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THE PRESENCE OF THE SLOVAK NATIONAL MINORITY AND VOTING FOR RADICAL RIGHT PARTIES IN POLAND: AN ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The main aim of this study is to analyze the impact of the presence of the Slovak national minority in Poland on voting for radical right parties (RRPs) by the native Polish population. Temporally, this work covers the years 1991–2023. Territorially, the work covers the Podhale region, where the largest number of Slovaks in Poland live. A comparative analysis of cartographic materials was the basic method used in this study. The results presented in this article indicate a positive relationship between the presence of the Slovak national minority and voting by the native Polish population for RRP: stronger voting by the native Polish population for RRP was observed when the share of the Slovak minority in a particular locality exceeded 20%.

Key words

electoral geography, electoral behavior, parliamentary elections, Poland, minorities.

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1. Introduction

Numerous works in the field of electoral geography have proven that political preferences are not only a simple reflection of voters' individual characteristics (social class, profession, income, etc.), but also result from the voters' relationships with their environment (e.g. Butler, Stokes, 1974; Miller, 1977; Huckfeldt, Sprague, 1995; MacAllister et al., 2001; Andersen, Heath, 2002; Johnston, Pattie, 2006; Gallego et al., 2016). In this approach, voters are perceived as people whose attitudes are shaped by the local context (Dikshit, 1999). One of the most important works with this tone was the classic article by K. Cox (1969), in which voters were considered links in the network of the flow of politically vital information. The author argued there that individual

people's access to this information is distorted by a number of deformations, including those related to geographical distance, and that these deformations subsequently influence the person's voting behavior. The above-mentioned article, as well as other works created in this spirit, gave rise to research in electoral geography on the so-called neighborhood effect. It is assumed here that political views are exchanged in social networks and that some people may change their views as a result of such a debate. It is more likely that those whose view is in the majority will succeed in convincing those whose view is in the minority, rather than the other way around. The result of this process is that in an area where the majority view prevails, a given party wins more votes than would be expected after analyzing the voters' social and economic characteristics (Johnston,

Pattie, 2008). One of many works in electoral geography that proved that voting behavior is influenced not only by who people are (structural effect), but also by where they live (contextual effect) was the study by M. Ebeid and J. Rodden (2006). The authors analyzed the elections for the position of governor in the United States and noticed that in an unfavorable economic situation, governors of industrial states lost power more often than those of agricultural states. This was explained by the fact that the inhabitants of agricultural states were aware that the governors of their states, compared to those from industrial states, had less ability to influence the economic condition of the state, e.g. they were unable to control atmospheric phenomena (droughts or downpours that destroy crops, etc.). Much of the work on electoral geography proves that similar people may vote differently depending on the environment in which they operate (Johnston, Pattie, 2008).

The most frequently analyzed contextual effect in works on radical right parties (RRPs) is the ethnic composition of the environment. This is not surprising, as the main message of RRP is negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigration (van Wijk et al., 2019). Likewise, at the level of an individual voter, it was noticed that what unites a diverse group of RRP voters is their negative attitude towards ethnic minorities and immigration (Lubbers, Scheepers, 2000; Norris, 2005).

The relationships between indigenous people's voting for RRP and the presence of an ethnic minority are explained by two opposing theoretical mechanisms. The first mechanism is based on the contact theory by G.W. Allport (1954) and assumes that increased contact of representatives of the majority group with representatives of ethnic minorities results in a reduction of prejudices among the former and an increase in their tolerance and it ultimately reduces their chances of voting for RRP. The second mechanism is based on the conflict theory by H. Blumer (1958) and assumes that increased contact of representatives of the majority group with representatives of the minority group results in a sense of threat (economic or cultural) in the majority group and, consequently, in their increased support for RRP (van Wijk et al., 2020).

A concept that reconciles the theoretical approaches of G.W. Allport (1954) and H. Blumer (1958) is the «halo effect», which is associated with increased support for RRP among indigenous peoples in areas adjacent to areas with a significant percentage of ethnic minorities, but not in the «minority» areas themselves (van Wijk et al., 2020). This is explained by the fact that in ethnically homogeneous areas adjacent to those with a significant percentage of ethnic minorities, representatives of the indigenous population

have only sporadic contact with representatives of minorities, which results in greater prejudice and a sense of threat and, as a result, stronger support for RRP. On the other hand, representatives of indigenous population living in areas with a significant percentage of ethnic minorities can have frequent contact with representatives of minorities, which reduces their prejudices and consequently weakens the electoral chances of RRP (Evans, Ivaldi, 2021).

Previous research on the relationship between the presence of an ethnic minority and voting for RRP by indigenous people has yielded divergent results. Among others, this results from their use of different geographical scales and different methods (van Wijk et al., 2019). Some studies indicate a negative relationship in line with G.W. Allport's contact theory (1954) (e.g. Bowyer, 2008; Rydgren, Ruth, 2013; Evans, Ivaldi, 2021); other studies indicate a positive relationship in line with H. Blumer's (1958) conflict theory (e.g. Lubbers, Scheepers, 2002; Coffé et al., 2007; Valdez, 2014), and still other studies indicate the lack of any relationship (e.g. Lubbers, Scheepers, 2000; de Blok, van der Meer, 2018; Van Wijk et al., 2019).

Some scientists point to a curvilinear relationship between the presence of an ethnic minority and indigenous people's voting for RRP. M. Savelkoul et al. (2017) showed that as the percentage of ethnic minorities in the place of residence increases, the probability of voting for the Dutch radical right party PVV increases among the indigenous population, but this only happens when the percentage of ethnic minorities exceeds 15%. H.J. Janssen et al. (2019) showed that the probability of voting for PVV by indigenous people is highest when the percentage of ethnic minorities in the place of residence is in the range of 30–50%. Z. Bertus (2017) showed that support for the Hungarian radical right party Jobbik increases as the percentage of the Roma minority increases, but when the percentage of the Roma minority reaches 20%, support for Jobbik decreases. Finally, some studies indicate that the level of support for RRP among indigenous people is determined not by the presence of an ethnic minority in their environment, but by the increase in its number (e.g. Kaufmann, 2017).

The term radical right parties (RRPs) is most often used to describe a group of political parties that are the object of interest in this work (van der Brug, Fennema, 2007). Ideologically, RRP are characterized by nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). This work focuses on two Polish political groupings which, despite significant differences between them and between them and their Western European counterparts, are classified as RRP: the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin – LPR) and Confederation (Konfederacja) (de Lange,

Guerra, 2009; Lubbers, Coenders, 2017; Szczerbiak, 2020). The peak of LPR's popularity occurred in the years 2001–2005. In the 2001 parliamentary elections nationwide, this party obtained 7.87%, and in the 2005 parliamentary elections 7.97%. The RRP group that has recently recorded successes in Poland is Confederation. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, this party obtained 6.81%, and in the 2023 parliamentary elections 7.16%.

A significant part of the works dealing with the relationship between the ethnic composition of the environment and voting for RRP are ecological analyses (e.g., Coffé et al., 2007, Bowyer, 2008; Rydgren, Ruth, 2013; Valdez, 2014; Martig, Bernauer, 2018). The great advantage of these works is that they are based on actual election results and not on voting declarations, as is the case with survey research (Savelkoul et al., 2017). Their significant disadvantage, however, is the possibility of committing an ecological fallacy (Dasgupta, Morris-Jones, 1975). In ecological research, in order to determine the level of support for RRP among indigenous people, it is necessary to assume that representatives of ethnic minorities do not vote for RRP (Janssen et al., 2019). Empirical data prove that such an assumption is justified: e.g., D. van Wijk et al. (2019) report in their study that out of 2,415 people belonging to national and ethnic minorities, only 15 (0.6%) declared support for RRP.

The region of Central and Eastern Europe is poorly researched in terms of the issue that is the subject of this work. In addition to the previously cited work by Z. Bertus (2017) on Hungary, the study by J. Suchánek and J. Hasman (2022) is worth mentioning. The authors found no evidence linking the concentration of immigrants with voting for the Czech radical right party SPD. As for Poland, an exception is the work of R. Matykowski (2008), who noted higher than the country's average support for small extremely nationalistic parties (PPN, Dom Ojczysty) in the Podlasie region, which is characterized by a significant percentage of the Belarusian minority.

Both in the West and in the East of Europe, so far, primarily the influence of the presence of national and ethnic minorities on voting for RRP has been studied, which differed significantly from the indigenous population (Roma, Muslims and other non-Western people). It is interesting whether this influence also occurs in minorities with characteristics similar to those of indigenous people. Slovaks living in Poland are such a minority. They do not differ at all or only to a slight extent in terms of ethnicity, religion, linguistics or the socio-economic profile from the native Polish population living in their immediate vicinity.

The main aim of this study is an ecological analysis of the impact of the presence of the Slovak

minority in Poland on voting for RRP by the native Polish population. This paper adds to the existing literature in the following ways. Firstly, it analyzes the situation in one of the CEE countries, i.e. a part of Europe that has so far been poorly researched in this respect. Secondly, it analyzes the case of a minority with characteristics quite similar to those of the indigenous population, while previous research has been dominated by very different minorities.

This study found a positive relationship between the presence of the Slovak national minority at the locality level and voting for RRP by the native Polish population. This concerned localities where the percentage of the Slovak minority exceeded 20%.

2. Data and methods

Data on the results of the 1991 parliamentary elections were obtained thanks to the courtesy of M. L. Bogdanowicz from the National Electoral Office. Data on the results of the parliamentary elections from 2001–2023 were obtained from the website of the National Electoral Commission.

Temporally, this work covers the years 1991–2023. The results of the parliamentary elections in 1991, 2001, 2005, 2019 and 2023 were analyzed. Territorially, the work covers the Podhale region, which has an area of approximately 2,000 km² and its population exceeds 250,000. C. Guzik and J. Leśnicki (2006) distinguished 8 geographic-economic subregions within Podhale: Tatra Mountains, Gorce Mountains, Ziemia Rabczańska, Ziemia Pienińska, Spisz, Orava, Nowy Targ Basin and Rocky Podhale (Fig. 1). Slovaks in Poland live mainly in Spisz; a small percentage of them also live in Orava. This is evidenced by the results of the parliamentary elections in 1991: the Electoral Bloc of Minorities (Wyborczy Blok Mniejszości – WBM) (Slovaks) obtained 21.11% of support in Spisz and only 1.00% in Orava (Fig. 2).

Since the presence of the Slovak national minority is mainly visible in Spisz, this subregion will be analyzed in more detail later in the work. Based on the results of the 1991 parliamentary elections, Kowalski (2002) estimated the number of Slovaks living in the Polish parts of Spisz and Orava at 3,230 people. According to the National Census in 2011, the total number of Slovaks living in Poland was 3,240 people. The fact that these two numbers were so close to each other proves that the WBM result in 1991 very well reflected the actual proportions of Poles and Slovaks in Spisz and Orava and in individual localities of these two subregions. The localities with the highest share of Slovaks (>20%) in Podhale are: Jurgów (51.08%), Krempachy (46.57%), Nowa Biała (42.72%), Rzepiska (31.01%) and Kacwin (21.43%).



Fig. 1. Geographic-economic subregions of Podhale (Poland).

Source: Own elaboration based on C. Guzik, J. Leśnicki (2006) and K. Miraj (2010).

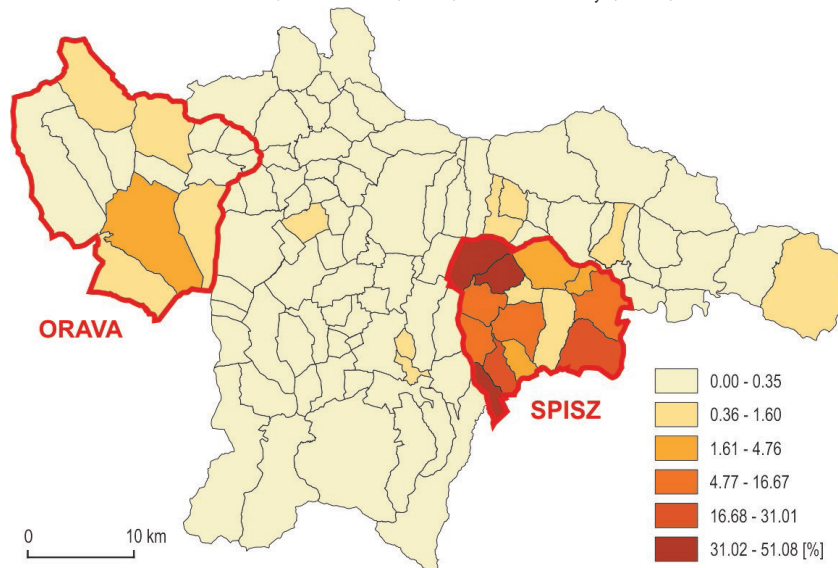


Fig. 2. Spatial distribution of support for the Electoral Bloc of Minorities (Slovaks) in the 1991 parliamentary elections.

Source: Own elaboration based on the National Electoral Commission data.

The research procedure consisted primarily in calculating the level of support for the RRP among the indigenously Polish population in individual localities in the Spisz region. The following assumptions were made in the calculations: (1) Slovaks do not vote for the RRP (this assumption was based on the study by D. van Wijk et al. (2019), where it was found that support among national and ethnic minorities for the RRP is negligible); (2) In the following years, Slovaks in the electorate constituted the same percentage as in the parliamentary elections in 1991 (this assumption was based on the fact that Slovaks living in Podhale do not differ significantly from their Polish neighbors due to a number of features, including the socio-demographic profile, which could result in a change in the proportions between Poles and Slovaks among voters (Raport..., 2015)). This work also assumes that the reaction of indigenous people to the presence of a national/ethnic minority in the local context is more important than the reaction in a broader context (e.g. country) (after Savelkoul et al. (2017)).

The calculation of the level of support for the RRP among the native Polish population in individual localities in the Spisz subregion was made by relating the RRP electoral result not to all voters

in a particular locality, but only to the Polish part of the electorate in that locality. The next research step was to compare the spatial distribution of support for WBM in 1991 with the spatial distribution of support for RRP among the indigenously Polish population in the years 2001–2023 in the localities of Spisz and throughout Podhale. The locality level is the lowest level of electoral data aggregation available to examine the impact of the presence of the Slovak national minority on the voting behavior of Poles.

3. Results

Figure 3 shows the spatial distribution of support for RRP in Podhale among the indigenously Polish population.

In the 2001 parliamentary elections, an increased level of support for the LPR (above the 70th percentile among Podhale localities) was recorded in the central and north-western parts of the Podhale region (the central part of the Nowy Targ Basin and Rocky Podhale, the southern part of the Ziemia Rabczańska and the northern part of Orava). An increased level of support for the LPR was recorded in two localities bordering with those

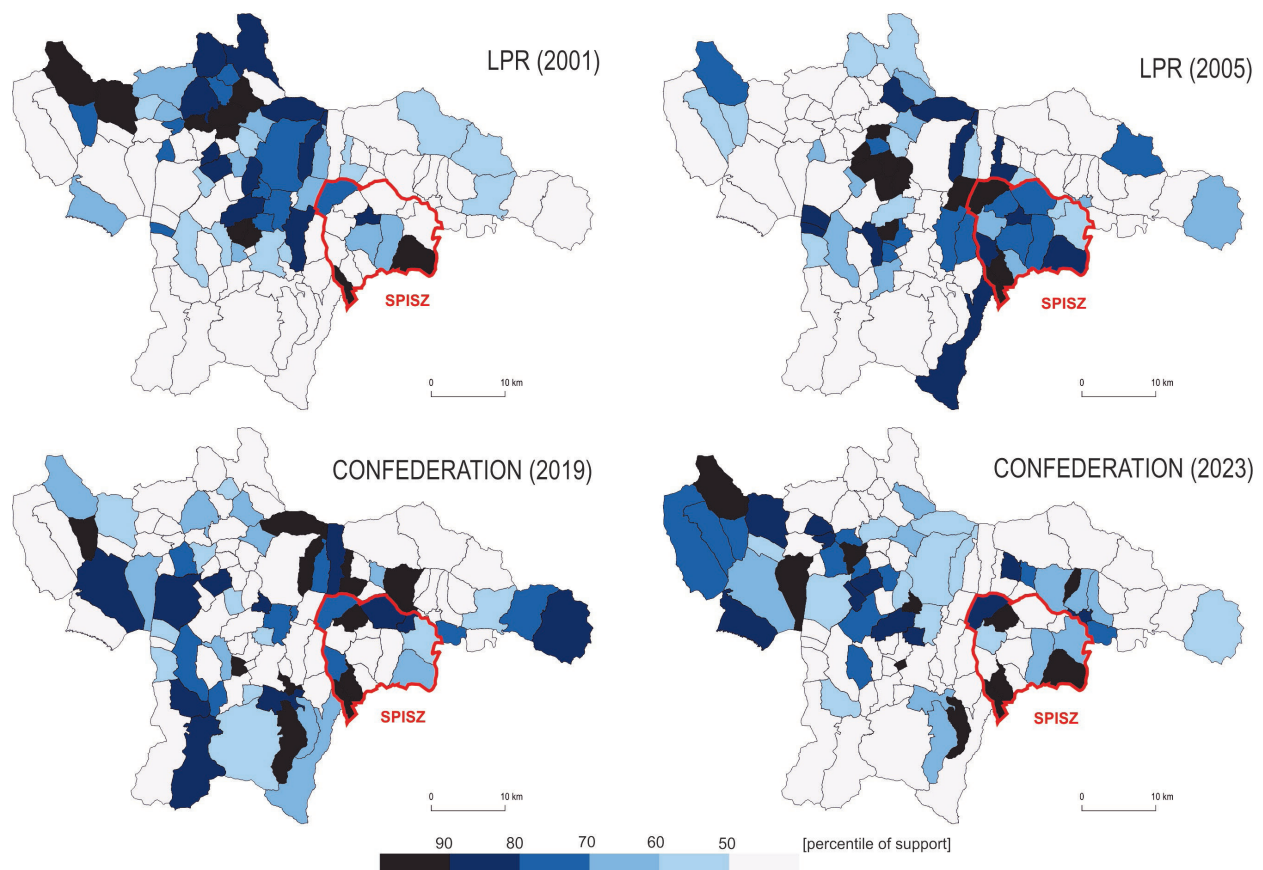


Fig. 3. Spatial distribution of support for RRP among the native Polish population in Podhale (2001–2023). Source: Own elaboration based on the National Electoral Commission data.

with a significant share (>20%) of Slovaks: a level of support above the 80th percentile was recorded in the locality of Groń-Leśnica, neighboring Nowa Biała, and Dursztyn, neighboring Krempachy. In Spisz, apart from Dursztyn, the LPR achieved support levels above the 70th percentile in Nowa Biała, and above the 90th percentile in Jurgów and Kacwin.

In the 2005 parliamentary elections, an increased level of support for the LPR (above the 70th percentile) was recorded in the central and south-eastern part of the Podhale region (central part of the Nowy Targ Basin and Rocky Podhale and Spisz). An increased level of support for the LPR was recorded in ten localities bordering with those with a significant share of Slovaks: support above the 70th percentile was recorded in the localities of Groń-Leśnica, Dursztyn, Białka Tatrzańska (bordering with Nowa Biała), Łapsze Niżne (bordering with Kacwin), Łapsze Wyżne (bordering with Rzepiska), Frydman (bordering with Krempachy), support above the 80th percentile was recorded in the localities of Harkłowa (bordering with Nowa Biała), Brzegi (bordering with Jurgów), Czarna Góra (bordering with Jurgów and Rzepiska), support above 90th percentile was recorded in the locality of Gronków (bordering with Nowa Biała). In Spisz, apart from the localities mentioned above, the level of support above the 70th percentile was achieved by the LPR in Krempachy, above the 80th percentile in Kacwin, and above the 90th percentile in Jurgów, Rzepiska and Nowa Biała.

In the 2019 parliamentary elections, an increased level of support for the Confederation (above the 70th percentile) was recorded in the northern part of the Podhale region (northern part of the Nowy Targ Basin), as well as in the strip of localities stretching from southern Orava, through the eastern part of the Nowy Targ Basin to the south-western part of Rocky Podhale. In the east of Podhale, an increased level of support for the Confederation was recorded in the Spisz subregion and in individual localities of the Ziemia Pienińska.

An increased level of support for the Confederation was recorded in five localities bordering with those with a significant share of Slovaks: a level of support above the 70th percentile was recorded in Ostrowsko (bordering with Nowa Biała) and Czarna Góra, a level of support above the 80th percentile was recorded in Łopuszna (bordering with Nowa Biała) and Frydman, levels above the 90th percentile were recorded in Harkłowa (bordering with Nowa Biała). In Spisz, apart from the localities mentioned above, the Confederation achieved support levels above the 70th percentile in Nowa Biała, above the 80th percentile in Falsztyn, and above the 90th percentile in Krempachy, Jurgów and Rzepiska.

In the 2023 parliamentary elections, an increased level of support for the Confederation (above the 70th percentile) was recorded in Orava, in the western part of the Nowy Targ Basin, individual localities in the central part of Rocky Podhale and Ziemia Pienińska, and in Spisz. There was no increased level of support for the Confederation in any locality neighboring those with a significant share of Slovaks. In Spisz, the Confederation achieved a level of support above the 80th percentile in Nowa Biała, and a level above the 90th percentile in Krempachy, Jurgów, Rzepiska and Kacwin.

Table 1 compares the results of WBM (Slovaks) in the 1991 parliamentary elections with the results obtained by RRP among the indigenously Polish population in individual localities of Spisz in the years 2001–2023. It is noticeable that the highest RRP results are concentrated in localities where support for WBM (the share of Slovaks) exceeded 20%. This mostly applies to Jurgów (in 4 elections, support for RRP was above the 90th percentile among Podhale localities) and Rzepiska (in 3 elections, support for RRP was above the 90th percentile). This relationship is less marked in the case of Kacwin (2 elections with support for RRP above the 90th percentile and 1 election with support above the 80th percentile) and Krempachy (2 elections with support for RRP above the 90th percentile and 1 election with support above the 70th percentile). This relationship is weakest in the case of Nowa Biała (1 election with support for RRP above the 90th percentile, 1 election with support above the 80th percentile and 2 elections with support above the 70th percentile). It should be noted that in several cases there was relatively strong support for RRP among the native Polish population in Spisz localities, where WBM obtained support below 20%. In Dursztyn, support above the 80th percentile was recorded in 2 elections. In Czarna Góra and Frydman, support was above the 70th and 80th percentile, respectively, in single elections. In Falsztyn, support above the 80th percentile was recorded in a single election. In Łapsze Niżne and Łapsze Wyżne, support above the 70th percentile was recorded in a single election. The presented table also shows that support for RRP among the indigenously Polish population does not increase linearly with the increase in the share of Slovaks in a particular locality. This is most noticeable in the case of the 2023 elections: moving from the bottom of the table to the top (i.e. from the localities with the weakest WBM result to those with the best result), the level of support for RRP remains very low, and after crossing the 20% barrier votes for WBM, there was a sudden increase in support for RRP among the indigenously Polish population. In the remaining elections, this relationship is slightly less pronounced, but still visible.

Tab. 1. The relationship between the electoral result of the Electoral Bloc of Minorities (WBM) (Slovaks) (in %) in the 1991 parliamentary elections and the electoral results of RRP among the indigenously Polish population in the 2001, 2005, 2019 and 2023 parliamentary elections in the localities of Spisz

	WBM (Slovaks) 1991	LPR 2001	LPR 2005	Confederation 2019	Confederation 2023
Jurgów	51.08				
Krempachy	46.57				
Nowa Biała	42.72				
Rzepiska	31.01				
Kacwin	21.43				
Czarna Góra	16.67				
Niedzica	10.61				
Trybsz	8.78				
Łapsze Wyżne	8.46				
Łapszanka	4.76				
Falsztyn	4.44				
Frydman	3.66				
Dursztyn	1.60				
Łapsze Niżne	1.14				

90	80	70	60	50	40	percentile of support

Source: Own elaboration based on the National Electoral Commission data.

4. Discussion

In the present study, the relationship between the presence of the Slovak national minority in Poland and voting by the native Polish population for RRP was investigated. Comparative analysis of cartographic materials was the basic method used in this study. Two political groupings were analyzed: the League of Polish Families and the Confederation.

(a) The results presented in this article indicate a positive curvilinear relationship between the presence of the Slovak national minority and voting for RRP by the native Polish population. The results presented in this article are most consistent with the results obtained by M. Savelkoul et al. (2017). In the mentioned study, the probability of support for RRP increased after

crossing the barrier of 15% minority share in the place of residence. This article observed stronger voting by the native Polish population for RRP after crossing the barrier of 20% of the share of the Slovak minority in a particular locality.

- (b) The localities where the share of the Slovak minority was at least 20% were: Jurgów, Krempachy, Nowa Biała, Rzepiska and Kacwin. However, the effect of stronger voting by native Polish people for RRP did not occur in all the mentioned localities with the same intensity and in all years. This may indicate, for example, local conditions: Slovaks may emphasize their presence differently in different localities in particular years; Polish-Slovak tensions do not always manifest themselves with the same intensity in particular localities and years, etc.
- (c) The results presented in this article indicate the functioning of the mechanism in accordance with H. Blumer’s (1958) conflict theory and not with G.W. Allport’s (1954) contact theory: in localities with a significant share of the Slovak minority, increased, not decreased, support for RRP is observed.
- (d) Among the few works relating to the CEE region, the results of this article show the greatest convergence with the results obtained by R. Matykowski (2008), who showed a positive relationship between the presence of the Belarusian national minority and voting for small extremely nationalistic parties (PPN, Dom Ojczysty).
- (e) The results presented in this article are not in line with the findings of E. Kaufmann (2017), who claimed that the increase in the number of minorities, and not their mere presence, is crucial for increased support for RRP among the indigenous population. In Podhale, the number of Slovaks is constant, but this fact itself creates a threat effect among the native Polish population, which is reflected in their stronger support for RRP.
- (f) The results obtained in this study provide weak evidence for the «halo effect.» On the one hand, in localities with a significant share of the Slovak minority there is increased, not decreased, support for RRP. On the other hand, in localities neighboring those with a significant percentage of the Slovak minority, there is no consistently increased support for RRP. The potential halo effect is most noticeable in the following localities: Dursztyn, Groń-Leśnica, Harkłowa and Frydman.
- (g) The Slovak minority little differs from the Polish majority, unlike the minorities examined in previous research on the impact of their presence on voting for RRP among the indigenous

population. This work provides evidence that even a very weakly distinguished minority creates a threat effect (economic or cultural) among the indigenous population, which results in different voting behavior in the form of stronger support for RRP.

- (h) This work is part of the research in electoral geography on the so-called neighborhood effect, where it is claimed that the same people operating in a different social reality vote differently. In the context of this work, it can be speculated that part of the Polish population of Spisz, having daily contact with the strong activity of activists of the Slovak minority, or seeing certain aspirations to present Spisz in contrast to the rest of Podhale or Poland, felt the need to resist these tendencies and decided to support groups that are perceived as those that most strongly emphasize attachment to national values, and which, in turn, they would probably not vote for if they operated in a different social reality.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to determine whether, and if so, how the presence of the Slovak national minority affects the voting behavior of the native Polish population. It was established that the

presence of the Slovak national minority is visible primarily in Spisz, and the localities of this Podhale subregion were subjected to a deeper analysis. This study is an ecological analysis conducted at the locality level (the most accurate level of electoral data aggregation available), which has a number of limitations, including a risk of committing the so-called ecological fallacy. Therefore, the findings of this work must be treated with great caution, and their verification through survey research is necessary.

During the analysis, it was established that the presence of the Slovak national minority at the locality level has a positive impact on voting for RRP by the native Polish population: stronger support for RRP was observed in localities where the share of Slovaks exceeded 20%. An important conclusion from this work is that the presence of even the Slovak minority, which is similar in many respects to the Polish majority, can create a threat effect and encourage Poles to support RRP more strongly.

This study proves the occurrence of the so-called neighborhood effect: Poles living in localities with a significant percentage of Slovaks, although they do not differ in any significant respect from their compatriots from nearby localities, vote differently because they function in a different social reality. This proves that the local context matters, and the voting behavior cannot be explained solely by individual voter's characteristics.

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