspectives of people living in disadvantaged regions. It aims to understand how different age and income groups perceive their local living conditions and how this shapes their future prospects and their relationship to politics. To enhance the transparency of our research, this methodological working paper presents in detail our basic methodological assumptions and the empirical approach, which includes expert interviews, focus groups, the use of visual stimuli, and a thematic analysis of the data.

Keywords: left behind places; geography of discontent; rural areas; qualitative methods; focus group; expert interviews; visual methods; thematic analysis; methodology

JEL-Codes: O18; P25

Kurzfassung

Die in zahlreichen europäischen Ländern herrschenden sozioökonomischen Ungleichheiten werden immer deutlicher sichtbar. Unser Verständnis ihrer sozialen und politischen Auswirkungen, insbesondere im Hinblick auf den zunehmenden Populismus und das Gefühl, räumlich und sozial „abgehängt" zu sein, ist jedoch nach wie vor sehr begrenzt. Das Projekt mit dem Titel „Soziale und politische Konsequenzen räumlicher Ungleichheiten eine ostmitteleuropäische Fallstudie" (SPC Spatial) zielt darauf ab, diese Zusammenhänge durch empirische Überprüfung, internationale Vergleiche, einen Fokus auf Ostmitteleuropa und einen Mixed-Methods-Ansatz zu adressieren. Dieses Working Paper ist Teil des qualitativen Arbeitspakets des Projekts, das sich speziell mit den Wahrnehmungen und Perspektiven der Menschen in benachteiligten Regionen befasst. Es zielt darauf ab, zu verstehen, wie verschiedene Alters- und Einkommensgruppen ihre lokalen Lebensverhältnisse wahrnehmen und wie diese ihre Zukunftsperspektiven sowie ihr Verhältnis zur Politik prägen. Um die Transparenz unserer Forschung zu erhöhen, werden in diesem methodologischen Working Paper unsere grundlegenden methodischen Annahmen und der empirische Ansatz, der Expert*innen-Interviews, Gruppendiskussionen, den Einsatz visueller Stimuli und eine thematische Analyse der Daten umfasst, im Detail vorgestellt.

Schlüsselwörter: Peripherisierung; Geographien der Unzufriedenheit; ländliche Räume; qualitative Methoden; Gruppendiskussionen; Experteninterviews; visuelle Methoden; thematische Analyse; Methodologie

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1 Project context: SPC Spatial

Significant socio-economic inequalities exist among regions within the European Union, with inter-regional disparities increasing despite diminishing cross-country inequality (Psycharis et al., 2020; Kemeny and Storper, 2020). Recent scholarship highlights the social and political consequences of these spatial inequalities, including the emergence of political cleavages, feelings of injustice and marginalization. Economic geographer Rodríguez-Posé (2018) speaks of the 'revenge of the places that don't matter' and argues that populism's support is driven by territorial inequalities rather than individual-level inequalities fuelling discontent in disadvantaged regions, leading to the rise of (right-wing) populist movements and creating a 'geography of discontent' (Dijkstra et al., 2020). However, the overall claim that spatial inequality is a core driver of anti-establishment resentment and populist support has also been contested (Gordon, 2018).

The project Social and political consequences of spatial inequalities: a case study of Central-Eastern Europe (SPC Spatial) is a joint undertaking of researchers from Institute of Sociology of The Czech Academy of Sciences (Czechia), Thünen Institute of Rural Studies (Germany), and Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization Polish Academy of Sciences (Poland) funded by Czech Science Foundation (GAČR), German Research Foundation (DFG), and Polish National Science Centre (NCN). The project aims to contribute to these debates on the social and political consequences of interregional socio-economic inequalities in four ways: by empirical verification, international comparison, focus on Central-Eastern Europe and a mixed-methods approach. Therefore, it thoroughly examines how inter-regional inequality contributes to individual-level inequalities, influences subjective perceptions of living conditions and prospects as well as 'feelings of being left-behind' (Deppisch et al., 2022), and affects political opinions and voting behaviour. It compares these issues internationally, moving beyond single-country studies for a more nuanced analysis. Thereby, it focuses on Central-Eastern Europe – specifically on the Czech Republic, eastern Germany, and Poland – which is rarely in the focus of research, despite the fact that regional inequalities and populism are prominent there (Bernard et al., 2025a). To identify the effects of spatial inequality and understand the perspectives of people in peripheralised places, the project uses both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The study design encompasses four work packages (see Figure 1):

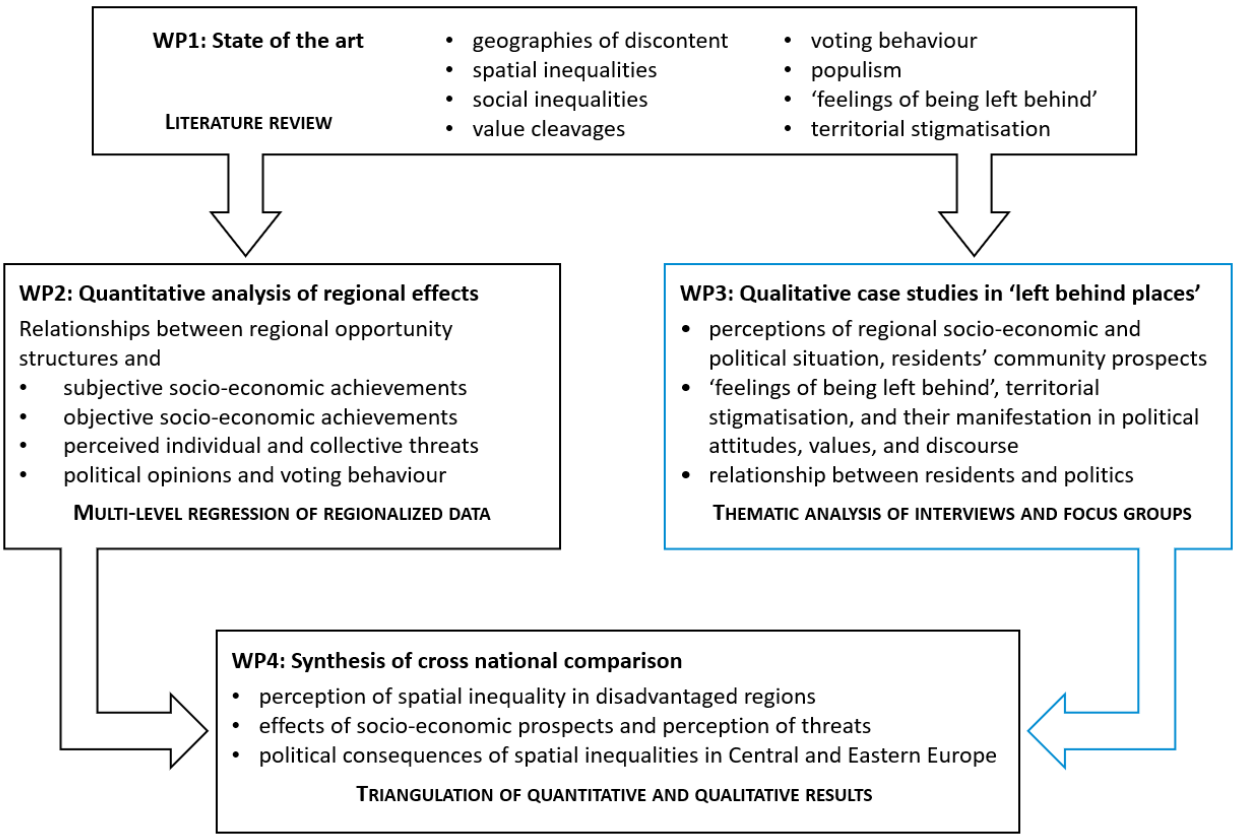
(1) The objective of Work Package 1 is to conduct a systematic literature review on social and spatial inequalities, with a particular emphasis on Central-Eastern Europe. The review will explore the consequences of these inequalities for voting behaviour.

(2) The objective of Work Package 2 is to analyse the relationships between regional inequalities, social inequalities, political attitudes, and voting behaviour across Europe. The quantitative analysis is based on existing large cross-national survey datasets and contextual data at the regional level (Bernard et al., 2025a; Bernard et al., 2025b).

(3) The Work Package 3 examines, through qualitative case studies, how the regional situation is reflected in residents' perceptions of their living conditions and their community's prospects as well as their relationship to politics. This working paper delineates the methodological framework and the empirical choices undertaken in this work package.

(4) Work package 4 is concerned with the triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative findings, and their systematisation with respect to the central research objectives.

Figure 1: Mixed-methods research design of the project SPC Spatial



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This Working Paper provides a comprehensive presentation of the basic methodological assumptions and the empirical approach we have chosen for the qualitative analysis in Work Package 3. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section summarises the basic methodological considerations regarding the choice of a qualitative paradigm to explore (dis)content in so-called left-behind rural places (Section 2). The following section summarises how the case study areas were selected for qualitative analysis (Section 3). We then outline our approach to data collection (Section 4) and describe how the expert interviews and focus groups were conducted in the context of the project. We then explain how we analysed the data using thematic analysis (Section 5) and how we handled the data (Section 6). The final section summarises our approach and provides an outlook for the qualitative part of the SPC Spatial research project (Section 7).

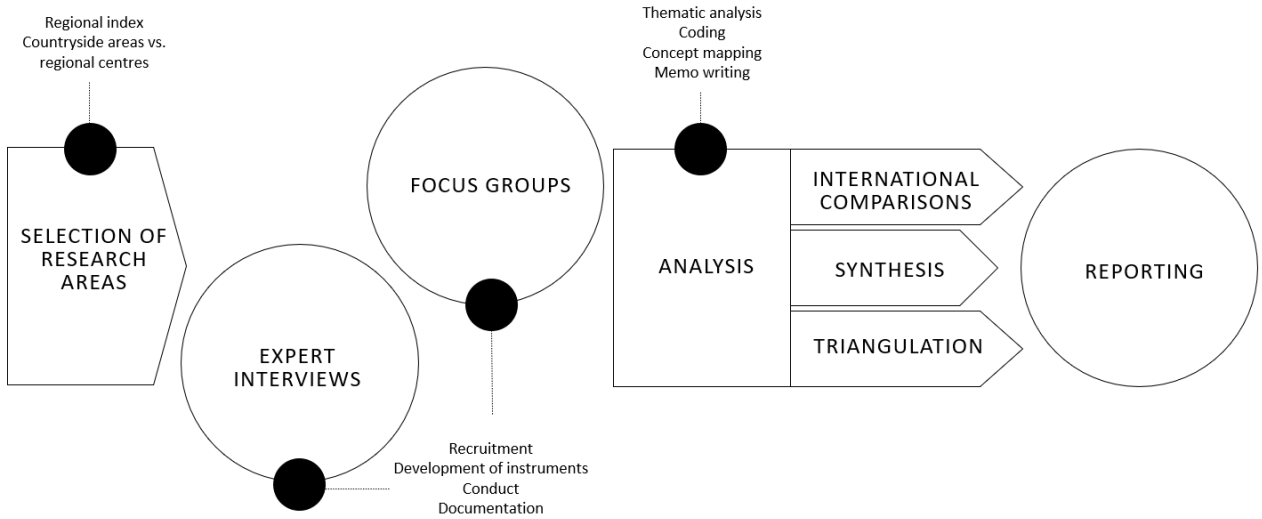
2 Methodological backgrounds

Currently, the debate on 'left-behind places' and the 'geography of discontent' is dominated by quantitative often macro-economic approaches that study correlations of, e.g., economic growth and election results of eurosceptic or populist parties. Underlying socio-psychological assumptions that link regional and social inequalities to feelings of fairness, threat, and political attitudes are rarely examined and the perspectives and perceptions of people living in so-called 'left-behind' areas are often left out of the analysis (EXIT consortium, 2023: P. 10). Although the literature on peripheralisation processes can partly fill this gap, it often focuses on questions of everyday life, mobility, or coping, leaving the political dimension as a residue. For example, we know little about how people understand being 'left behind', how feelings of being left-behind relate to political beliefs, how they differ between social groups and peripheralised rural regions, what role perceptions of past periods and transformations play, and, more generally, how place acts as a lens through which people interpret politics. Because of its ability to reveal nuances of meaning, qualitative methodology is well suited to gathering rich data on these issues, complementing the insights gained from quantitative analysis (Bernard et al., 2025b).

The aim of Work Package 3 of the SPC Spatial project is to qualitatively capture the social and political consequences of spatial inequalities from the perspective of people living in so-called 'left behind' regions. We want to uncover, how the local and regional situation is reflected in the subjective perceptions of the inhabitants of rural peripheralised research areas concerning living conditions and community prospects, as well as how these perceptions interact with their conception of, relationship to, and expectations from politics. This contributes to a growing body of research which examines issues of spatial inequality from the everyday perspective of people in rural areas (Bernard et al., 2016; Keim-Klärner et al., 2021; Klärner and Knabe, 2019; Komornicki and Czapiewski, 2020). To explore these questions, we conduct a comparative case study based on expert interviews and focus groups.

Case studies contribute to a small-scale examination of (dis)content and we assume that only a variety of case studies can paint a comprehensive picture of the complexity of society. To qualitatively capture the perception of the regional situation in the research areas from the perspective of people living in so-called left behind regions, we have chosen the basic design of a comparative study (Flick, 2009: P. 135) drawing on multiple cases (Yin, 2003: P. 46). As with qualitative studies in general, our aim is not to generalise our findings to other rural peripheral regions. Rather, a deeper understanding of our case study areas should contribute, in the overall view, to the understanding of the social and political consequences of spatial inequalities. Two research areas were selected in each of the Czech Republic, eastern Germany and Poland. Thus, performing international comparison and regional comparison. We also chose different participants in terms of age and socio-economic characteristics in the six focus groups per research area. Figure 2 summarises the empirical steps of our research in Work Package 3.

Figure 2: Schematic procedure of Work Package 3



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2.1 Expert interviews

After selection of case study areas (see Section 3) we started data collection with expert interviews. Conducting the expert interviews was based on three main objectives: (a) to gather local knowledge and background information for better understanding of the case study areas, especially regarding perceptions and assessments of spatial inequalities and discontent, (b) the preparation of the focus groups, especially regarding current (local and/or group specific) issues, and (c) to introduce ourselves as researchers in the area and to gain gate keepers' support for the recruitment process.[1]

We thus gained in-depth knowledge of the selected research areas through the expert interviews. Understanding the experts' perspective on the local economic, infrastructural and political-cultural situation and identifying issues that were debated in the research areas at the time informed the design of our focus group guideline (see Appendix A.2) and the choice of visual stimuli for the focus groups (see Appendix A.7). Moreover, some of the experts helped us to find participants for the focus groups and thus acted as gate keepers. As we approached the experts in their functional role, many of them had a tighter schedule and the scope of the information they were able to share was more limited than in other forms of interviews (Flick, 2009: P. 166). Expert interviews are a form of guided, often semi-structured qualitative interviews (Trinczek, 2009). In contrast to other, more biographically oriented forms of interviews, 'here the interviewees are of less interest as a (whole) person than their capacities as experts for a certain field of studies' (Flick, 2009: P. 165). According to Bogner and Menz (2009: P. 46–48), the expert interviews that we conducted in our project can be understood both as 'explorative' expert interviews and as 'theory-generating'. In the exploration phase the interviews thus helped us 'to develop a clearer idea of the problem' (Bogner and Menz, 2009: P. 46) and functioned 'as a preliminary move in the identification of a final interview guide' (Bogner and Menz, 2009: P. 46). As 'theory-generating' expert interviews we are able to use them to reconstruct subjective action orientations and to analyse the implicit knowledge of the experts about the region.

[1] The last point applies mostly to the German cases as the Czech and Polish team used agencies to recruit participants for the group discussions.

Who is considered an expert varies considerably. We define experts as persons who not only possess 'contextual knowledge' (Bogner and Menz, 2009: P. 46) about the region and the groups of residents who are our subjects but also as persons who are in positions of power or influence. Therefore, experts are of interest for our research because their 'knowledge has an effect on practice, it structures the conditions of action of other actors in the expert's field in a relevant way' (Bogner and Menz, 2009: P. 55). If we consider people as experts who are in a position to put their own interpretations into practice locally or regionally, they provide insight into local realities not only from their private point of view but also from a professional perspective.

2.2 Focus groups

The core of our qualitative analysis, however, is focus groups. We consider focus groups to be a particularly suitable method for assessing the social and political consequences of spatial inequalities because they focus less on individual biographies and more on shared perceptions, beliefs and collective orientations, as well as their origins in social interactions. Focus groups allow researchers 'to describe and understand meanings and interpretations of a selected group of people to gain an understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of the participants of the group' (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 3). There are different labels for interviews with more than two people, such as 'group interviews', 'focus group interviews', 'focus group discussion' (Barbour 2018: P. 2), 'focussed interviews' (Merton & Kendall 1946 according to Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 1) or 'group discussion' (Flick, 2009: P. 196–202). While the term 'group discussion' is very common in the German-speaking qualitative social research community (see for example, Bohnsack, 2004; Kühn and Koschel, 2018), recent Anglo-Saxon debates often refer to the term 'focus group' (Flick, 2009: P. 203). Whilst the different terms sometimes indicate varied methodological approaches and assumptions (Barbour, 2018: P. 23), there are many similarities between the two concepts (Bohnsack, 2004). We use the term focus group because of its high degree of compatibility with the international discussion of methods.

Kitzinger and Barbour (1999: P.. 20) give a broad definition that emphasises the interactional dimension of such discussions: 'Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction'. Thus, focus groups allow for consideration of the interactional context in which interview statements are made. Barbour (2018: P. 23) advises researchers who wish to make full use of this potential to invite participants to interact with each other and not just with the moderator, to encourage questions and topics that stimulate such interaction, to be attentive to the interactional aspects during the discussion and to explore 'differences in views or emphasis of participants' (Barbour, 2018: P. 23), and to compose the group in a way that makes participants comfortable with the discussion. To address the last point, we composed the groups to be socially relatively homogeneous by age and social status (see Sections 4.2.1).

Focus group methods have not developed within a fixed methodological framework (Barbour, 2018: P. 32), but can be aligned with different qualitative traditions such as symbolic interactionism, social constructivism, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, feminism, and critical pedagogical practice (Barbour, 2018: P. 33–36; Flick, 2009: P. 201–202; Liamputtong, 2011: P. 15). With this methodological indeterminacy comes the need for researchers using focus group methods to define their own methodological assumptions and theoretical beliefs about the constitution of the social. For this project, we decided to draw methodologically on symbolic interactionism and social constructivism. Symbolic interactionism stresses how meanings and interpretations are produced in the context of human interaction, thus creating a shared reality (Blumer, 1969). In line with the argument that social phenomena are jointly shaped by the actors involved, social constructivism also points out that social phenomena are maintained through social actions, habits and customs (Barbour, 2018: P. 34). In essence, Berger and Luckmann (1966) showed, how social reality is created, stabilised and contested over time in the context of collective interaction. Such 'dynamic and social negotiations of individual views as an essential element of the social constructionist theoretical approach to reality' (Flick, 2009: P. 202) provide an important theoretical foundation for focus group research, as 'verbal data can be collected in their context' (Flick, 2009: P. 201).

Accordingly, Flick underlines that group discussions have the potential to trigger a kind of communication that is very close to everyday conversations:

> 'In contrast to narration produced as a monologue in the narrative interview, processes of constructing social reality are referred to that take place in joint narratives […]. By thus extending the scope of data collection, it is attempted to collect the data in context and to create a situation of interaction that comes closer to everyday life than the (often one-off) encounter of interviewer and interviewee or narrator permits.' (Flick, 2009: P. 195)

Similarly, Liamputtong highlights this every-day-dimension of focus groups when she emphasises that it 'allows researchers to access different communication forms which people use in their day-to-day interaction, and these include joking, arguing, teasing and recapturing past events' (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 5). It is a 'process of collective sense-making' (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 18) that can be observed as people interact in focus groups. They therefore 'afford a privileged vantage point from which to observe the processes through which ideas, meanings and discourses are formulated, contested, debated and modified' (Barbour, 2018: P. 34). Participants respond to one another, so we can assume that this 'synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 45–46). It can be considered a strength of the method that it represents the interactional and situational context in which the data are collected. This choice of method may even open doors to reach people who would not otherwise participate in a social science study. For example, there is evidence that young people like the format of a focus group better than individual interviews, due to the more everyday atmosphere and the company of other young people (Punch 2002 according to Liamputtong, 2011: P. 116–117). Because participants can develop their own emphases, 'focus groups have the capacity to reflect issues and concerns salient to participants rather than closely following the researcher's agenda. This means that the resulting data can yield surprises' (Barbour, 2018: P. 25). Therefore, we considered them a suitable tool for our explorative research questions.

To encourage the discussion among participants, we used visual stimuli in addition to open-ended questions. The use of stimulus materials in focus groups 'allow[s] the participants to feel more relaxed and comfortable in the group' (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 64–65). It can help in 'reassuring participants that discussion will not be couched in 'ivory tower' terms, the use of such accessible points of reference also, importantly, gives participants permission to draw on the rich resources provided through their daily lives and interests' (Barbour, 2018: P. 86). Barbour points to an important ethical dimension in the usage of visual stimuli. Not only do visual stimuli help to reduce power imbalances between researchers and participants, but moreover they may allow researchers to steer the discussion without being forced to verbalise their research interest. Thus, images can stimulate a focus group without influencing participants verbally. Moreover, as research on 'left-behind places' or 'peripheralisation' always comes with the risk of spatially stigmatising the participants (Meyer et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2023). Visual stimuli can help mitigate this risk, because 'the presentation of a photo allows the participant to consider a stigmatized issue as an object rather than them being asked questions directly about that issue' (Wood et al., 2023: P. 1177). We used photos with the intention that it would allow people to talk openly and without fear of judgment about their own perspectives on sensitive topics (such as future prospects) thereby unclosing rather nuanced and ambiguous sides of everyday life under the conditions of disadvantage. We have chosen to use visual stimuli because not only can images help to evoke different levels of thought than words alone (Harper, 2002: P. 13), but they can also contribute to the understanding between researchers and participants as images are read and processed in a different way to words. Harper sums it up pointedly when he says:

> 'Sociological questions are often not meaningful to non-sociologists. There is the need, described in all qualitative methods books, of bridging gaps between the worlds of the researcher and the researched. Photo elicitation may overcome the difficulties posed by in-depth interviewing because it is anchored in an image that is understood, at least in part, by both parties.' (Harper, 2002: P. 20)

'[T]he use of photographs during the interview process' (Lapenta, 2011: P. 201) is referred to as 'photo-elicitation' (Lapenta, 2011). Photo-elicitation has been used both in rural contexts and in research on 'left-behind

places' (Harper, 2001; Sampson-Cordle, 2001; Wood et al., 2023). While much of the methodological work on photo-elicitation focuses on the context of interview studies (Harper, 2002; Dimbath, 2013; Dobrusskin et al., 2024), it has also been fruitfully used in focus groups (Władyniak et al., 2019; Richard and Lahman, 2015; Dörner et al., 2011). In the context of focus groups, the use of visual stimuli is seen as particularly helpful, as images can help participants to focus on collective issues rather than biographical ones – a benefit that has been highlighted in the context of photovoice[2] (Hannay et al. 2013 according to Barbour, 2018: P. 92).

While Section 2 summarised fundamental methodological considerations that led us to choose a qualitative paradigm to investigate social and political (dis)satisfaction in deprived areas, the following Sections 3 to 5 will detail the empirical steps we undertook to do so.

[2] Photovoice is a research method that is based on collective picture taking aiming to strengthen a communities critical self-reflection. Lapenta sums it up as a 'participatory action research approach that asks interviewees to take photographs that they feel portray their daily routines, common events or community life. They subsequently talk about the significance and meaning of these images with other members of the community, and the researcher' (Lapenta, 2011: S. 207)

3 Case study design

As the question of the selection of cases to be compared is crucial for comparative studies (Flick 2009: 135), this section summarises the basic methodical assumptions on the selection of case study areas. The selection of case study areas was a two-step process. In the first step, we created an index on a regional level to choose two regions in each country. Since these regions are geographically rather large in a second step, we chose smaller research areas in the six regions that where roughly distinguished by their degree of rurality.

3.1 Selection criteria

The first step in selecting the research areas was to create a regional index that captures spatial disadvantage in terms of economic, demographic, and social indicators. Two principles guided the construction of the index: to use regions of comparable size in all three countries, and to use the same sub-indicators in all three countries as far as possible. In the search for regions of comparable size in Germany, Poland and Czechia, it was not possible to use the same NUTS classification level in all three countries because the German NUTS regions are significantly smaller than the Czech and Polish regions of the same level. Therefore, for Germany we used NUTS level 3 regions (*Landkreise*), while in Czechia and Poland we used regions, historically belonging to the LAU1 level (*Powiaty* for Poland and *Okresy* for Czechia). In Czechia and Poland, GDP figures for LAU1 regions were transferred from the NUTS3 levels. As the focus of the project is on the post-socialist Central Europe, we have only worked with data from the regions of the former East Germany.

We have selected six indicators of spatial disadvantage. Two indicators related to regional economic performance, two indicators related to population development and two indicators related to poverty and social disadvantage. The first indicator for poverty in each country is based on the specific national welfare system. The other poverty indicator refers to country-specific, sometimes rather hidden forms of poverty and social disadvantage. See Table 1 for an overview of the chosen indicators.

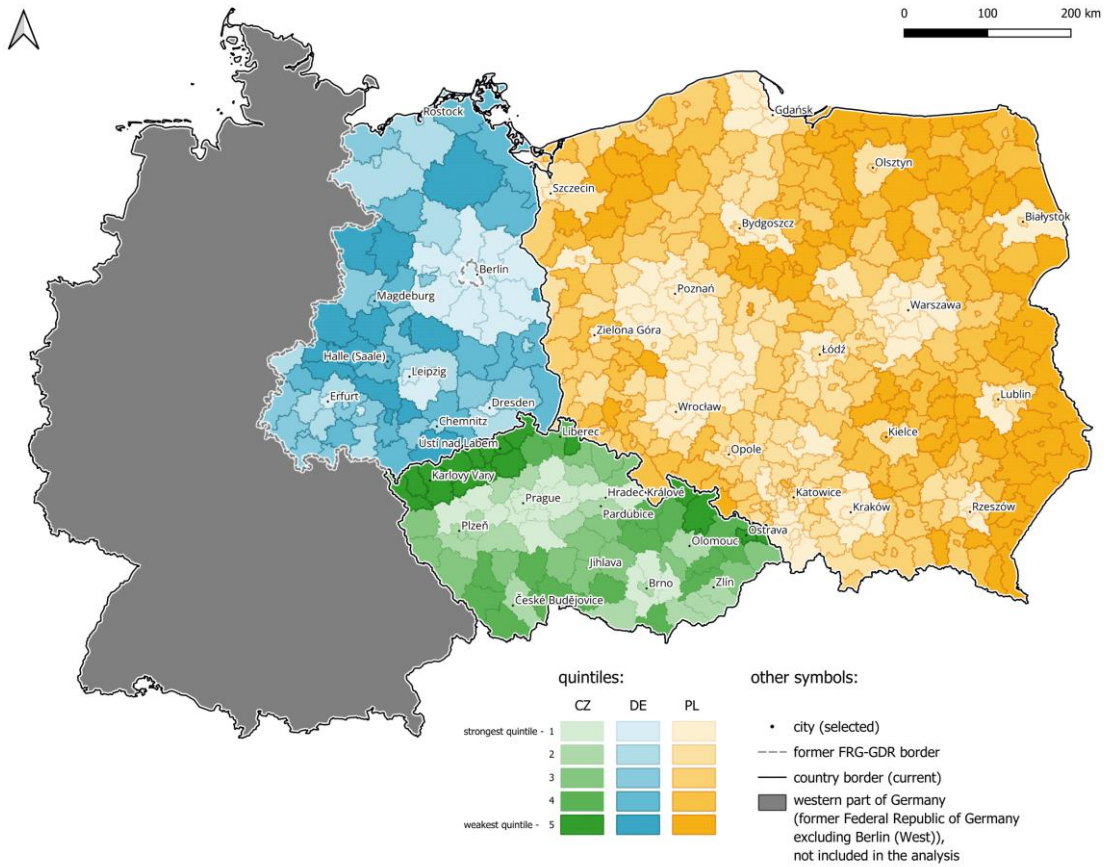
Table 1: Composition of the regional index

Domain	Indicator
Economic Performance	GDP per capita pps, logged, 2021
	GDP gross change, 2021/2011
Demographic Dynamics	Population change 2021/2011
	Migration saldo in the period 2011-2020
Poverty and social Disadvantage	Poverty indicator 1 (country specific) *CZ: Share of inhabitants in households receiving the the basic living minimum tested welfare 2021* *DE: Share inhabitants receiving basic income support for job seekers 2020* *PL: Share of inhabitants receiving social assistance under an income criterion 2021*
	Poverty indicator 2 (country specific) *CZ: Share of inhabitants with debt seizures 2021* *DE: Share of low-income households 2020* *PL: Unemployment rate 2021*

Source: own compilation.

We standardised the values of all indicators and then created an additive summary index based on all six variables. The national results using the index were then categorized into quintiles and displayed in maps (see Figure 3). The research areas were selected from the weakest quintile. For Czechia 15 regions qualified as potential research regions, for eastern Germany 15 and for Poland 76.

Figure 3: Czech Republic, eastern Germany and Poland indicating the ranking on the regional index



Source: own calculation and depiction.

From this pool of spatially disadvantaged regions, we selected two regions for each country, considering the following aspects:

- political discontent (under-average levels of voter turnout and/or over-average support of populist parties)[3],
- spatial variety (both regions must belong to different NUT3 regions and in Germany to different federal states),
- research pragmatics (accessibility of the region for the research team, and previous research experiences of the researchers in the region).

Thus, all regions selected are socio-economically disadvantaged, have an unfavourable economic and demographic trajectory, and show strong indications for political discontent (high election results for the respective populist parties and/or low voter turnout in the last national elections).

[3] For Czechia, the turnout of the 2021 parliament elections and the results for the parties ANO, SPD and KSČM were considered. For Germany, the turnout of the 2021 parliament elections and the results for the party AfD were considered. For Poland, the turnout of the 2019 parliament elections and the results for the parties PiS and Konfederacja were considered.

From the regions selected smaller research areas for the case studies were chosen based on similar aspects relevant for choosing the regions:

- spatial disadvantage (in terms of economic performance, demographic dynamics, poverty),
- political discontent (under-average levels of voter turnout and/or over-average support of populist parties),
- spatial variety (in order to examine the influence of the size of the place and differences in the availability and accessibility of services and facilities – in the following we refer to the more rural research areas as 'countryside areas' and the less rural areas as 'regional centres'),
- research pragmatics (accessibility of the region for the research team, and previous research experiences of the researchers in the region).

We describe the six selected case study areas in the following section.

3.2 Research areas

In the Czech Republic, two areas were selected that are far from the national average in terms of much higher unemployment rates, significant depopulation, higher numbers of households under debt seizure, and higher proportions of residents living on minimum support schemes. Both areas rank lowest in terms of non-participation in elections and have almost the highest support for populist politics compared to the national average.

The Czech regional centre research area is a town of less than 15,000 inhabitants on the border with Germany. It was an industrial centre of the region, known for its textile industry dating back to the 18th century. After the Second World War, the German population, which made up the overall majority of the inhabitants, was expelled and the region was resettled, with industrial production continuing to be a central element of the local economy and of the order of local everyday life. The steady process of deindustrialisation that has unfolded in the more than three decades since the end of state socialism has resulted in the closure of most factories, and the town has faced high levels of poverty and unemployment and lost a significant proportion of its population.

The Czech countryside research area has less than 5,000 inhabitants. It is located in a peripheral, sparsely populated part of an economically lagging region that was resettled after the expulsion of the German population at the end of the Second World War. Although the population grew during the period of state socialism, it never returned to pre-war levels. Currently, it is shrinking again, and the town's vocational school, which served the larger region, as well as health services and various local shops, have closed. Local wages, including those in the town's small metalworking factory, are described by the respondents as very low. The town is situated in a rural region, surrounded by villages where agriculture was, and sometimes still is, the main source of household income.

In Germany, the research area selected as a regional centre is a small town in a rather rural region of eastern Germany with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants. At the end of the 19th century, helped by a railway connection, it developed into an industrial centre, more than doubling its population in 40 years. Today, the community still draws on this historic boom in its self-presentation, and at least a core of the old industry remains. The town lost its status as a district seat about 30 years ago. Today, it encompasses infrastructures and facilities such as several discounters, petrol stations, a library, a public swimming pool, a secondary school and a railway station. In any case, in the 2021 federal election, the town had a very low voter turnout and a very high share of AfD votes compared to the (eastern) German average.

The countryside area we selected in Germany is one of the most remote areas in a very rural region, with long distances to basic services. Most of the social support infrastructure, including a food bank, is located in the town with less than 7,000 inhabitants, while there are few such facilities in the villages. In one of our first expert interviews, this area was described as a 'periphery within the periphery'. Some of the main employers are the armed

forces, smaller agricultural businesses, companies in the construction industry, and care services for elderly. Many residents commute to work elsewhere. Indicators for both the area and its inhabitants indicated a rather negative economic situation (e.g., percentage of low-income households and percentage of unemployed). In the municipalities that we have chosen, more than a third of people voted for the AfD in the 2024 EU elections.

In Poland, the two selected research areas differ in terms of historical and cultural conditions. Their selection should therefore provide a more complete picture of Poland's lagging regions. Both areas represent negative socio-economic characteristics associated with high and persistent unemployment, emigration of young people and an ageing population. In both case study areas, voter turnout in the 2019 Polish parliamentary elections was significantly lower than the national average, reflecting lower social participation.

The regional centre research area is the main town of a region characterised by dispersed rural settlements. It has about 25,000 inhabitants and predominates the region. Historically, this area belonged to Prussia, later Germany and became Polish after 1945. The German population was resettled and replaced by Poles mostly from the eastern pre-war Poland. Subsequently, large state-owned farms were established here. They were liquidated during the economic transition of the early 1990s, contributing to rising unemployment, the decline of local industry, rural-urban migration and increasing structural poverty. The population of this region has traditionally voted for liberal and left-wing parties, including populist fractions.

The other Polish research area we selected as a countryside area is the main town (of about 5.000 inhabitants) of a region characterised by relatively dense rural settlements, high (agrarian) land fragmentation, and a high proportion of farmers with small family farms. During the partitions of Poland, this region was controlled by the Russian Empire. There has been no population transfer and multi-generational families are common. This region can be considered an inner periphery (Tagai et al., 2017; Vaishar, 2006). Despite its relative proximity to the capital, Warsaw (about 120 km), it is severely under-invested, with significant out-migration and economic decline. The electorate in this region tends to be conservative and traditional, often supporting right-wing parties and agrarian populists. In the 2019 Polish parliamentary elections, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) won in this region, gaining more than 65 per cent (the average result is 43.6%), while the Liberal Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska,* KO), in second place, received less than 15 per cent (the average result for Poland is 27.4%).

4 Data collection

Our research is mainly based on verbal data. By conducting explorative expert interviews in each research area, we aimed to establish a comprehensive foundation for our subsequent focus groups, which form the main empirical base of our study. In the following, we outline in-depth how we collected the data and we explain main decisions made in the empirical investigation. For central data-gathering instruments such as interview guidelines see the Appendix.

4.1 Expert interviews

In the initial phase of our data collection process, we employed expert interviews to gather essential insights and context for each case study area. The expert interviews aimed to gather local knowledge and background information to better understand spatial inequalities and discontent in the case study areas, prepare for focus groups on current issues, and introduce our presence to gain support from gatekeepers for the recruitment process (see Section2.1). We conducted 7-9 expert interviews in each research area and talked to 65 experts in 49 interviews in total. These interviews lasted between 30 to 123 minutes. The selected experts represented local and regional positions of power and influence, as well as the age and socio-economic groups we later approached for our focus groups. In each region we interviewed at least one local or regional representative in order to introduce ourselves and to establish our presence in the area. Furthermore, we interviewed other local and regional experts such as local government professionals, members of local action groups for rural development, social workers, teachers, journalists, representatives of job centres, charities (e.g., food banks), churches, sport and leisure clubs, or large employers and entrepreneurs in each case study area. Table 2 provides an overview of all conducted expert interviews:

Table 2: Number of conducted expert interviews

Country	Expert interviews	Administration	Civil Society	Economy	Social issues	Overall
CZ	Countryside area	3 (3)	2 (2)	1 (1)	3 (5)	9 (11)
	Regional centre	2 (4)	1 (1)	2 (2)	4 (4)	9 (11)
DE	Countryside area	3 (3)	2 (3)	1 (3)	1 (2)	7 (11)
	Regional centre	2 (3)	3 (9)	1 (1)	2 (4)	8 (17)
PL	Countryside area	2 (2)	1 (1)	3 (3)	2 (2)	8 (8)
	Regional centre	4 (4)	1 (1)	2 (2)	1 (1)	8 (8)
Overall		**16 (19)**	**10 (17)**	**10 (12)**	**13 (18)**	**49 (66)**

Note: numbers in brackets indicate how many persons were interviewed, as some interviews involved several people.

Source: own compilation

For expert interviews the interview guide has a stronger directive function than in other forms of interviews (Flick, 2009: P. 167). Expert interviews are often conducted under time pressure and have a narrower thematical focus. Thus, we streamlined our interview guide to ensure that our research interest is met and that the interview avoids topics with less relevance to our research questions (Flick, 2009: P. 167). Nevertheless, the interviewee should be given opportunity to emphasise what is important to them. That is why we used a 'standardized, but open-ended interview' guide (Aurini et al., 2016: P. 82) as is common in semi-structured interviews. This allowed' for some 'spontaneity', while providing a fair degree of comparison' (Aurini et al., 2016: P. 82) between the interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face mainly in offices of the experts.

Our interview guide consisted of three main parts, similar to most guidelines for conducting semi-structured interviews (Aurini et al., 2016: P. 92–96):

(1) The *introduction* establishes rapport, gives the interviewee some context information on the goals of the research project and the interview and serves administrative and data protection purposes. When we introduced the research project, we tried to be transparent but also to avoid influencing the content of the interviewees' statements too much. Therefore, we did not use expressions such as 'left behind', 'spatial disadvantage', or 'populism', which could bias the interviewee. This applied not only to the interview itself, but also to the small talk beforehand.

(2) The *body* consists of the main interview questions, which the team agreed upon after several rounds of discussions and commenting (see A.1 for the full expert interview guide). The questions were designed to familiarise the experts with the interview situation by talking about their work in the research area at first. Afterwards, we encouraged our interview partners to assess the local situation, to reflect about current issues and responsibilities, to talk about their perception of the socio-political situation, to speak about their assessment of the discussion about left-behind places, and to share their views on future prospects of the region.[4]

(3) The closing remarks 'should provide the interviewee a sense of closure' (Aurini et al., 2016: P. 96) and gives interviewers the chance to thank for the interview, to appreciate the interviewee's contribution and most importantly for the progress of the research project to agree on further steps regarding the recruitment of residents for the focus groups. We followed the qualitative principles of communication and openness (Rosenthal, 2018: P. 39–48) and rather than using the interview guide as a rigid instrument, we used it as a tool which helps the interviewer to shed light on the expert's assessments and perceptions.

4.2 Focus groups

To analyse the collective perception of the region regarding spatial inequality and residents' community prospects, we examined how these perceptions interact with residents' political experiences, expectations, and relationships. Additionally, we explored the diverse perspectives shaped by Central-Eastern European backgrounds, residency in countryside areas or regional centres, age, and socio-economic status (see Section 2.2). To this end, we conducted six focus groups in each case study area. In one of the German regions, an additional discussion was held due to high participant turnout, allowing for two smaller sessions instead of a single large one or turning people away. As a result, a total of 37 focus groups were conducted throughout the project (see Table 3).

Table 3: Number of conducted focus groups

Research area	Czech Republic	Germany	Poland	Overall
Countryside areas	6 (48)	6 (32)	6 (37)	19 (117)
Regional centres	6 (50)	7 (40)	6 (31)	18 (121)
Overall	**12 (98)**	**13 (72)**	**12 (68)**	**37 (238)**

Note: numbers in brackets indicate how many persons participated in the focus groups overall.

Source: own compilation

The focus group lasted between 43 and 105 minutes. In total, 238 people, aged between 14 and 85, participated in the meetings.

[4] Two of the questions we used were inspired by Katherine J. Cramer 's study *The politics of resentment* (2016: P. 237): 'What are the major issues facing people in this community? What do you think should be done about this?'.

4.2.1 Composing the groups and recruiting participants

We used a purposive sampling strategy, which is very common in focus group research (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 50–51). Our sampling strategy aimed at the 'maximal variation in the sample' (Patton 2002 after Flick, 2009: P. 122). This means 'to integrate only a few cases, but those which are as different as possible, to disclose the range of variation and differentiation in the field' (Flick, 2009: P. 122). In order to capture the widest possible qualitative range of perspectives on the regional situation and politics and 'to reflect the diversity within the […] population under study' (Barbour, 2018: P. 69), group members were grouped by age and socio-economic status. Socio-economic similarities between participants are 'more likely to maximize interaction within the group' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 20–21), it helps participants to find common ground. This type of 'purposive sampling allows for the data to be interrogated purposefully, that is, in order to carry out systematic comparison' (Barbour, 2018: P. 69) between groups. At the same time, this grouping ensures that all participants 'share at least one important characteristic [within the group] which can also encourage people to attend and may facilitate discussion on difficult topics' (Barbour, 2018: P. 70). In order to account for possible gender specific differences, the groups mostly were of mixed gender. Two groups were one-gender groups, the average share of women participants was 58 per cent. With this group composition, we aimed to explore and compare the perspectives and different lenses that people of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds in places of residence in both countryside areas and regional centres bring to the issue of spatial inequality and political discontent. In Table 4 we provide an overview about the composition of the focus groups.

The Czech and the Polish teams used recruitment agencies. In the Czech case, the researchers recruited the experts themselves. If the experts agreed, the researchers put them in touch with the agency to help them recruit focus groups. In the Polish case, the agencies were based in the research regions, so to some extent the staff themselves acted as gatekeepers. The German research team recruited by themselves. As we wanted to appeal to a diverse population and some parts of the population may not respond to impersonal recruitment strategies (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 52; Ellard-Gray et al., 2015), we combined different recruitment techniques.

In the the German regional centre research area, for example, we used gatekeepers such as the experts we interviewed and other people in key positions (such as a school principal or the employers at the local food bank) to help with recruitment. We also put-up posters in many shops, charities, and municipal notice boards, or handed out flyers to associations such as the local choir or sports clubs, to experts, to other participants, or to people we met on the street. We moreover published short texts in the municipal newspaper, the local newspaper, and a small adds portal in the internet. For the advertisement, we tried to avoid potentially off-putting words such as 'focus group' and instead used 'group conversation' or a 'round of talks' to avoid sounding too academic (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015: 4, see this text for more helpful advice on low-threshold recruitment). Another successful recruitment strategy was to attend community meetings to present the project in person and make face-to-face contact with potential participants. It also happened to us that people we initially thought of as experts became participants in focus groups (which was already described by Jonsson et al. 2002 according to Liamputtong, 2011: P. 53): a person we initially approached as an expert, had the idea of participating in a focus group herself. She invited three other members of her association and two participants also brought their partners. To match potential participants to the intended age and socio-economic groups, a 'few qualifying questions' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 61) were used during the recruitment process to ensure group composition met our needs. It was especially demanding to ask potential participants about their socio-economic status without discouraging them to participate. Thus, we asked about profession and/or occupation as a proxy for socio-economic status.

In terms of both the capacity to moderate the focus group and to analyse the transcripts, we aimed for each focus group consisting of a minimum of four residents (to ensure a certain potential for differences) and a

maximum of nine (to ensure that all participants have sufficient space to express themselves)..[5] The average number of participants was six people. In one case, a discussion with only two participants was realised, because otherwise the discussion could not have taken place at all. Because compared to other qualitative research techniques, focus group participants have to travel to a location, which involves financial and other costs such as transport, childcare, or time away from work or family, we offered compensation for these additional costs (Krueger & Casey 2009 after Liamputtong, 2011: P. 56).

Table 4: Composition of the focus groups

Research area	Countryside area	Regional centre	Countryside area	Regional centre	Countryside area	Regional centre
Country	**Czech Republic**		**Germany**		**Poland**	
Length in minutes (mean)	65-86 (76)	70-101 (88)	50-97 (74)	43-105 (81)	64-99 (80)	50-96 (77)
Number of participants (mean)	7-9 (8)	7-9 (8)	2-9 (5)	4-8 (6)	6-7 (6)	4-6 (5)
Ratio female/ male participants	30/20	25/23	21/11	22/18	19/18	20/12
Participants' age in years	18-85	19-77	14-78	17-80	15-78	16-77

Note: numbers in brackets indicate how many persons were interviewed, as some interviews involved several people.

Source: own compilation.

In order to encourage the explication of supposedly basic shared knowledge, we aimed to recruit participants who did not have any particular personal or professional connection. However, this was not always possible. Firstly, it was sometimes impossible to recruit a group matching the necessary age and socio-economic categories without drawing on pre-existing groups. Secondly, some groups turned out to be at least partly real groups without us knowing beforehand. This might be related to the specific (rural) research setting. The communities we studied are small, and people in similar circumstances often know each other, at least by sight. For example, in one group which we considered to be an ad-hoc group when composing it, three participants turned out to be neighbours, two were friends, two others were in the same self-help group, and two were a divorced couple. Pre-existing groups also have advantages. They provide a natural setting, people feel safe and relational dynamics become clear (Barbour, 2018: 71?). This is similar to how 'information and influences filter through individuals' everyday interactions with family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and other social networks' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 11). We therefore drew on pre-existing or 'natural' groups where appropriate and necessary, and thus have a sample which combines both pre-existing and ad-hoc groups.

[5] Barbour (2018: P. 71) recommends a size of four to eight participants. Other authors speak of six to eight individuals Liamputtong (2011: P. 3) or eight to twelve participants (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 40). Stewart and Shamdasani (2015: P. 64) claim that '[f]ewer than 8 participants makes for a rather dull discussion'. This does not reflect our experience. We agree with Barbour (2018: P. 71), that it is not only 'perfectly possible' but sometimes even 'preferable' to hold a group discussion with only a minimum of three or four participants, if you want to be able to explore meanings and interpretations in depth.

4.2.2 Moderating, guiding, and setting up the focus groups

To conduct the focus groups, the research team consisted of at least two people: a moderator and an 'assistant moderator' (Barbour, 2018: P. 61) or 'note-taker' (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 60). The aim of the moderator was to build an informal atmosphere in order to encourage a discussion that is prone to everyday conversation (Flick, 2009). Stewart and Shamdasani also point out that 'the usefulness and validity of focus group data are affected by the extent to which participants feel comfortable about openly communicating their ideas, views, or opinions' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 7). Therefore, we aimed for a moderation style which would facilitate the discussion instead of controlling it (Bloor et al. 2001 after Barbour, 2018: P. 94).

Rich focus groups do not require much input from the researcher (Barbour, 2018: P. 85; see also Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 12–13). As a result, after introducing ourselves and the research project and warming up with a first stimulus to know each other, our guide consisted of only three general questions and ended with a short summary or a short of reflections of the focus group, a socio-economic questionnaire and the handing out of the compensation (see A.2). Moreover, moderators were not only encouraged to be patient and to tolerate moments of quietness (Barbour, 2018: P. 86), but also to 'keep a weather eye open for distinctions, qualifications and tensions that have analytical promise - seeking clarification and emphasizing these where necessary' (Barbour, 2018: P. 94). The note-taker had the important role of keeping track of the course of the discussion itself and anything of analytical importance that happens before or after the discussion (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 63). The note-taker passed a message to the moderator, in the case that they felt that something important needed to be asked (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 63) and the person wrote down the order of what was said. These latter notes improved the transcript massively when it was difficult to separate speakers by voice alone. The Czech approach was slightly different because of the use of video recording and the assistance of an agency not only for recruitment but also for technical assistance and transcribing the focus groups.

When we chose the venues for the focus groups, we stayed adaptable and kept in mind the specific groups, their routines and preferences. Thus, we held the discussions where our diverse participants could easily come and feel comfortable. Therefore, the venues were as diverse as our participants: for example, youth clubs, schools, town halls, or libraries. We offered refreshments and treats to help people feel more comfortable and provide a more natural day-to-day environment (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 57). When preparing the room, we seated the participants 'in a circle, or at least in a fashion where all group members can easily see one another, [because it] facilitates discussion and reduces the tendency for particular members of the group to emerge as dominant or for subgroups to emerge' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 31). See Figure 4 for an example of a focus group setting.

Figure 4: Example of a focus group set up in a public library

Source: Susann Bischof.

To make our research comparable between the different national teams, each team used the same guide to conduct the focus groups. It was modified after the first focus groups. We tried to use simple language when formulating our questions (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 73). Our guide consists of 6 parts:

(1) Introduction of the research project and consent to data processing
(2) Warm-up and getting acquainted
(3) Current issues
(4) Expectations of politics
(5) Prospects (using visual stimuli)
(6) Closing.

Although the guide is crucial to our method, every focus group was different and it was important to follow its process and to understand what was being said. Despite of broadly following the guide, we tried to remain open to the actual flow of the discussion and respond accordingly (Liamputtong, 2011: P. 76–77). See the Appendix (A.2) for a detailed commented version of the focus group guide.

In addition to the focus group data, we obtained more detailed knowledge about the socio-economic position of the participants using a short questionnaire about gender, age, place of living, education, occupation, financial situation, and household structure of the participants (see Appendix A.5). The socio-economic questionnaire was handed out to the participants after the discussion. It was slightly adapted for very young participants (see Appendix A.6). Similarly, to the postscripts for expert interviews (see Appendix A.3), we wrote detailed structured memos after each focus group to capture contextual information and first analytical thoughts (see Appendix A.4).

4.2.3 Using visual stimuli

To encourage further insight into perceptions of the regions, and to introduce an invigorating, dynamic element into the focus group, we issued photos in the last third of the scheduled time (see Section 2.2). The photos were supposed to open up the discussion about future prospects for the region, thereby animating the discussion with a different angle. Yet, as Harper notes: ‘Photos do not automatically elicit useful interviews’ (Harper, 2002: P. 20), so the choice of the photos and how they are introduced is crucial. The methodological literature and empirical examples show that there is no single ideal solution for choosing the right pictures for photo elicitation. The selection of image vignettes is considered to be very challenging (Rundel, 2020: P. 147). Some researches describe the choice of photographs as a reflexive process of trial and error (Harper, 2002: P. 21), others conduct a more structured analysis of the visual depiction of their research field. Illouz (2006), for example, presented her interviewees with nine varied images of couples to analyse their interpretations of romance. She previously analysed 80 advertising images from magazines to inform her selection.

In order to select appropriate images, a semiotic approach was employed. This approach entailed the initial identification of subjects and meanings that the images would convey (Rose 2022) – that is, the collective future prospects for each ‘left-behind’ research area. We then operationalised the different possible community prospects as precise as possible, in order to make it comprehensible across the three countries and their regions (see Table 5). Afterwards, the country teams chose the photos according to the defined and operationalised meaning, but sometimes depicting different specific problems, based on the site-, culture-, region-specific needs and characteristics (see Appendix A.7 for the used visual stimuli). Although the selected images were intended to represent a specific prospect, it was important to us to choose images that were open to interpretation in order to stimulate the participants' perceptions.

Table 5: Conceptualisation of community prospects for the selection of visual stimuli

Prospect	Conceptualisation
Economic prosperity & decline	This prospect is linked to the future trajectories of local economic development, recognising that development does not necessarily entail progress. This term encompasses a variety of phenomena that contribute to the overall concept of economic prosperity and decline, which may differ between regions. These include the unemployment rate, the state of local entrepreneurship, fluctuations in the local labour market, minimum and average wages, and salaries.
Spatial inclusion & exclusion	This prospect relates to both, spatial inclusion and the risk of spatial exclusion of the region, which can lead to feelings of being left behind and peripheralisation. This prospect encompasses several key issues: transportation and commuting (including train and bus networks, and the quality of local roads), the infrastructure of local institutions essential for the region's basic self-sufficiency (such as schools, kindergartens, healthcare units, and shops), and the integration of the region into the countrywide transportation and commuting network.
Political agency, social division & cohesion	This prospect concerns political agency in the region and the potential for social division or cohesion. This includes voter turnout; the number, quality, and character of political parties operating in the region; local NGOs and grassroots social movements; as well as social conflicts.
Ecology, green transformation & climate change challenges	The ecological prospect refers to the green future of the region. This encompasses a wide range of issues including: landscape transformation, natural disasters (such as droughts and floods), green energy and fossil fuels, as well as the impact of environmental change on the labour market, economic performance and quality of life.
Recognition & importance	This prospect concerns the external perception of the region. It includes: national recognition, de-stigmatisation of being left behind, national media discourses, tourism and other site-specific activities that contribute to a positive and desirable image of the region or their potential stigmatisation.

Source: own compilation.

For our research project, the visual material itself was not the object of our study, it facilitated and mediated the communication process by eliciting reactions and reflections on taken-for-granted thoughts, ideas, and experiences. As Barbour (2018: P. 88) points out in relation to the use of maps as stimuli, it may be of less interest to the researcher's analysis which stimulus was specifically chosen, than how the participants explain their choice of stimuli. While stimulus material is often seen as an icebreaker at the beginning of an interview or discussion (Lapenta, 2011: P. 205; Liamputtong, 2011: P. 65), it can also be used to counteract fatigue in the process (Richard and Lahman, 2015: P. 6). Therefore, we decided to use the photos as a new stimulus towards the end of the focus group rather than as an icebreaker at the beginning. All pictures were printed in A5 size so that details can be seen and participants with poor eyesight could recognise them. The researchers handed a bundle of images to each participant so that everybody had the possibility to look at each picture.

5 Data analysis

Focus groups and expert interviews were audio-recorded or – in the Czech case – video-recorded, transcribed verbatim, documented by a post-script and thematically analysed using the MAXQDA software. We used MAXQDA to operationalise the analysis, as it increases the transparency of qualitative data analysis and allows for flexibility during the analytic process. This flexibility was important, because thematic analysis as many other approaches to qualitative analysis highlights the non-linearity of the process. Moreover, with a relatively large international team, bringing together researchers with different scholarly backgrounds and research focuses, the data analysis application allowed us to build a robust analytical basis but at the same time provided the opportunity to pose diverse research questions. To ensure a consistent usage of the software, we used free video tutorials, but also developed an own tutorial of MAXQDA workflows for the project. Particularly in the first phase of the analysis process, the researchers repeatedly exchanged their impressions of the material and coding experiences in order to develop an intersubjective understanding and improve the intercoder quality. The subsequent section provides a detailed description of the analytical approach, with particular emphasis on the focus groups, which are the primary sources for this working package. However, it should be noted that a similar analytical approach was also applied to the expert interviews.

5.1 Analytical strategy

In selecting an analytical strategy, it was imperative to ensure both empirical openness to the data and procedural comparability within and between the international team. The analytical approach delineated herein is, consequently, the outcome of an ongoing, team-based process of developing, discussing, reviewing and refining ideas, codes, labels, and concepts (Guest and MacQueen, 2008).

In order to benefit from the analytical potential of focus groups, the literature generally recommends paying close attention to the interaction between participants. As Barbour (2018: P. 146) states, ‘Rather than simply extracting the comments made by individuals, huge dividends can be gained by paying due attention to what is happening during a piece of interaction, as the whole can be infinitely greater than the sum of the parts’. This approach entails the recognition that each focus group ‘really represents a single observation’ (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 179). Consequently, our analytical objective is not to compare the statements of individual participants, but rather to consider each group as a distinct unit for comparison. As Flick (2009: P. 204) proposes, this approach ‘focuses on the topics mentioned, the variety of attitudes towards these topics among the members in the group, the stages the discussion ran through, and the results of the discussion in each group’. This entails a focus on the contexts in which statements are made, the ongoing interchange between the participants, explanations, negotiations, and justifications (Barbour, 2018: P. 147, P. 167).

Barbour (2018: P. 154) stresses that there is no one right way to analyse focus group data, ‘rather researchers should feel free to develop their own procedures, which can give rise to interesting, and productive, hybrid approaches’. However, thematic coding and other more content-focussed approaches are very common techniques when analysing focus group data (Barbour, 2018: P. 126). We analysed the transcripts, using a combination of deductive and inductive coding that is oriented towards thematic analysis (TA) by Braun and Clarke (2022a). This analytical approach allowed us to identify themes related to relevant categories from the debate on geographies of discontent, while leaving room for the participants’ own thematic framings that extend the previous explanations.

5.2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) needs to be seen as a tool to analyse data (Braun and Clarke, 2012: P. 58; for central definitions and concepts of TA see Figure 5). It is not embedded in fixed methodological assumptions and as such does not present a full research program such as grounded theory or discourse analysis. Yet, TA is appreciated for its accessibility and flexibility which makes it a good choice for working in a diverse international team. This flexibility, however, requires researchers to invest in conceptual work. The aim is to create a coherent research design, 'where the research aims and purpose, philosophical, theoretical, and methodological assumptions, and methods cohere together' (Braun and Clarke, 2021: P. 4).

For our research, we combined TA with the methodological underpinnings we chose as a base for applying focus groups: symbolic interactionism and social constructivism (see Section 2.2). This theoretical approach implies that social reality is created and shaped in collective interaction – a theoretical assumption that gives 'analytic power' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: P. 57) to the analysis of interaction situations, such as the focus groups we analysed. Constructionist approaches are often deductive in their analytic orientation, 'examining how the world is put together (i.e., constructed) and the ideas and assumptions that inform the data gathered' (Braun and Clarke, 2012: P. 59).

According to Braun and Clarke (2022a: P. 35–36), TA is a six-phase process, which is not linear. The six phases consist of:

(1) Familiarising yourself with the dataset

(2) Coding (deductive and inductive)

(3) Generating initial themes

(4) Developing and reviewing themes

(5) Refining, defining and naming themes

(6) Writing up.

Initially, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading through the transcripts for the first time and highlighting important segments. Subsequent to this preliminary phase, we discussed our resulting first impressions of the data and started developing the codes. Braun and Clarke define coding as '[t]he process of exploring the diversity and patterning of meaning from the dataset, developing codes, and applying code labels to specific segments of each data item' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: P. 53). We combined both deductive and inductive coding. The deductive orientation means that 'theory provides an interpretative lens through which to code and make meaning of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: P. 57). For developing deductive codes, we drew on our knowledge based on the literature on geographies of discontent and 'left-behindness' and on our first impressions from conducting interviews and focus groups. Additionally, our research questions and our interview guide were important sources for developing deductive codes before engaging in the analysis. However, we also added codes inductively when new ideas emerged during analysis. In order to structure the exchange within the international team and simplify the country, regional and group comparisons, a detailed summary was written for each focus group based on the code tree. To this end, guiding questions were developed to enable systematic and comparable analyses. The resulting 37 summaries formed the basis for further in-depth analyses, developing themes and writing papers.

After coding each focus group individually, we referred to the entire data set to develop interpretations in relation to the various research questions we are exploring in different papers. In this final step of analysis, analytical approaches and practices varied across our heterogeneous team. For all of the team members, this final step entailed reviewing the coded segments in relation to the specific research questions, interpreting them in depth, and extracting central meanings from the focus groups and interviews. At this point, we thus shifted the focus 'from the micro detailed scope of the coding process, towards exploring, at a more macro scale, for connections

and alliances that might develop into broader patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: P. 76). For those of us who drew on TA according to Braun and Clarke (2022a), reviewing the coded segments in depth particularly involved clustering the material into initial themes and exploring these as patterns of meaning. Themes are the key analytical unit in TA. In the process of developing themes, visual tools such as simple mind maps were especially helpful. Once initial themes have been developed, the next step was to write theme definitions in order to test whether these themes actually work (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: P. 108). These themes are the basis for writing up analyses for papers or reports (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: P. 87).

With this approach, we do not aim for generalisability in a statistical sense. Reflecting the potential generalisability and transferability of our results, it is important to keep in mind that:

> 'Generalisability refers to things we have identified in a specific 'sample' or context that have relevance for a wider population or context. Transferability refers to qualitative research that is richly contextualised in a way that allows the reader to make a judgement about whether, and to what extent, they can safely transfer the analysis to their own context or setting.' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: P. 143)

Although we have an overall fairly high number of participants in focus groups and expert interviews (n=304), it is important to underline that 'the types of generalizations that arise from focus group results tend to be more general than specific, more tentative, and more descriptive' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 179–180.

Central definitions and concepts of TA (Braun and Clarke, 2022a)

Code: 'An output of the coding process; an analytically interesting idea, concept or meaning associated with particular segments of data; often refined during the coding process.' (p. 53)

Code label: 'An output of the coding process; a succinct phrase attached to a segment of data, as a shorthand tag for a code; often refined during the coding process.' (p. 53)

Initial or candidate themes: Provisional themes based on the clustering of 'potentially connected codes (into candidate themes), and exploring these initial meaning patterns. This exploration considers each cluster: on its own terms; in relation to the research question; and as part of the wider analysis. Key to remember at this stage is that you are exploring clustered patterning *across* your dataset - not just within a *single* data item.' (p. 79).

Theme: '[A] theme has to capture a wide range of data that are united by, and evidence, a shared idea, sometimes quite obviously, and sometimes far less obviously, and sometimes in quite different ways. […] A contradiction in, or dichotomisation of, meaning can form the basis for a theme.' (p. 77-78).

Theme definitions: 'In writing a definition for each theme, it's useful to ask yourself whether you can clearly state:

- What the theme is about (central organising concept).
- What the boundary of the theme is.
- What is unique and specific to each theme
- What each theme contributes to the overall analysis.' (p. 111)

Theme names: 'A good theme name is a short phrase, or perhaps a heading and subheading, that captures the essence of the theme and engages the reader.' (p. 112)

6 Data handling

All expert interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded or – in the Czech case – video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts only need to be as exact as necessary for the planned analysis strategy (Flick, 2009: P. 300 referring to Strauss 1987). As our analysis did not focus on the linguistic details, we applied simple content-semantic transcription rules (Dresing and Pehl, 2018: P. 21–22). Transcription was approximated to written language, word doublings were only recorded, if they were used for emphasis, and punctuation was smoothed in favour of readability.

All interviewers and moderators wrote detailed structured postscripts after the expert interviews and focus groups. By the term 'postscript' we essentially mean memos written as soon as possible after the data gathering, which may include a summary of the content, theoretical, methodological and personal insights of the researcher (Aurini et al., 2016: P. 104–105; Witzel and Reiter, 2012: P. 95–97). See Appendix A.3 and A.4 for the postscript form we developed as a structure to capture main information and thoughts on each expert interview and focus group which might inform later analysis.

As researchers we aim to handle the data we produce in accordance with European and national legislation, professional guidelines and ethical standards, thereby protecting our participants from any harm caused by their participation. For us, being careful with participants' data means, first and foremost, using their real names as sparingly as possible. Most of the documents and files we produce should not contain real names of the participants. To ensure that different forms of data can be correctly linked, we used identifiers (or pseudonyms) wherever possible. We carefully anonymise the names and other details that could lead to the identification of our participants. The aim of focus groups is not biographical insight, narrative depth, nor the attribution of contributions to personal socio-economic characteristics, or accessing participants' attitudes, but at the reconstruction of a shared and mutual construction of reality in the situation of the discussion itself (Barbour, 2018: P. 19–28). For the presentation of the data, this gives us the opportunity not to refer to individual characteristics of the participants when presenting our data, but to attribute the results on a more general level.

For a qualitative case study conducted in relatively sparsely populated rural regions like ours, the question of anonymisation of places is crucial when it comes to data protection (Vainio, 2013: P. 687). It raises a dilemma between presenting the collected data as accurately as possible and protecting the natural or legal persons being researched (Kühl, 2020: P. 3). Furthermore, researchers should be aware of the risk of contributing to the further spatial stigmatisation of research sites, which is considered a crucial dimension of peripheralisation processes (Bürk, 2013; Meyer et al., 2017). We decided to anonymise our research sites for this Working Paper in order to be more flexible regarding our anonymisation strategies in future publications.

We used a publication-oriented anonymisation strategy (Werner et al., 2023). Publication-oriented anonymisation strategies generally do not thoroughly and homogeneously anonymise all the transcripts at an early stage of the research process. Instead, they apply flexible anonymisation for each publication. For each publication (article, working paper, book contribution, talk etc.) that uses qualitative data collected in the project, we write an anonymisation protocol that documents all data used for the publication, the pseudonyms used, other anonymisation procedures, and lists original quotes used and their translation for the publication. As part of this protocol, all publications will be double-checked for anonymisation efforts before publication.

7 Summary

This Working Paper offers a comprehensive presentation of the basic methodological assumptions and the empirical approach we have chosen to explore the interrelations of regional and social inequalities with residents' understanding of, relationship to, and expectations from politics. It is based on Work Package 3 of the research project Social and political consequences of spatial inequalities: a case study of Central-Eastern Europe (SPC Spatial), a mixed-methods project that aims contribute to the debates on 'left-behind' places and geographies of discontent through empirical verification, international comparison, and a focus on Central-Eastern Europe (see Section 1 as well as Bernard et al., 2025b; Bernard et al., 2025a).

So far, the academic debates on 'left-behind' places and geographies of discontent have been dominated by quantitative, rather economic approaches. However, the underlying mechanisms and interrelationships between spatial inequalities and discontent are complex and call for regional, multidimensional perspectives (Bernard et al., 2025b). The qualitative approach presented here is well suited to complement insights gained from quantitative analysis because of its contextual sensitivity, flexibility and ability to provide rich, nuanced insights into the complexity of social phenomena, allowing researchers to capture the voices, experiences, and perspectives of people living in places that have witnessed peripheralization processes.

The empirical approach presented here takes a qualitative stance to capture the social and political consequences of spatial inequalities from the perspective of people living in so-called left behind regions. In particular, the project aims to uncover, how the local and regional situation is reflected in the subjective perceptions of the inhabitants of rural peripheralised research areas regarding living conditions, community prospects, and how these perceptions interact with their understandings of and experiences with politics. To this end, we have decided to conduct a comparative case study based on expert interviews and focus groups.

The research design we have developed considers expert interviews to be a particularly appropriate entry point into the study of 'left-behind places', not only because they can be seen as gatekeepers to residents, but also because they provide insight into local realities not only from their private point of view, but also from a position of power to put their own interpretations into practice at the local or regional level. A key empirical concern we seek to address is how people make sense of being spatially disadvantaged and how this relates to their perceptions of living conditions, community prospects and politics. To this end, this Working Paper set out why we consider focus groups to be a particularly powerful tool for assessing the social and political consequences of spatial inequalities. Focus groups focus less on individual biographical events and more on shared beliefs, knowledge and experice, as well as, on collective orientations and their origins in social interactions. It is mostly due to the fact that focus groups have the potential to trigger communication that resembles everyday conversations, thus allowing to observe meaning making and negotiating processes behind it.

This Working Paper has also introduced photo elicitation as a way of stimulate such discussions through the use of an object in addition to being forced to verbalise sensitive issues related to living in so-called left-behind places. In order to reduce the power imbalance between researchers and participants, and to mitigate the risk of (spatial) stigmatisation of participants that is always present in this type of research, we used photo elicitation in the hope that it would allow people to talk openly and without fear of judgement about their own perspectives on sensitive issues, and thus unlock rather nuanced and ambiguous aspects of everyday life under the conditions of spatial disadvantage.

In line with the methodological considerations, we have briefly presented how we selected the six case study areas on the basis of a regional index of social and spatial disadvantage. We have outlined the details of how we conducted the expert interviews and focus groups, and present many of the instruments developed for this purpose in the Appendix. We also explain why we chose thematic analysis as a suitable tool for flexibly analysing and comparing large amounts of verbal data in an international and interdisciplinary project context.

As this Working Paper has focused on the methodological considerations and the empirical approach of the qualitative work package, the theoretical underpinnings of the project as a whole have not been thoroughly explored. Two recent publications have already outlined how 'left-behind' regions can be conceptualised, operationalised and classified in the European Union (Bernard et al., 2025b), and the electoral implications of spatial inequality , particularly for left-behind regions in Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic (Bernard et al., 2025a). However, the theoretical nuances of the complex mixed-methods approach, a detailed discussion of the underlying rationale, and a reflection on the experiences and challenges will be the subject of forthcoming publications. In addition, the research findings and the comparative perspective on the different age and socio-economic groups in the six regions of the two countries will be further developed when we publish our first research findings in 2025 and 2026.

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Appendix

A.1 Expert interview guide

INTRODUCTION

1.THANKING FOR THE WILLINGNESS TO JOIN THE STUDY AND INTRODUCING THE RESEARCHER AND THE INSTITUTE 2. INFORMING THE INTERVIEWEE ON OUR STUDY AND THE INTERVIEW SITUATION 3. BRIEFING ON THE DATA MANAGEMENT AND SIGNING THE INFORMED CONSENT		
BODY	**Check if mentioned**	**Probes**
4. POSITION OF THE EXPERT **To start with, would you please tell me something about your position and the activities of your organisation/association?**	What is your area of responsibility? Could you tell me a little more about the projects/activities your organisation currently engages in?	Could you elaborate on that? What does the term […] mean to you? Please, tell me more about this. Please give me an example. What happened afterwards? How did it come about? You mentioned the situation x – could you tell me more about this? Can you remember a situation when …?
5. ASSESSMENT OF THE LOCAL SITUATION **Could you describe the region/town/municipality from your (professional) perspective?** ***Are there any places in the region/town/municipality that are worse off than others?***	*How has the economy developed?* *How has the population developed?* *How do you asses the accessibility and availability of services of general interest?* *In what way are they better/worse off?*	
6. CURRENT ISSUES **What are the major issues facing people/people you work with here these days?***	Whom does this (the issue mentioned) concern? [If it fits:] Why do you think this has been overlooked?* [If it fits:] Can you identify the moment when it all started (some events, political decisions, etc.)? Are there any other issues people face?	
7. RESPONSIBILITY **What do you think should be done about this?***	Who is supposed to deal with the issue? How? Which possibilities do *you* have to influence the situation? How do other people/groups deal with this issue?	

8. PERCEPTION OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION	
In general, how would you characterise the political atmosphere in the region/town/municipality? **How do you feel supported here by politics? What would you wish for here from politics?**	Could you give me an example on how people in the region/town/municipality express their disagreement with politics? Do you also have an example to on how people express their content with politics?
9. PROSPECTS **In which direction is your region/town/municipality heading?**	
10.LEFT-BEHINDNESS **There is a discussion about left-behind regions – how do you perceive this?**	
CLOSING REMARKS	
9. INTERVIEWEE'S PRIORITIES **When you review our conversation, is there anything else that is important to you that we haven't talked about yet? Is there anything else you would like to add?**	
10. RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS (DE+PL) **We are still looking for more participants for our research project. Above all, we are looking for ordinary citizens from young to old who would be willing to tell us about their perception of the region/town/municipality in a focus group. Can you think spontaneously of any people we could contact?** **I have also brought our flyer with me, where we have listed this again. Could I perhaps display the flyers somewhere here? I also have a poster that I would like to put up. Would that be possible?**	If yes: Who is that? How can I get in touch with this person? Could you perhaps make the contact? If no: You mentioned person XY earlier. Do you think she would be interested in participating in the focus group? Either case: If you think of someone later, you can always contact me after the interview.
11. GRATEFULNESS AND APPRECIATION FOR PARTICIPATION	
12. OTHER AGREEMENTS (FOLLOW-UP-CALL, RECRUITMENT ETC.)	

The italic questions under point 5 were only asked in the initial phase of the expert interviews when communal and/or municipal representatives were interviewed and the choice of smaller research areas was still ongoing.

*Questions 6 and 7 were inspired by Katherine Cramer's study 'The politics of resentment. Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker'. She also asked her interview partners: 'What are the major issues facing people in [name of municipality] these days? Which of these issues are of special concern to you all personally? What do you think should be done about this? Why do you think this has been overlooked? Whom does the current policy benefit?' (Cramer 2016, p. 233).

A.2 Focus group Guide

1. INTRODUCTION	Comment
First of all, I would like to tell you something about ourselves and the project. My name is [name]. I am a researcher at the [Institute]. This is a research institute based in […], that deals with [e.g., demographic, economic and social developments in rural areas, among other things]. The perspective of the population is always particularly important to us. That is why we are very pleased and grateful that you have agreed to participate in the focus group. In today's meeting, I would like to hear from you how you feel about the situation in [town/municipality/village], what your future prospects are, and what you hope and expect from politics.	Introduce yourself, your institute and the project. Show the participants your appreciation for their contribution and let them know, what they can expect.
Data privacy: I would like to briefly inform you about our data privacy measures. Page 1: I have just informed you about our research project. Then I have a few comments. Your consent is voluntary, it is possible at any time to refuse to give information or to leave the discussion. Even after the discussion, you can still withdraw your consent. I will record the discussion so that I can concentrate fully on you and what you say during the discussion. The audio recording will then be digitally stored and fully typed up. This text will then be anonymised and used for scientific purposes only. This means that your name will never be mentioned in connection with the study, only pseudonyms. Third party names will also be changed completely. **Do you have any questions about this?** Page 2: Then I would now like you to sign the consent form so that I can prove later that I have informed you about the audio recording and the data protection measures. Please do not forget to also tick the boxes on page 2. Please complete and return this copy to us. We need this for our records. You will find a detailed version of the consent form for your records in your folder. There you can read everything I have told you.	Each team will inform the participants about data protection measures, but the exact form must be adapted to the different national contexts. This is the example from Germany.
Discussion situation: My colleague will take some notes because otherwise it's hard to tell the voices apart afterwards. We would be happy to have an open conversation. There are no right or wrong answers or topics. Everything that seems important to you is interesting to us. **Please discuss among yourselves, not only with me.** Feel free to refer to what others have said **- I would like to interfere as little as possible, after all I want to know more about what YOU think.** Therefore, I have only brought some general questions to stimulate the discussion or to bring it back to the topic. You can say as little or as much as you want, but not all at the same time. Each person should have the opportunity to speak. You don't have to agree and it's perfectly fine if you disagree, but it would be nice if we have a respectful atmosphere. Above all, I would like us all to enjoy the discussion, so feel free to laugh, have a drink and feel comfortable. Anonymity and time: For me it is easier if we address each other by our first names during the discussion for reasons of anonymity. I hope that's okay with you. As already announced, the focus group will last about 90 minutes. Is that okay with you? After discussion: small questionnaire, 30 € compensation **Are there any questions?** Now: cell phones off Then: *Switch on the audio recorder.*	For most participants, this will be the first time they take part in such a discussion. Therefore, you should introduce them to the situation. This part is inspired by Liamputtong (2011: P. 73–74).

2. Warm-up/Getting-acquainted (10 min)		
To begin, I would like to initiate a short round of introductions to get to know each other. **I would therefore like to ask you to state your first names and complete the following sentence: When I think of [the town/village], I think of…**		It is common, to give the participants the opportunity to get acquainted at the beginning of the focus group (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: P. 33). The first question also has the function to warm up and invite each participant to say something at the very beginning in order to lower the threshold to participate in the course of the following discussion. We have chosen a stimulus that directs the participants to talk about the topic of the focus group from the very beginning on: their place of residence – not their biography.
DISCUSSION BODY	**QUESTION**	
3. Current issues (30)	You have touched on this already a little: We would now ask you to talk among yourself, w**hat are the major issues facing people here these days?** ➢ What does this turn into a problem for you? What does this mean for your life? [if discussion isn't going there anyway or is very abstract]	If it fits, acknowledge that positive points have been made before: You have mentioned positive and negative aspects. We would now like you to discuss among yourselves what are the major issues facing people here these days? The question is adapted from Cramer's study 'The politics of resentment' (2016: P. 237). If the discussion becomes too abstract, probe for the everyday dimension that the issues mentioned have for the participants.
4. Expectations of politics (10 min)	We have been talking about some issues already [maybe point to one issue], **now I would like you to talk about, what do you think should be done about this? By whom?** ➢ Now we have talked a lot about the role of […] – who else could something about this issue? What?	This question is also adapted from Cramer (2016: P. 237). In our experience, people often have talked about it beforehand already.
5. Prospects (30 min)	I would like to introduce another issue now: I would like you to talk about the future now. Therefore, I brought some pictures with me. [Assistant places 5 pictures (all pictures are the same) on the table in front of each participant.] Out of the pictures you see in front of you: **Which of these pictures depicts, in which direction your [town/municipality/village] is heading? Please choose one picture each. I'll give a moment to do that. Has everyone chosen a picture? Now I would like to know why you chose your picture: In which way can your picture show in which direction [the town/municipality/village] is heading in your opinion?** ➢ Has anybody else chosen this picture? Why did you choose it? ➢ I see that nobody has chosen [picture X]. Why not? ➢ What has been left out in these pictures? ➢ Who could influence this, how? [if time or if responsibility not mentioned up to this point]	We decided to ask about the future with an open timeframe, because we wanted people to choose a frame of reference that made sense to them. If people struggle with choosing one photo, let them choose two photos. It is more important how they explain their choice than which photo they choose. Encourage the participants to talk about expectations rather than wishes, but often both aspects come up. It is very helpful to have the assistant moderator hand out the visual stimuli so that the moderator can concentrate on giving the instructions and asking the questions. The question 'What has been left out in these pictures?', was taken from Harper (2002: P. 22).

6. Closing (10 min)	- Summary of the discussion Summary of the discussion [mention broad topics, do not go into depth]. **Thank you very much for the stimulating discussion. I was able to learn and take away a lot.** - In closing: **I have no more questions to ask but is there anything else you all would like to bring up, or ask about, before we finish this session? (CZ: How did it make you feel to talk about your village/town here?)** - Moderator asks note-taker: **Are there any issues which have not been discussed or do you have any extra questions?** - **Thank you** for participation and turn off audio recorder - **Before we say goodbye, I would like to ask you to fill in a short questionnaire for us and to confirm that you have received the compensation.** [Assistant hands out questionnaires, incentives in envelopes and receipts and collects them afterwards]. - Farewell		It is important to thank the participants for supporting the research project. Remember that although the respondents receive a monetary compensation, they are essentially doing us a favour by taking part in the discussion. We want them to leave the discussion with a positive impression. The questions were adapted from Liamputtong (2011: 75, 63).
Probes	Directed to single people	Directed to the group at large	
	Is that your experience too? [If someone looks puzzled at a comment by another group member:] **You look puzzled. Why? What don't you understand?** **Shy people: [place them opposite of the moderator; make eye contact] [Name], I don't want to leave you out of the conversation. What do you think? [Name], you haven't had a chance. How do you feel about this?** **Talkative people: [place them next to the moderator] Thank you, [name]. Are there others who wish to comment on the question? Does anybody feel differently? That's one point of view, let's hear what others have to say**	**Does anyone have an example of that?** **Is this anyone else's experience?** [It is generally not a good idea to probe by directly asking if anyone agrees or disagrees with the preceding statement. Rather:] **Does anyone have a similar (different) perspective/opinion?**	It can be necessary to address certain people directly or to pose questions to the group at large to explore other perspectives. The questions directed to the group at large were adopted from Stewart and Shamdasani (2015: P. 106).They give the advice not to probe by directly asking if anyone agrees or disagrees with the preceding statement because this can feel intimidating for the person people refer to. Instead, ask about similar or different perspectives. The questions directed to single people were adopted from Stewart and Shamdasani (2015: P. 106) and Liamputtong (2011: P. 81–82).

A.3 Postscript for interviews

Interview ID: _____

Date:		**Time and duration:**	
Place:		**Interviewer:**	

1) Background of recruitment (Why contacted? Contact history)
2) Description of the interviewee, the situation before and after the interview, interruptions
3) Notes on recruitment
4) Agreements made with the interviewee (e.g., anonymisation, information on project results, etc.).
5) Other (e.g., research assignments, feedback on the interview)
6) First methodological insights (e.g., events that might have an impact on the quality of the interview, problematic questions, and further new questions that should be added) (optional)
7) Reflect on the relevance of the interview for the focus groups (topics of regional interest, recruitment strategy, etc.) (optional)
8) First theoretical insights (e.g., theoretical or conceptual ideas that emerged during the interview, connections to theories and concepts') (optional).

A.4 Postscript for focus groups

Focus group ID: _____

Date:		**Duration:**	
Place:		**Time:**	
Moderator:		**Note-taker:**	
No. participants:		**No. f/m**	
Type of group:			

1 Background of recruitment and type of group (Why contacted? Contact history)
2 Description of the situation before and after the focus group, the atmosphere, interruptions
3 Summary: content (assessment of the local situation, current issues, important findings or quotations)
4 Agreements made with the participants (e.g., anonymisation, information on project results etc.)
5 Other (e.g., research assignments, feedback on focus group)
6 First methodological insights (e.g., 'events that might influence the quality of the focus group, problematic questions, and other new questions that should be added') (optional)
7 Ideas/reflection on the relevance of the focus group for other focus groups (topics of regional interest, recruitment strategy, etc.) (optional)
8 First theoretical insights (e.g., 'theoretical or conceptual ideas that emerged during the focus group', connections to theories and concepts') (optional)

A.5 Supplementary questionnaire for the focus group (German adult version)

Participant Number: _____

Answering the questions is voluntary. You can also omit individual questions. The answers will be evaluated pseudonymously so that no conclusions can be drawn about your person.

1. What gender are you?

- ☐ female
- ☐ male
- ☐ _____

2. How old are you? _____ years

3. Do you currently live in [case municipality]?

- ☐ yes, since _____ years, in the local district _____
- ☐ no

4. What is your highest school-leaving qualification?

- ☐ secondary school leaving certificate/POS with 8th or 9th grade certificate
- ☐ Realschulabschluss (Mittlere Reife)/POS with completion of grade 10
- ☐ (Fach-)Abitur (EOS/gymnasium)
- ☐ left school without a school-leaving qualification
- ☐ another school-leaving qualification, namely: _____

5. What is your highest educational qualification?

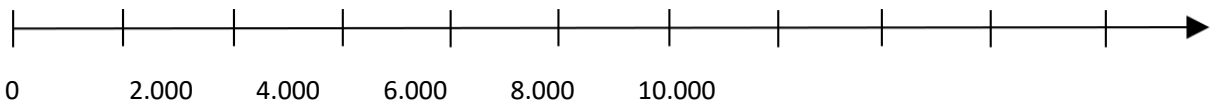
- ☐ vocational training (apprenticeship)
- ☐ graduation from a technical school, master craftsman's school, technical school, administration and business academy or a technical school in the GDR
- ☐ university of applied sciences or university degree (BA, MA, Magister, Diplom, Staatsexamen)
- ☐ doctorate
- ☐ no professional qualification
- ☐ another professional qualification and namely: _____

Participant Number: _____

6. Which employment situation applies to you? (Note: Employment is understood to be any paid activity or activity associated with an income).

- ☐ full-time gainful employment
- ☐ part-time employment/partial retirement (even if in the release phase)
- ☐ vocational training/apprenticeship
- ☐ marginally employed or mini-job
- ☐ one-euro job (if receiving Bürgergeld)
- ☐ occasional or irregular employment
- ☐ voluntary military service, federal voluntary service or voluntary social year
- ☐ retraining
- ☐ maternity leave, parental leave or other leave of absence
- ☐ not in employment (including pupils or students who do not work for money, unemployed persons, early retirees, pensioners without additional income)

7. What is the approximate monthly net income (in euros) of your household? (Note: Sum of the income of all persons living in your household for one month, after deduction of taxes and social security contributions. Income includes, for example: wage, salary, income from self-employment, pension, income from public benefits, income from renting and leasing). **Please put a cross:**



8. a) How many people (adults and children) live in your household?

_____ people

b) How many of these people are children under 14?

_____ children under 14

A.6 Supplementary questionnaire for the focus group (German youth version)

Participant Number: _____

Answering the questions is voluntary. You can also omit individual questions. The answers will be evaluated pseudonymously so that no conclusions can be drawn about your person.

1. What gender are you?

☐ female ☐ male ☐ _____

2. How old are you? _____ years

3. Do you currently live in [case municipality]?

☐ yes, since _____ years, in part of the municipality _____
☐ no

4. What is the highest educational qualification you are aiming for?

☐ vocational training (apprenticeship)
☐ graduation from a technical school, master craftsman's school, technical school, administration and business academy
☐ university of applied sciences or university degree (BA, MA, Magister, Diplom, Staatsexamen)
☐ doctorate
☐ no professional qualification
☐ another professional qualification and namely: _____

5. What do you want to do after school?

_____

6. What do your parents do for a living?

_____

7. a) How many people (adults and children) live in your household? _____ people

b) How many of these people are children under 14? _____ children under 14

A.7 Descriptions of the photos used for photo elicitation

CZ	Countryside area	Regional centre
Prospect	**Description of the photos**	
economic prosperity/decline	The picture stands for the changes in the local economy. Most of the local shops are owned by the Vietnamese community. There are currently two functioning restaurants in the town. The rest are closed. The photo shows the place in the main square, where an old restaurant has been turned into a grocery store. What remains is the sign 'restaurant'.	The picture shows the current state of local industry in the town. It shows the main entrance to a factory producing stockings, which was well-known in the communist Czechoslovakia. It is now in a state of disrepair. The image represents economic decline, peripheralisation, loss of status as an important, recognisable manufacturer.
spatial inclusion/ exclusion	The picture shows the local bus stop with school children waiting to return to their villages after school. There is currently only one large primary school for the whole area, and the secondary (vocational) school has been closed. To get an education oneself means to commute even 30 km. The picture can therefore stand for spatial exclusion in terms of the education system.	The image stands for the social exclusion of the place. There are constant problems with train connections, both within the Czech Republic and across the border. There is only one local bus service to the regional capital. The selected small town is isolated from the rest of the region to which it belongs politically and administratively.
social cohesion/division	The picture shows the local information board in the centre of the town, where there are many different announcements– including one advertising a right-wing extremist protest in Prague. The image represents the division of the local community, influenced by larger societal issues, such as the spread of conspiracy theories and anti-establishment political and social movements.	The picture shows the visualisation of a brand-new kindergarten that was about to be opened at the time of the fieldwork. This very expensive investment has divided the local community. Pre-school education is a place of reproduction of discrimination against Roma people and their disadvantaged position in Czech society.
recognition & importance	The image depicts a well-known local natural attraction. It represents the future of the region and its potential for tourism, as well as showing the beauty of the region.	The image is part of a leaflet of a local political movement. It reproduces a postcard of the town in the XIX century, presenting the imagined future of the place. It represents the once lost recognition and importance of the town after the decline of the industry, its then growing population and vibrant social life.
ecology & green transformation	The picture shows the interior of the largest local milk and dairy producer. It represents the possible future economic development of the region and its current focus on big farming. Most of the small and private farms no longer exist. The region hast moved towards large, professional and automated agricultural production.	The picture shows the panorama of the town, surrounded by the local mountains. It represents the rich natural environment, and its future potential mainly for tourism. The image also stands for the beauty of the region, compared to the images of social and economic decline of the place.

DE	Countryside area	Regional centre
Prospect	**Description of the photos**	
economic prosperity/ decline	The photo shows a sign in front of a local industrial company claiming “We are hiring”. The company is called like a small town adjacent to our municipality. We chose it to illustrate the future prospects of prosperous economic development and available jobs in the region.	The photo shows an industrial estate in the municipality from an aerial perspective. We chose it to illustrate the future prospects of prosperous economic development.
spatial inclusion/ exclusion	The photo shows a closed shop in a derelict house in the region. There is a post box in front of the building and a sign promoting fast internet access. The photo was chosen because it can stand for the future prospect of loss of facilities of general interest. At the same time the expansion of high-speed internet offers the viewer a partly positive interpretation in the sense of a more positive outlook for the future of services of general interest, which are of great importance for today’s society.	The photo shows a closed grocery shop with barred windows in eastern Germany. It was not taken in our research area. There is a post box in front of the building and a sign from the savings bank showing that a mobile savings bank branch stops here. The picture was chosen because it can stand for the future prospect of loss of facilities of general interest, but it also shows alternative provision with services by mobile offers.
social cohesion/division	The photo shows protest signs claiming “Our country – our rules” and “resistance for the home land”. It was not taken in our research. Anyway, it can stand for a future prospect of social divide and a form of political discontent which rests on conspiracy theories, racism and antidemocratic values. “Land” can not only be translated to “country” in the sense of “nation” but also to “countryside” in the sense of “rural area” and leave the viewer the opportunity for a connection of the picture to rural protest, rural discontent or social polarisation in the future.	The photo shows a recent protest at the market square in the municipality, where regularly 30 to 75 people demonstrate. The sign in the front says: "Our wish: that our people suddenly and unexpectedly wake up." These demonstrations grew out of the anti-Corona protests, but as Monday protests they also have other historical implications with regard to the protest events in eastern Germany. A picture of these protests implies for us a general discontent with politics in a localised form. It stands for a future prospect of social divide and a form of political discontent that positions itself far from democratic representation.
recognition & importance	The photo shows people of different ages, also children, at a festivity in a rural surrounding. They talk and laugh. In the back of the picture, you can see an Easter fire secured by the local fire fighters. The festivity was organized by the local culture and home association of a small village in the area in 2018. For us, the picture stands for social cohesion, a socially harmonious and active population in the context of a small village. The future outlook thus described could be a socially prosperous village where people come together and celebrate.	The photo shows a festival on the market square in the area. You can see people of different ages: on the left a woman with a baby buggy, in front a child playing and on the right a woman with a rollator and many middle-aged people. In the background you can see the performance of a music group. Market stalls with various foodstuffs frame the colourful hustle and bustle at the festival. For us, the picture stands for social cohesion, a socially harmonious and active population. The future outlook thus described could be a socially prosperous city where there are festivals like this where people come together and celebrate.
ecology & green transformation	The picture shows a wolf in a wood. In rural areas in eastern Germany, there is an ongoing debate about the comeback of the wolf. "Wolfserwartungsland" (literally: wolf expectation country) is a buzzword. Also in our research area, there have been several sightings of wolfs. We expect the wolf to be a stimulating symbol for current changes in the natural environment, for political responses to it (e.g., "rewilding"), for people adjusting to it or resisting it. The wolf can stand for a recovering eco-system, but also for depopulation (the people leave the ‘left-behind’ area and the wolf can take their place) and experiences of devaluation (e.g., the wolf being more important than the expectations of safety on behalf of people in peripheral areas).	

PL	Countryside area	Regional centre
Prospect	**Description of the photos**	
economic prosperity/ decline	This photo reflects the contradictions associated with the construction of a motorway: the road improves communication, but at the same time, it cuts the region off from other places and hinders the influx of tourists. Some residents see the motorway, which was built a few years ago and now bypasses the small town, as a threat, for example because fewer travellers visit the restaurants (and some have collapsed), while others see the potential in the improved accessibility to (and from) Warsaw and Kraków. In the absence of unique attractions, the small town sees its advantage as a weekend attraction between the larger agglomerations.	The photo shows a petrol station belonging to a company that plans to build a modern oil-pressing plant in the small town. Locals see this as an opportunity to improve the unemployment situation in the area, as the investment will create new jobs and help improve the financial situation. On the other hand, however, it is an extremely capital-intensive and time-consuming investment, with a long decision-making and investment process.
spatial inclusion/ exclusion	This photo reflects the outflow of local residents, especially young people, to larger cities in Poland and abroad. This picture represents the future prospect of further out-migration of young people. The region is known for having the highest unemployment rate in Poland.	During the communist era, many state farms were located around the small town. After the economic transformation, these places were abandoned, often excluded from transport and degraded. On the other hand, these places can represent future potential. With adequate financial input and decisions by the authorities, they could be successfully integrated into the functional structure of the district, forming areas that, after appropriate transformation, could serve agricultural, industrial or residential functions.
social cohesion/division	This photo shows residents gathered to protest against the construction of a mink farm near the small town. The local community was divided on the issue, with some arguing that the investment would mitigate unemployment, and others saying that fur farming was an unethical contributor and a nuisance to local residents because of the smell.	The photo shows a protest in front of the district court in the small town in defence of the courts. The demonstrators wanted to express their opposition to the far-reaching draft amendments to the laws on the court system. The photo, on the one hand, draws attention to social divisions and conflicts, to protests, but also to the ability of the residents to unite around a cause that is right for them.
recognition & importance	This photo reflects the social debate about the construction of a new swimming pool: on the one hand, it can be a recreational facility for people, but on the other, it represents a significant investment that is unlikely to pay off. The swimming pool was promised to the residents by the authorities already some 20 years ago and is something that many people want. The issue has come up again and again during successive election campaigns, but to no avail.	The photo shows a former bunker system built by the National Socialists near the small town. On the one hand, it is a unique monument and one of the main tourist attractions of the district, but on the other hand, some residents do not want their town to be associated only in this way. They also point out that other neighbouring towns have much better developed tourist and recreational facilities and are able to keep tourists at their place longer than the small town, where visitors only stop for a transit to see the bunkers and spend the rest of their holiday elsewhere.
ecology & green transformation	This photo reflects the ongoing social conflict over the construction of a biogas plant: on the one hand, it will create additional jobs, but on the other hand, people are concerned about pollution and noise. This picture also represents the issue of adequate information about the benefits and/or potential dangers of such facilities.	The photo shows the felling of trees and refers to the felling of a forest complex in the small town. The Forestry Commission removed dangerous trees, which was met with protests from mostly young residents. The decision was controversial mainly because of its premature completion and questionable justification. The protesters pointed out that many of the trees to be felled were not dangerous or could only be properly cared for rather than removed. The use of heavy equipment in the forest, which could have contributed to damage the ecosystem, was also met with outrage.

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