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Between the secondary and hybrid nature of the European Parliament elections – the Polish perspective

For many years, the European Parliament elections have been described as second-order elections. Although institutionally considered direct elections to an international parliament, they are perceived by citizens and political elites primarily through the prism of national politics. It has been recognized that as long as important political decisions are decided at the national level, European elections will remain additional, second-order national elections.

In recent years, these elections have been analyzed through the lens of the rise of populism and Euroscepticism, which have significantly changed the dynamics of political competition at the European level. However, the eurozone financial crisis, the migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and geopolitical tensions have contributed to the persistent politicization of European integration, making European elections a particularly fertile field for populist groups.

The need to combine second-order theories with theories of the politicization of European integration is emphasized. As a result, elections in the era of populism have a hybrid character: they retain the features of secondary elections but also serve as an arena for genuine ideological debates about the future of the European Union.

The study examines the mechanisms shaping the results of the European Parliament elections in Poland, taking into account the debate on second-order and hybridity, and their interpretation from the perspective of long-term political transformations. In addressing the relationship between the European Parliament elections and the parliamentary elections, the focus was primarily on voter turnout as a fundamental determinant of the election's significance. The issue of rewarding or punishing the country's ruling parties in European elections was considered important; therefore, the discussion included support for key parties and protest parties, or those on the periphery of the political scene. The study concludes with considerations of postal voting as a possible indicator of citizens' determination to participate despite logistical obstacles.

The study used electoral data published by the National Electoral Commission, covering five European Parliament elections (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019, 2024) and seven parliamentary elections (2001, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, 2023). The methodological framework was based on indicator analysis, including the measurement of voter turnout and its comparison, as well as party support. A key element was spatial analysis, which enabled assessment of the phenomenon across various spatial reference systems: 13 electoral districts for the European elections, 16 regions, and 41 electoral districts for the parliamentary elections. Cartographic methods were used to supplement the data, enabling the visualization of spatial turnout patterns.

Keywords: electoral geography, European Parliament, second-order elections, hybrid elections