

Staying in power: a case study of municipal leadership stability in Czechia

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Abstract

The major transformative events in Czechia after 1989 came with many aspects of a new reality, including changes to the geographical organisation of society and public administration. Along with this reality, there was a fundamental change in the electoral behaviour of the population and its discontinuity in time and space at different scales. Given the above, it is clear that the voting behaviour of the Czech population is partly determined by socio-economic and socio-demographic factors, in addition to increasing spatial polarisation. The aim of this paper is therefore to help – using the stability index – reveal the spatial differentiation of the stability of local political elites (members of assembly) and electoral behaviour in selected types of regions in Czechia during the period from 1994 to 2022. The territory of the Pilsen Region and South Bohemian Region was chosen for the analysis. These regions represent territorial units co-determined by structural changes and at the same time, show a relatively higher internal differentiation of social, demographic, economic and other phenomena. The highest values of analysed stability were identified in low-populated rural municipalities with up to 200 inhabitants, with the exception of a few mountain municipalities in the state border areas. Conversely, it can be noted that there are a number of border municipalities with up to 200 inhabitants. The results show a significant spatial differentiation of the examined stability and its ambivalent character, determined by selected socio-economic factors. For these reasons, the selected types of regions can be identified as suitable territorial units for a pilot analysis of the stability of local political elites.

Keywords

Local political elites,
Spatial differentiation,
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Stability,
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Highlights for public administration, management and planning:

- The research analyzes the spatial differentiation of the stability of municipal leaders (members of assembly) in selected types of regions in Czechia (Pilsen Region and South Bohemian Region) from 1994 to 2022.
- The highest values of stability were identified especially in low-populated rural municipalities with up to 200 inhabitants. These municipalities can serve as examples of best practices in long-term public trust in local governance.
- Relatively lower values of stability can generally be observed in larger cities. This can be attributed to the higher degree of heterogeneity in the urban population and its lower personal knowledge of local representatives.

1 Introduction

The waves of democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s transformed, among other things, the character of the Czech territory, including the settlement system. Along with the onset of historical and fundamental events ([Ekiert](#)

& Ziblatt 2013; [Jańczak 2015](#); [Zarycki 2015](#); [Fukuyama 2014](#)), changes were also made to territorial reforms, political trust, electoral behaviour and the geographical organisation of society ([Hampl et al. 1996](#); [Bertus & Kovács 2022](#)), which included spatial patterns of electoral behaviour and its (dis)continuity. Changes in the electoral

behaviour of the population and their causes were compounded by increasing spatial polarisation, which further exacerbated the problems of structurally disadvantaged and economically weak regions in Czechia. Previous research (e.g. [Kostelecý et al. 2015](#)) shows that electoral behaviour in these areas is regionally differentiated, relatively stable over time and dependent on compositional and contextual variables ([Mikešová 2019](#)). The electoral behaviour of the population is also conditioned by the existence of problem areas in Czechia. One of the consequences of electoral behaviour is, among other things, the stability of election results, which directly affects the spatial distribution of the stability of local representatives in the country. However, the spatial differentiation of the stability of local political elites (members of assembly), its significance and changes over time have not yet been studied and explained to a satisfactory extent. No clear conclusions can be formulated without empirical research, even on questions concerning the importance of the stability of municipal representatives for the territory's future development. For these reasons, this text aims to provide a theoretical and empirical framework for the issue of local political elites (members of assembly) in the post-totalitarian context of Czechia, as well as to identify spatial differences in the degree of municipal stability over time and space, including by attempting to clarify and understand the observed stability from a broader perspective. The last aim of this study is to identify stability values of representatives in selected Czech micro-regions and describe potential context between certain socio-economic and socio-demographic variables. Although the study is geographically situated in the specific context of Czechia, its findings carry broader relevance for the entire group of post-totalitarian countries that have undergone significant political and institutional transformations since 1989. The stability of local political elites reflects not only voting behaviour, but also the extent to which democratic principles have taken root, the historical continuity of local governance, and the ability of municipalities to respond to societal challenges. Because of the chosen methodology—designed to be easily adaptable to other national contexts due to its universal logic—it can be argued that this study offers not only a tool for analysing the development of local political representation, but also an impetus for international comparison that can contribute to understanding the diverse trajectories of democratic consolidation, particularly across different parts of post-

communist Europe (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia etc.).

2 Spatial differentiation and administrative changes

In the context of the changes in Czech society after 1989, specific social groups emerged that sought their social, economic, political and other roles in the transforming system and the newly established social contract. Following the establishment of new social ties and structures at the national level, significant political changes took place, including at the regional and local levels. These changes were manifested in different ways in many regions or municipalities ([Heřmanová et al. 1992](#)). To some extent, a new local political environment was thus formed based on the experiences and patterns of electoral behaviour from the totalitarian regime. The subsequent emancipation of political subjects and Czech society in general allowed a space to be created for the emergence and subsequent establishment of new elites (not only political), who became important actors of local development in the newly established democratic system. The above processes caused a fundamental qualitative transformation of local administration and self-government in Czechia. However, the shift from a non-democratic system to a democratic one did not become manifested in the new political order until after 1990. The newly introduced legislative changes enabled the disintegration of municipalities ([Illner 1997](#)), taking place as a result of political discussions, the activation of the professional public, local communities or a certain aversion to the previous directive integration of municipalities ([Hampl & Müller 1998](#)).

Local government in Czechia had a relatively high level of trust (compared to other political actors), and as [Illner \(1997\)](#) points out, this trust was based primarily on the social capital of local leaders and the relative absence of the introduction of political conflicts into decision-making processes at the local level. The relatively high level of trust in local politicians is still evident today, as confirmed by regular surveys carried out by research agencies (e.g. [CVVM 2022](#)). Now that several decades have passed since the transformative events, it is clear that there are certain types of regions or municipalities in the country that show specific values in terms of the stability of local representatives. In general, these territorial differences in stability are natural and do not, in principle, represent a unexpected phenomenon. However, when focusing on the pat-

terns of spatial stability and types of regions, there is a clear possibility of identifying above-average stable or unstable clusters of municipalities in some regions. The degree of continuity in the personnel composition of representatives represents one possible indicator in the evaluation of local government.

It turns out that there are many municipalities, for example in border or structurally disadvantaged regions, isolated localities or marginalised areas, which have relatively high stability, yet many of these exhibit negative development characteristics or other structural constraints. However, the (in)stability of local political elites in certain types of micro-regions does not mean that the continuity or discontinuity of representatives can be assessed positively or negatively. The variation in stability is based on very different (including cumulative) processes that may have different causes and consequences in particular types of regions or municipalities (see Fig. 1). Geographical location is just one, but not the only explanatory factor. To analyse the stability of local political elites, two internally differentiated regions in Czechia which underwent similar socio-historical development and exhibit similar socio-economic or socio-demographic phenomena were selected. Specifically, these were the Pilsen and South Bohemian regions. Several types of the micro-regions mentioned can be identified in both regions, however, for better spatial clarity, has been used the typology of Perlin et al. (2019), which defines four basic types of micro-regions in Czechia based on the prevailing phenomena in the territory. Thus, the following types of micro-regions can be identified: Developed, Socially disadvantaged, Socially and geographically disadvantaged, Geographically disadvantaged and Undefined.

Local and regional regularities or differences in electoral behaviour are not just the result of social stratification of the population, but rather, they are also influenced by territorially specific factors or other complementary aspects. Simply put, the stability of members of assembly is influenced by the actors in a given society and the spatial context in which the actors are located and make decisions (Spurná 2007). In general, residents are not isolated and inert individuals; on the contrary, they are actors whose behaviour is territorially determined by the environment or context (Baldini 2002) in which everyday activities take place (Agnew 1996). A few key contextual influences include place of residence (Bernard & Kostelecký 2014), place of birth (Kuldová 2005), sense of belonging (Chromý & Skála 2010), developmental discontinuity

(Ekiert & Ziblatt 2013), and tradition and experience (Mikešová 2019).

3 Local political elites

In general, elites are a relatively difficult subject of interest to grasp due to their different goals, tasks and social roles. However, they can be described as a specific group of actors with a certain level of power to make decisions about public affairs (Jann 2002). The definition of elites currently lacks a unified theoretical basis and a number of disciplines (especially geography, sociology or political science) attribute different parameters and characteristics to elites (Etzioni-Halevy 1997; Khan 2012; van der Wal 2014). Therefore, in many cases, elites are discussed in a formal sense, without a precise consensus on what is the subject of interest (Tuček 2006). However, for this text, local political elites can be defined as members of assembly (municipal representatives) or public actors (Giddens 1984; Meadowcroft 2001) who, by virtue of their formal and informal positions, decide on the further development of municipalities. Current studies on elites emphasise interdisciplinarity and terminological diversity based on different criteria. In general, however, elites can be described as holders of power in political, economic, military, state, administrative, cultural, media or other institutions. Each definition of elites has specific characteristics.

For these and other reasons, leaders are treated as political or power elites. Since these are members of assembly, the term “local political elites” can be used. This term is quite legitimate; for example, Illner (1997) has worked with it in Czech sociology. The absence of theoretical approaches also reflects political and ideological aspects that have influenced the lack of interest in defining new elites or new discussions about elites. For these and other reasons, it is impossible to find sufficiently valid sources in Czech literature describing local political elites and their influence on territorial development prior to 1989.

With the onset of the transformative period in Central and Eastern Europe (Tavits 2008; Szabó 2013; Kovács & Vida 2015) and in Czechia, significant social changes took place that led to a transformation of the perception of elites as such. The exceptions to the research on Czech elites after 1989 are a few mainly sociological studies (Machonin et al. 2007; Tuček 2006), which predominantly deal with the analysis and description of general, regional and local elites, including their social and economic backgrounds or professional and political careers.

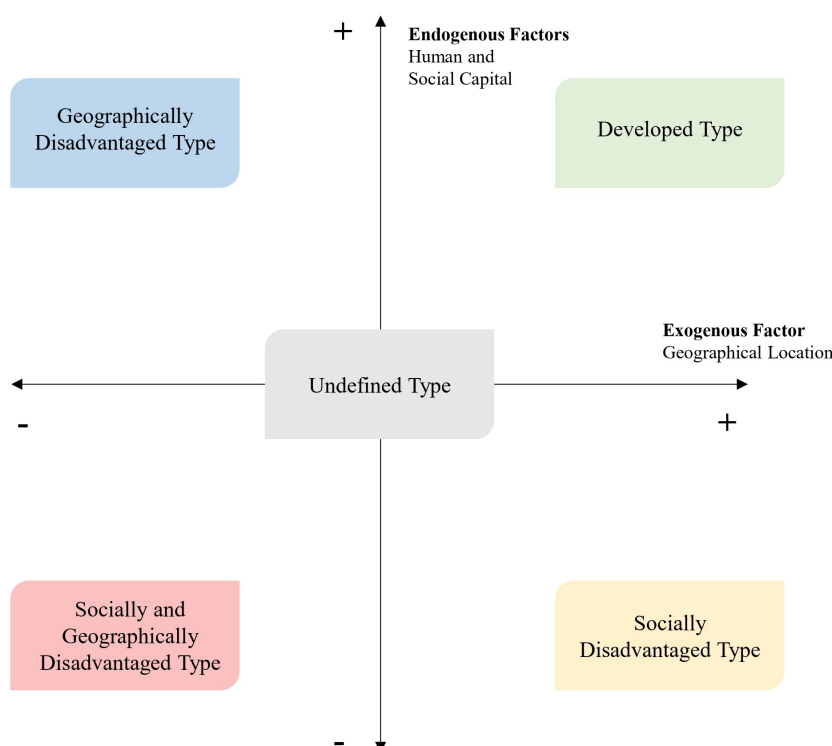


Fig. 1 Typology of Czech micro-regions according to [Perlín et al. \(2019\)](#)

However, in light of these studies, it can be concluded that the territorial differentiation of local political elites and the preconditions for its variability have not been sufficiently analysed and explained. For these reasons, one of the main tasks of this paper is to identify, describe and partially explain the spatial differentiation of the stability of local political elites in selected regions in Czechia. The studies that have partially addressed this issue have provided rather cursory results. Often, they were limited to institutional contexts between society and space. By contrast, there are several studies (e.g. [Řezníčková 2015](#); [Prener 2022](#)) that focus on the territorial differentiation of local political elites and, to a limited extent, their influence on local development. For the above reasons, it is not possible to formulate empirical assumptions regarding the importance of the territorial differentiation of stability of representation in Czechia without theoretical and practical research. Similarly, there are currently no valid methods for calculating stability or objective criteria for measuring the benefits of representation stability for territorial development. Therefore, one of the aims of this paper is to bridge this gap and present the stability of representation as an important consequence of electoral behaviour in Czechia

4 Local political elites as key representatives of municipal development

Local political elites generally represent important actors of local development in Czechia. Every municipality in Czech territory has formal or informal personalities who, because of their legitimacy and credibility, have held or still hold decisive positions of power in the municipality (similarly [Putnam 1993](#)). From this and other research studies (e.g. [Plešivčák et al. 2022](#)), it is clear that the legitimacy of municipal politicians is a fundamental pillar and a necessary condition for the functioning of democracy at the local level. Previous studies ([Pink et al. 2011](#); [Řezníčková 2015](#)) have shown that there are municipalities within Czechia that, due to their structural and locational attributes, exhibit a relatively lower stability of local representatives, which can lead to micro-regional clusters of above-average or less developed municipalities. Considering the current fragmentation of the Czech settlement system ([Hampl et al. 1996](#); [Dostál & Hampl 2007](#)), it is clear that this fragmented structure does not allow for the more ambitious development of municipalities.

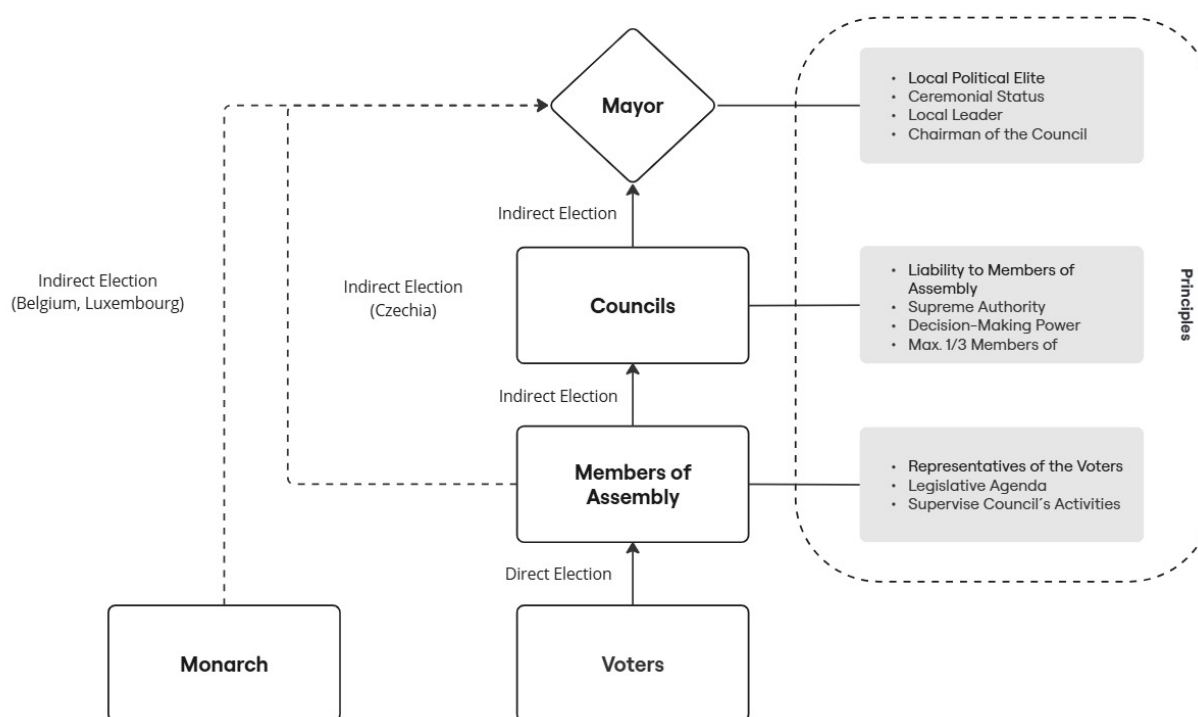


Fig. 2 Model of Local Government in Czechia (Collective form of Governance), own processing

The existing possibilities of local political elites to influence the possible development of municipalities were practically limited in the second half of the 20th century, as the decision-making mechanism was subordinated to the then Communist Party and its leading role in society. The absence of democratic principles in the management of local administration and self-government was limited by the vertical subordination and collective decision-making of the national committees. The method of exercising the political mandate was thus freed from social pressures, but was instead replaced by political pressures emphasising social class affiliation to ensure smooth territorial administration without unwanted animosities. At the local level, however, there were different groups of people who formed the formal or informal relationships necessary to maintain and control power in the community. Behind-the-scenes agreements and practices therefore took centre stage, and were partly replaced by ideological and political conflicts after the transition. Political decision-making in post-totalitarian societies was to some extent influenced by moral and legal considerations that took over the collective legitimacy of decision-making. The collapse of the undemocratic regime thus caused subsequent transformations in the interpretation and understanding of decision-making mechanisms in the political system.

Along with changes in the political system, changes in territorial administration led to the decentralisation of public administration and an unprecedented increase in the number of municipalities and representatives. Eventually, more than two thousand municipalities were established, most of them in the post-revolutionary 1990s. In terms of size categories, these were mainly municipalities with less than 200 inhabitants. They were often dysfunctional municipalities with a lack of public life and depopulation. The democratisation changes in these municipalities took place at a gradual pace and often in an opaque manner. Local governments experienced rather sporadic and limited personnel changes. Instead, years of disputes and new conflicts over the further development of the municipality opened up (see [Heřmanová et al. 1992](#)). Although the establishment of local political elites is situated in a broader post-totalitarian context in Central Europe, it is clear that the model of governance in Czechia is similar to Western European systems of public administration, particularly the model of collective leadership found in countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. In this model, decision-making power rests

with a collective body (mainly a council or assembly) which is responsible for most executive functions. In Belgium or Luxembourg, the mayor is appointed by the central government or the monarch. As a result, the role of the mayor is less important in practice and in terms of symbolic significance. This model emphasises the collective nature of leadership rather than individual professionalism and political leadership, which may in some ways hinder development opportunities, especially in low-populated municipalities. This suggests that in small municipalities in Czechia, the mayor represents an important local leader who to some extent takes over the decision-making powers of the representatives (see Fig. 2).

5 Data and methods

In this case, the stability of members of assembly created for this study is a socially constructed phenomenon. It is necessary to approach and evaluate the observed changes in the stability of municipal representatives and the territorial differentiation of local political elites with this knowledge. Stability itself and its benefits can be analysed and evaluated in different ways and using different methods depending on the discipline studying the issue, the hierarchical scale chosen and, last but not least, the geographical location of the territorial unit in question. The method presented in this study is applied to the lowest level of governance in Czechia, namely the municipal level. Given this fact, the method can be adapted to most countries of the world, their political systems and thus to different levels of governance. Changes in the representatives are calculated using the representative stability index, which represents the result of the turnover of members of assembly (only members of assembly, not mayors).

This index reflects the extent to which there have been changes in the personnel of local political elites in the municipalities of the Pilsen and South Bohemian regions between 1994 and 2022. The resulting stability index is calculated as the sum of elected and re-elected members of assembly over time. Simply put, it is the sum of re-elected members compared to the previous period. Each member is assigned a weight of four as a bonus for each elected term in which the member (re)elected their political mandate.

Table 1 Example of calculation of stability of members of assembly in Planá near České Budějovice in 1994–2022

Year	Name	Value
2014	Balogh Ladislav	4
2018	Balogh Ladislav	8
2022	Balogh Ladislav	12
2010	Bábská Simona	4
2018	Bábská Simona	8
2022	Bábská Simona	12
2014	Beran Martin	4
2018	Beran Martin	8
2022	Beran Martin	12
1994	Beranová Alena	4
2006	Bláhová Vladimíra	4
2010	Bláhová Vladimíra	8
2014	Bláhová Vladimíra	12
1998	Čapčuch Luděk	4
1994	Fošenbauer Josef	4
1998	Fošenbauer Josef	8
2002	Fošenbauer Josef	12
2006	Fošenbauer Josef	16
1994	Hošna Jiří	4
1994	Hošna Jiří	4
1994	Kolařík Stanislav	4
1998	Kolařík Stanislav	8
2002	Kolařík Stanislav	12
2006	Kolařík Stanislav	16
2010	Kölbl Jan	4
2002	Kölbl Tomáš	4
2006	Kölbl Tomáš	8
1998	Loskotová Helena	4
2002	Loskotová Helena	8
2006	Loskotová Helena	12
2010	Mlnářik Stanislav	4
2014	Mlnářik Stanislav	8
2018	Mlnářik Stanislav	12
2022	Mlnářik Stanislav	16
1998	Novák Milan	4
2002	Novák Milan	8
2006	Novák Milan	12
2010	Pintér Tomáš	4
2014	Pintér Tomáš	8
2018	Pintér Tomáš	12
2022	Pintér Tomáš	16
2010	Schönbauer Jan	4
2014	Schönbauer Jan	8
2018	Schönbauer Jan	12
2022	Schönbauer Jan	16
2010	Sodomková Růžena	4
2014	Sodomková Růžena	8
2018	Sodomková Růžena	12
2022	Sodomková Růžena	16
1994	Tibitanzl Jan	4
1998	Tibitanzl Jan	8
2002	Tibitanzl Jan	12
1994	Vobořil Jan	4
1998	Vobořil Jan	8
2002	Vobořil Jan	12
2006	Vobořil Jan	16
Total		456
Number of Mandates		56
Stability		8.14

source data: CSO 1994–2022

In context of constructing the stability index, a weight of 4 was selected as the coefficient representing the repeated election of a municipal representative, for several reasons. First, the numerical value of 4 reflects the average length of an electoral term at the municipal level in Czechia, thereby symbolically assigning each re-election to an additional four-year period of active political service.

Second, the use of this weight allows for the quantification not only of the fact of re-election itself but also of the intensity and duration of voter trust in the given representative. From a methodological perspective, the weight of 4 provides a consistent and interpretable measure of mandate continuity across both time and regions, facilitating inter-municipal and temporal comparisons. The resulting value of observed stability is calculated as a result of the above totals for each municipality in the selected regions, which are then divided by the average number of members of assembly in that municipality from 1994 to 2022 (an example is shown in [Tab. 1](#)). The above method assigned the resulting stability values to individual municipalities or their leaders based on the turnover rate of local political elites. The analytical method presented was then applied to the Pilsen and South Bohemia regions and identified spatial clusters of municipalities with high or low representative stability. The values obtained were categorised into 3 different intervals based on the analysed maximum and minimum values with respect to the rules for creating intervals. This led to the creation of the low stability (less than 6.00), medium stability (6.00–7.99) and high stability (8.00 and more).

The Pilsen Region and South Bohemian Region represent territorial units in Czechia that have significant spatial differentiation in electoral results and are internally heterogeneous in terms of social, cultural, economic and other variables. They are also regions that have been significantly affected by transformative events.

Moreover, these territorial units were influenced by the former presence of the Iron Curtain, which for decades predetermined the further development of the borderlands. The regions were chosen as territorial reference units for the reasons mentioned above. In this research, the primary datasets used were the lists of the names of elected representatives in municipal elections from 1994 to 2022. These datasets contained information on all elected representatives for each municipality in Czechia. The datasets were obtained from the election results of the Czech Statistical Office (CSO), respectively from [Volby.cz](https://volby.cz). In terms of territorial scope, the data matrices provided an overview of the com-

position of members of assembly in the Pilsen Region and South Bohemian Region for individual election periods, including any personnel changes (e.g. resignations, deaths, changes in marital status, etc.). Other data sources were information from the Czech Statistical Office's territorial analysis materials (CSO 2022). This secondary data, such as the age index, growth rate, voter turnout, votes for the anti-system party KSČM-Communist party (both Elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic), unemployment rate and municipal tax revenues, served as explanatory variables to reveal any cumulative tendencies leading to the low or high stability of representatives in the selected types of regions.

In terms of validity, the data do not identify any fundamental deficiencies, although the processing of the final dataset was subject to certain limitations. Typical was the candidacy of two persons with the same name (e.g., father and son) which complicated the assessment of overall stability. Identified inaccuracies were corrected using personal (individual) data. During the analysis, it became evident that the name lists of elected representatives contained several additional mistakes that had to be revised. These primarily involved incorrectly written identification data—most often typographical mistakes—in attributes such as first name, surname, age, education, profession, etc.

Based on the above-mentioned or other individual characteristics (such as education, age, etc.), these deficiencies were subsequently corrected. Although minor inaccuracies cannot be entirely ruled out given the scale of the dataset, the data were not processed automatically, as automated methods are unable to detect nuances and contextual specifics present in individual cases. The methodological limitations described—such as inaccuracies in identification data, the dissolution or merger of municipalities, and the issue of duplicate names—may to some extent influence the accuracy of the representative stability index. Although most of these inaccuracies were eliminated through manual verification and the use of complementary personal data, the occurrence of minor errors cannot be excluded.

Table 2 Number of members of assembly in Czech municipalities by size category

Size Category	Number of Members of Assembly
Less than 500 inhabitants	5–15
500–3 000 inhabitants	7–15
3 001–10 000 inhabitants	11–25
10 001–50 000 inhabitants	15–35
50 001–150 000 inhabitants	25–45
Over 150 000 inhabitants	35–55

Source: Law No. 128/2000 Coll.

It is important to emphasize that the data processing was not carried out fully automatically, precisely in order to capture subtle contextual variations that automated tools would likely overlook. While this approach increased the difficulty of the analysis, it also enhanced its validity and allowed for the correction of mistakes that could otherwise distort the results. Overall, it can be concluded that although the existing limitations represent a certain degree of uncertainty, their impact on the main conclusions of the study is limited and does not constitute systematic data distortion. Therefore the results can be considered credible, especially in light of the dataset's scope and the care taken in its manual review and correction. In general, it can be stated that the presented data are relatively comprehensive and can contribute to a better understanding of issues related to the stability of municipal representatives in selected regions of Czechia.

6 Results and discussion

Based on the observed values of the stability of members of assembly, it can be concluded that there are quite significant spatial differences between individual municipalities. In addition to horizontal differences, i.e. between areas on the borders and within the regions under study, a certain verticality cannot be overlooked, which shows differences depending on the number of inhabitants in the municipality (see Fig. 3). Higher values of stability are evident in smaller municipalities, especially those with up to 200 inhabitants. One of the reasons for this is the limited and relatively stable number of people willing and able to perform the work of members of assembly or mayors. Other reasons include a greater personal knowledge of and trust in representatives and residents' interest in local affairs and sense of belonging to their place of residence

(van Assche & Dierickx 2007; Plešivčák et al. 2022), which can influence stability. The effect is particularly noticeable in geographically remote parts of the regions (e.g. areas around Tábor, Soběslav and Strakonice), whose settlement structure is characterised by many smaller rural municipalities with specific socio-demographic and socio-economic parameters and a relatively poor vertical position in the settlement system. One exception among small municipalities is sparsely populated mountainous areas close to the state border. Due to their geographical location, historical development, and socio-economic characteristics, these areas face several developmental constraints and distinct features. People's lives and the exercise of elected self-governance often face specific natural conditions (e.g. protected areas), tourism problems and the seasonality of economic activity. Settlements are often fragmented and some residents only stay there during a certain time of the year. These factors appear to determine the behaviour of local voters, which secondarily influences the local stability of members of assembly. Examples are border areas and municipalities (e.g. Strážný or Nová Pec) in the south-western part of the regions (Šumava), which are among the municipalities with one of the lowest stabilities of municipal representatives in the South Bohemian Region. Another size category of settlements with lower representational stability can be found in the two regional cities (both are in developing micro-regions) of Plzeň (circa 175,000 inhabitants) and České Budějovice (circa 94,000 inhabitants). Both cities have a higher number of members of assembly and higher heterogeneity of the population, and therefore of political views, preferences, and agendas (Bertus & Kovács 2022). This fact is indirectly confirmed by Baldini (2002), who describes that people in large cities tend to project national political trends and issues into their electoral choices due to the anonymity of the political environment, and vote more for parties than for specific candidates. The link with parliamentary politics is often an incentive for the circulation of local representatives depending on the current political mood of Czech society. It is also shown that many of the findings can be explained by the size and heterogeneous socio-economic parameters of municipalities.

In addition to the size of a municipality, the stability of members of assembly can be influenced by many other factors, whether demographic, socio-economic or political. Demographic determinants include, for example, the proportion of people over 65, the average age of the municipality's population,

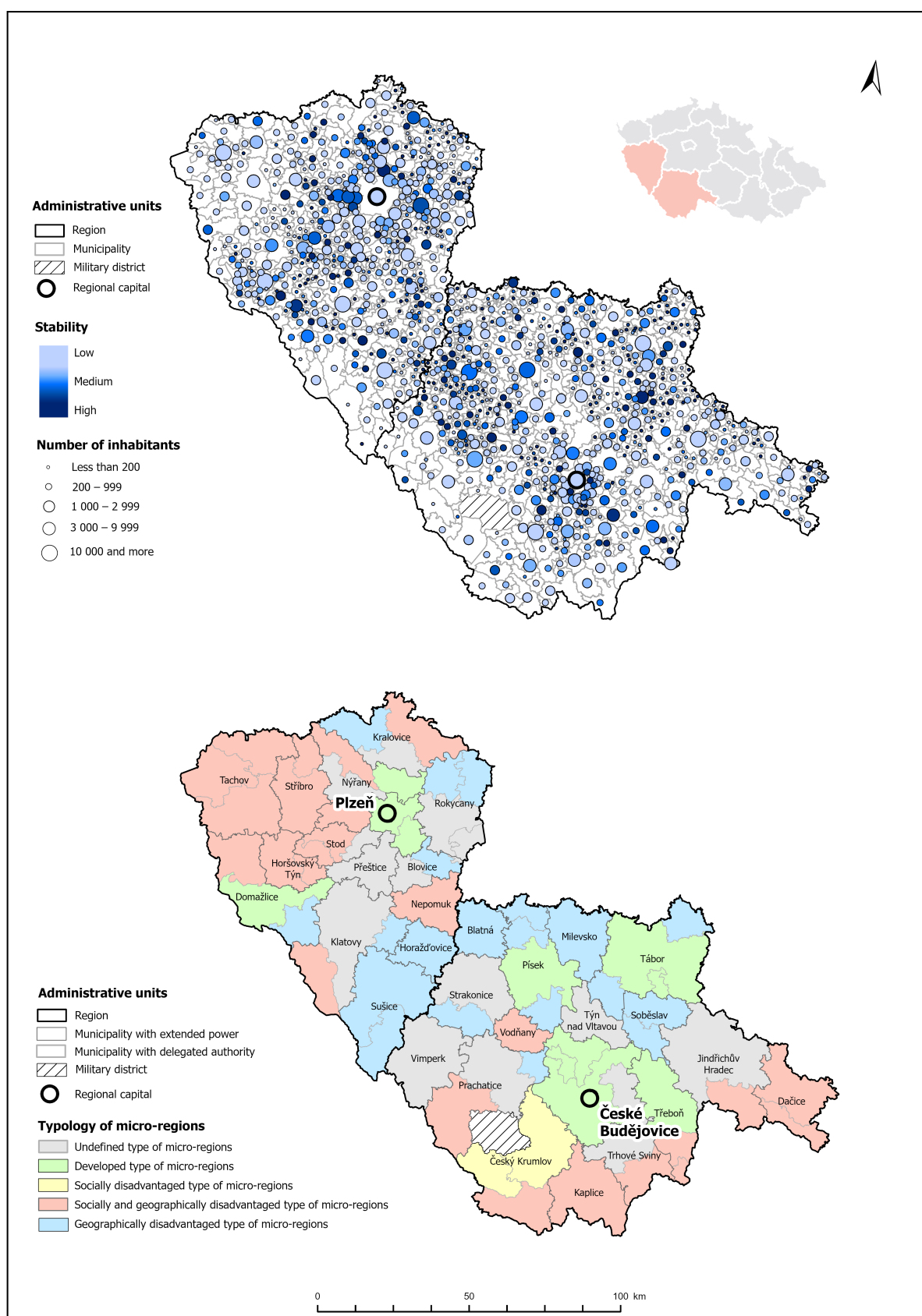


Fig. 3 Territorial differentiation of stability of local political elites in Pilsen Region and South Bohemian Region in 1994–2022 (data source: CSO 1994–2022; [Perlín et al. 2019](#))

population trends and the proportion of people born in the municipality (Kuldová 2005). Based on the results, it can be concluded that municipalities with a higher proportion of older residents, native-born residents and predominant depopulation generally tend to have more stable voting behaviour and consequently less frequent changes in representative personnel (CSO 2022). The demographic characteristics indicated correspond in particular to the areas of the inner peripheries located on the border with the Central Bohemian Region (areas around Rokycany, Blatná, Milevsko or Tábor – geographically disadvantaged type of region). Conversely, municipalities in the north-west or south-east of the regions, in the areas around Tachov and Kaplice (most of the border regions – socially and geographically disadvantaged regions) with a younger population and a smaller proportion of native-born residents show less stability. This phenomenon also applies to the suburban villages around the two regional cities (and some other towns, e.g. around Jindřichův Hradec), which also have a younger and growing population. The situation is similar in the town of Týn nad Vltavou, where the offer of employment at the nearby Temelín nuclear power plant has attracted middle-aged and younger people with a higher education level in recent decades.

In contrast to the factors mentioned so far, it does not appear that voter's level of education is a determining factor for the stability of local representatives (Persson 2015; Norris & Inglehart 2019). Municipalities with a high proportion of residents with primary education, located mainly in border areas and inner peripheries, show low and high representative levels of stability. Thus, more pronounced conditioning can be observed in the economic sphere, specifically in regard to unemployment and household financial situation, which can strongly influence people's satisfaction and dissatisfaction, including their voting behaviour (Pattie et al. 1997; CSO 2021). The results show that communities with unfavourable unemployment rates also have lower stability values. This effect is particularly evident in vulnerable regions in the border areas in both counties. As the unemployment rate decreases, the presence of this trend decreases and stability values tend to move towards the average and gradually decrease. Furthermore, it is evident that in areas with a higher level of unemployment and higher proportion of people in prison, which are traditionally located in border regions, dissatisfaction with the worse economic situation is reflected in the popularity of radical parties and groups (e.g. Fig. 4) opposing the current political elites. However, the regional city

of Plzeň is also struggling with a high share of foreclosures. In this case, however, the relative instability of Plzeň's members of assembly is not primarily due to the above parameter, i.e. the share of people in foreclosure, but rather to a higher level of political competition (Hábl 2019; CSO 2021).

In addition to demographic and socio-economic factors, the spatial differentiation of stability in municipal representatives can also be attributed to the influence of political aspects. In addition to the natural influence of parliamentary politics (which, as already mentioned, resonates in municipal elections, especially in large cities and developed type of regions), there is a specific correlation between the stability of members of assembly and the inclination of voters towards radical or anti-system political parties on both the left (KSČM-Communist party) and right (SPD-a right-wing populist party) side of the political spectrum. Areas with traditionally above-average support for these parties are located mainly in the state border regions. This reflects the historical factor of post-war displacement and subsequent resettlement, which took place in several waves, and the current higher unemployment rate and unfavourable educational structure of the local population. The usually lower coalition potential of these relatively strongly represented parties creates an atmosphere of ideological polarisation and instability in municipal politics, which often leads to the more frequent turnover of political representation.

It is no exception that municipalities in border regions, as well as large cities and their suburbs, have a relatively high voter turnout (CSO 2021, see Fig. 4). This creates a certain paradox whereby higher turnout can sometimes lead to instability in members of assembly. Conversely, lower turnout can indicate a form of stability (inertia), a fact that is evident in several parts of the north-west or south-east of the selected regions, especially in socially and geographically disadvantaged types of micro-regions. Due to the intermingling of demographic, socio-economic, political and historical influences, the location of settlements in the core-periphery system has only a limited influence on the spatial differentiation of stability in both regions (Havlíček & Chromý 2001; Kubeš & Podlešáková 2021). From this perspective, it is difficult to identify significant spatial gradients. Only the differences between the northern and southern parts of the region may indicate some general disparities, with the southern half of the Pilsen Region, with the exception of the border areas, appearing to be more stable and the northern (or eastern) part of the South Bohemian Region seeming to share this attribute.

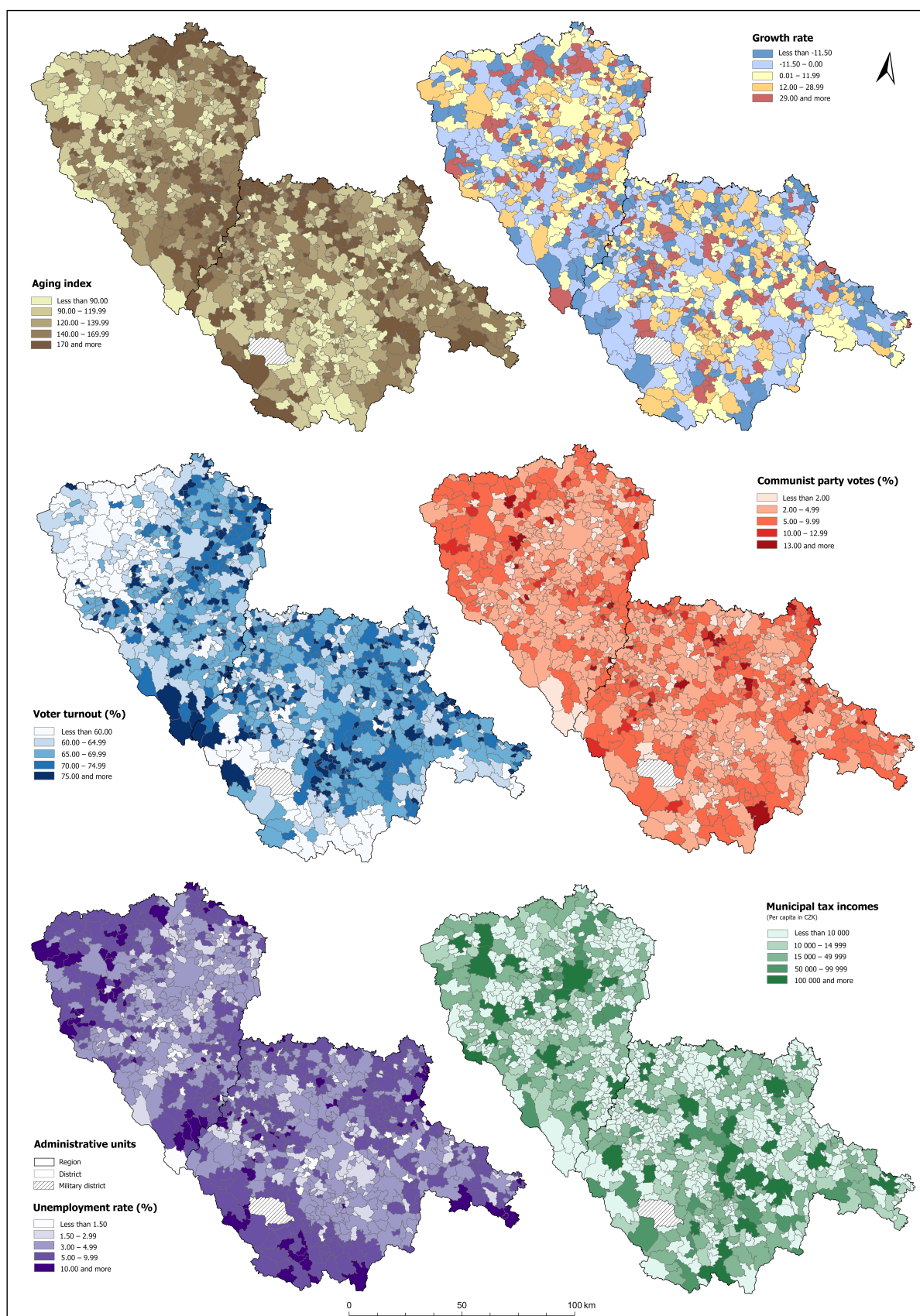


Fig. 4 Selected variables in Pilsen Region and South Bohemian Region (data source: CSO 2021, CSO 2022)

Rather than spatial gradients or differences between cores and peripheries, it is more appropriate to talk about a mosaic structure and clusters of villages or areas with a predominance of high or low stability. Areas with a higher degree of stability of elected members of assembly as shown in Fig. 3 are located mainly on the inner peripheries on the borders of both regions with the Central Bohemian Region, in the southern half of the Pilsen Region, in the Strakonice district or in the eastern part of the South Bohemian Region in the Jindřichův Hradec district (both areas are an undefined type of micro-region). With a few exceptions, these areas are characterised by long-term population decline, predominance of rural communities or small towns and a relatively high proportion of the elderly and older adults. In contrast, clusters of municipalities with an unstable composition of elected members of assembly are the Tachov region and the adjacent border belt extending into the Český Krumlov district (socially disadvantaged type of micro-region). In addition to these sparsely populated areas, regional towns and municipalities in their immediate vicinity also show low stability. While Tachov and the border region are peripheral to the settlement system and the population is leaving, the two regional towns with their suburbs are in a completely different situation. In addition to the lower proportion of older residents and elderly, the worse economic conditions of the population and therefore the higher propensity to vote for radical or anti-system political parties can be seen as a factor contributing to the lower stability of the elected elites in the sparsely populated border areas and the wider Tachov region. Lower satisfaction with the living standards of the municipality and politics leads to a turnover of elected members of assembly.

In contrast, voters in and around large regional cities (developed type of micro-regions) tend to be more detached from elected representatives because of the more anonymous environment and are more likely to integrate social moods and changes in national politics into their electoral preferences. Despite a certain regularity, which is partly reflected in the spatial differentiation of the observed phenomenon, many exceptions deviate from their surroundings, confirming that the reality is more complex and dependent on individual situations, specific personalities, community problems or generally cumulative causes.

In the Pilsen Region, Domažlice and Modrava can be identified as special cases with a more stable local representation than expected in border areas. In the case of Domažlice, this is proba-

bly due to the influence of the settlement's continuity, which, due to the historical predominance of the Czech-speaking population, did not undergo as significant changes after the Second World War as in the rest of the state border region (Arburg & Staněk 2010). Thus, the municipalities in northern Domažlice district have a higher proportion of long-term residents and lower unemployment rates or a lower proportion of residents in foreclosure.

Similarly, specific differences can be identified in the territory of the South Bohemian Region, again mainly in border areas. While the south-western part of the region (Šumava) is among the areas with the lowest representative stability, the municipalities in the north-eastern part of the South Bohemian Region stand out for their above-average stability of local political elites. At the same time, local inhabitants face similar problems (depopulation, unemployment, foreclosures, inclination to radical parties) to those in Šumava. In addition to the personal factor, possible explanations can therefore be found in the higher proportion of long-term residents and people who live and work stably throughout the year, including in agriculture, which in some ways makes these municipalities more similar to the inner periphery.

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that the stability of local political elites is deeply rooted in spatial, social, and economic contexts, and therefore has significant potential for application beyond the Czech case study. Many of the factors influencing the (in)stability of local political elites—such as the size of the municipality, the degree of local social cohesion, economic vulnerability, or manifestations of ideological polarization—are also present in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, or the post-Soviet space that are undergoing or have undergone similar transformative processes. In these contexts, personnel stability at the local level can serve as an equally important indicator of democratic consolidation, institutional trust, and the ability of local governments to withstand social and political shocks. The approach applied in this study thus offers not only an interpretive framework, but also a practical tool for comparing transformational dynamics across various geographical and cultural settings.

7 Conclusions

By its nature, this issue falls under rather marginal and insufficiently explored areas of geographical

interest. While the stability of municipal leaders and their problems have been the subject of several studies, it is clear that a comprehensive approach to this issue is currently lacking. This text is partly related to some earlier research by [Řezníčková \(2015\)](#) and [Prener \(2022\)](#). In view of the above, it aims to identify spatial differences in the level of stability of municipal representatives, which serve as a suitable indicator of the regionally selective impact of transformation forces after 1990. In Czechia, there are regions, areas or municipalities that, due to their historical context, exhibit certain negative features of development (which are subsequently reflected in electoral behaviour), such as social exclusion, territorial marginalisation or the regional or local “rooting” of residents, companies and capital. The aim of this text is therefore not to generalise the findings and clarify all aspects of electoral behaviour, but to identify spatial differences in the observed phenomenon – the degree of stability of members of assembly – and to highlight this aspect as an overlooked attribute of electoral behaviour, even in municipalities with specific structural problems or discontinuities in development. The paper also seeks to identify several factors that lead to the resulting level of stability. The findings show that the regions studied have a significant spatial differentiation of local political elites. Their stability or instability in a given municipality, however, does not automatically imply that the continuity or discontinuity of the composition of members of assembly can be assessed positively or negatively.

Differences in the stability of representation are based on very different processes that may have different causes and effects. Given the stability values analysed, it can be concluded that spatial differences in the observed phenomenon tend to exhibit certain spatial regularities, including clustering. Given the above, it can be argued that geographic location itself is one of several factors that determine the high or low stability of local political elites. Another important variable affecting electoral behaviour and the aforementioned stability of local political elites is the population of the municipality. This fact is accompanied by, among other things, higher voter turnout, a strong interest in local affairs and a sense of belonging (the sense of belonging and the ability of local residents to agree on visions for further development is what brings a significant stabilising effect and higher legitimacy to elected representatives). These signs are typical for rural regions, which are rarely located in areas near the border or in geographically disadvantaged regions.

The highest values of stability are often found in low-populated municipalities with up to 200 inhabitants (with the exception of a few mountain municipalities in border areas). These municipalities are usually in geographically disadvantaged regions. This is mainly due to the knowledge of the local representative, trust in elected officials and the effect of social control. In contrast, relatively lower stability values can generally be observed in larger towns. This can be attributed to a higher degree of heterogeneity in the urban population and thus to significant differences in terms of electoral support or political views in general ([CSO 2022](#)). These facts are typical of the development types of regions that can be identified in suburban areas.

In addition to the population of the municipality, an important factor in terms of the observed stability is the economic condition, or the objective value of the unemployment rate, the subjective perception of personal financial situations, or the relative rate of foreclosures in a given municipality or tax revenues. Here, it is obvious that a higher unemployment rate and higher proportion of people in foreclosure are linked with political preferences for selected anti-system parties (KSČM, SPD, etc.), which in turn can and in many cases do cause local ideological clashes and thus the subsequent instability of the representatives. Places where these anti-system parties achieve above-average electoral results are mainly located in border areas, which we could identify as vulnerable regions. Several other factors are important here, which are interrelated and significantly affect the stability of the representatives. First, there are municipalities or regions with discontinuous development, i.e. areas that have been resettled and significantly affected by several waves of settlers with unfavourable educational structures and different cultural practices. Another factor that determines a higher or lower degree of stability is the proportion of people born in their current place of residence. It is clear that areas with a higher proportion of local residents show higher values of stability, mainly due to a higher sense of belonging to the place, “local rootedness” or “social connectedness”.

Despite some spatial regularities in the stability of representatives, it is clear that the results do not suggest explicit conditioning that could fully and convincingly reveal the mechanisms leading to the resulting stability value at a given location. It turns out that the reality is more complex and depends on many – in some cases hidden and difficult to measure – factors that ultimately determine the electoral behaviour of the population and there-

fore the stability of the representatives. Given the absence of empirical studies focusing on the presented or similar topics in Czech and foreign literature, it is not possible to formulate unambiguous conclusions about the causes of stability and its consequences. However, based on the results so far, several factors can be mentioned that either in isolation or in conjunction with other factors influence – positively or negatively – the stability of representatives. These are mainly the number of inhabitants of the municipality, the age index, the discontinuity of territorial development, the unemployment rate, voter turnout and support for anti-system political parties.

In view of the above, this text aims to capture spatial differences in the stability of local political elites as a phenomenon that can be classified among the “soft factors” of regional or local development. The stability of representatives should be viewed in the context of the territory or reference period being studied. Representatives can be influenced by many geographical, social, economic and political aspects or historical experiences. For example, experiences with non-democratic regimes and post-totalitarian events can significantly determine the current and future needs of citizens to participate in public decision-making processes. Another factor influencing the degree of stability is the form of local government (in this case the collective leadership model) and the structure of the settlement system, including the size categories of municipalities and their spatial differentiation. Given the different nature of forms of local government in Europe, the comparative possibilities for the stability of local political elites in the context of local government across different countries are relatively limited. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the discussion of spatial changes in the stability of local representatives in Czechia, and at the same time to highlight the spatial differences in the stability of local political elites as evidence of the selective impact of transformative forces after 1989.

The presented research demonstrates that the stability of local political elites is a significant yet often overlooked indicator of regional differences. The findings confirm that the (in)stability of municipal representatives is not random but spatially conditioned. Especially in post-totalitarian societies such as Czechia, a deeper understanding of this issue can help identify areas with a higher risk of political fragmentation, distrust, and ideological conflict. For countries that have undergone transformative processes, the article offers practical insight: monitoring and evaluating the stability of local elites can be key to understanding the legitimacy of local gov-

ernments, the effectiveness of public administration, and the sustainability of democracy at the local level. Identifying (in)stable areas enables a more targeted approach to regional policy, civic participation, and building trust in institutions. Moreover, the applied methodology is transferable to other countries and may serve as an inspiration for similar analyses in other transitional societies.

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