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**The Local Geography of Disconnect: Intra-Municipal  
Centre-Periphery Relations and Local Political  
Representation**

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## Abstract

This compendium investigates the effect of centre/periphery structure created by municipal amalgamation, focusing on the settlements of municipalities in the Czech Republic. This research highlights an appearance of "geography of disconnect" that emerges between administrative centers and peripheral settlements. By shifting the unit of analysis from the municipality to individual settlement units, the studies reveal how intra-municipal borders institutionalize political inequality, creating "left-behind places" even within small local jurisdictions.

The theoretical framework integrates centre-periphery paradigm with concepts of descriptive and substantive representation. The research posits a vicious circle of neglect: peripheral units, often smaller and geographically distant from the municipal office and public services, face higher entry costs for political candidacy. This results in a lack of descriptive representation, which subsequently triggers a lack of substantive representation. Evidence from electoral manifestos demonstrates that political parties, prioritize the interests and infrastructure of central units while mostly ignoring peripheral ones. It is then followed by higher alienation towards local government expressed by lower probability to vote for incumbent parties.

Methodologically, the compendium employs a multi-level quantitative framework, utilizing longitudinal electoral data (2006–2022) from the Czech Republic, administrative registries, geocoded mentions from manifestos for local elections and a large-scale exit poll of more than 5,000 voters.

The research concludes that the marginalization of peripheral settlements is not a transitional effect but a long-term structure. This work points out to be cautious with territorial reforms. It suggests that neglecting the spatial dimension of representation undermines the legitimacy of local democratic institutions.

**Key words:** Municipal Amalgamation, Centre-Periphery, Political Representation, Czech Republic, Local Democracy, Settlement Units.

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# Introduction

All inhabitants in all European countries are living somewhere, and this somewhere is always a part of some municipality. However, the municipalities differ in many aspects, they are located in different landscapes, vary in number of inhabitants, provide different range of services and are interconnected in various ways. There is another important aspect which is broadly overlooked in current research. This aspect is internal organizational composition of municipality. With specific ways of creation of municipalities mostly in 19th century and their development since that, the situation evolved into the phase, when most of European municipalities are composed of multiple settlements.

This situation, at least in the Czech Republic, is mostly the result of process called municipal amalgamation, sometimes also referred as territorial reform or municipal mergers. Aggregation of formerly independent municipalities into bigger entities has been very common feature of local politics in most western European countries (Tavares, 2024). The process was often motivated by pursue for effectiveness, increase of capabilities of municipalities, and effort to ease the administrative complexity for higher tier of government. However, the process has also some more or less obvious political consequences. Amalgamation reduces access to local services, worsens political representation, and weakens the links among citizens (Galizzi et al., 2023; Swianiewicz, Gendźwiłł, & Zardi, 2017). Recent research points out that the negative effects of amalgamation are typically apparent only in some units within the amalgamated municipality (Harjunen, Saarimaa, & Tukiainen, 2021; Lapointe, Saarimaa & Tukiainen, 2018; Pickering, Tanaka, & Yamada, 2020; Yamada & Arai, 2021). With merging municipalities, the chances of politicians from formerly smaller municipalities are diminished and the representation of smaller parts of municipalities is challenged.

This creates internal hierarchy of "central" and "peripheral" units within amalgamated municipalities. The administrative centre typically houses the municipal office, concentrates public services and population, and serves as the primary site for political meetings. In contrast, peripheral units often lack these facilities and find themselves geographically and symbolically removed from the local government. This organizational divide impacts the entire democratic cycle, starting with candidacy. Potential candidates in small peripheral units face higher entry costs; they often perceive the political system as "closed" or realize that their unit's small population share limits their probability of electoral success. Consequently, these areas produce fewer candidates, leading to a lack of descriptive representation in the municipal council.

This descriptive absence often translates into a lack of substantive representation in political discourse. Political parties, acting as vote-seeking agents, strategically prioritize larger and central units in their election manifestos to maximize their appeal. Smaller peripheral units are significantly less likely to be mentioned in these documents, which serve as the blueprint for future service allocation and policy-making. This neglect creates a "vicious circle": units without candidates are ignored in manifestos, and units ignored in manifestos are unlikely to receive prioritized services or infrastructure, further fueling resident alienation. The feedback loop of electoral accountability is also strained by

physical distance. Increased distance between a settlement and the administrative centre acts as a barrier to information flow, making local government feel abstract and removed. Voters in distant peripheries are less likely to support incumbent parties, regardless of their actual performance, indicating a profound sense of political disconnect. Ultimately, while amalgamation may offer administrative advantages, it risks institutionalizing "geography of disconnect" where structurally neglected places emerge even within the borders of very small municipalities.

### 1.1. Research contribution

The relevance of this compendium is partly theoretical, partly methodological and hopefully also practical in some extent. The compendium is filling gap in our understanding of political inequality within administrative units in the Czech Republic. This study addresses the growing 'geography of discontent' by identifying how administrative borders create different options and possibilities for citizens in different places within their own municipalities. While some actors<sup>1</sup> have been pushing for mergers to increase efficiency and save money, it seems that hidden costs in the form of potentially negative impact on political participation and more generally in decreased involvement in politics are neglected from discussion. This research may provide an empirical framework to evaluate the trade-off between administrative efficiency and political equality. Understanding this gap is important for maintaining the legitimacy of local democratic institutions in an era of low trust and alienation from politics.

The contribution for theory lies partly in application of influential and important theories into new setting and partly in broadening the theory about territorial representation. All articles are based on centre/periphery theory or "left-behind places" which can be considered as modern depiction of timeless appearance of places with varying powers, economic strength and political role. The definition of left-behind places points to "the existence and persistence of spatial inequalities in socio-economic prosperity and performance, or the problem of 'geographically uneven development'" (Fiorentino et al., 2024). The compendium adds to this strain literature by examining the role of political representation for creation and reproduction of such places. Whereas the concept is usually used in scale of state (Erlingsson, Öhrvall, & Wallman Lundåsen, 2023), and sometimes for explaining supra-national phenomena, it is rarely used for analysis of local politics within municipalities. This compendium applies the concept on almost the lowest possible scale and provides some evidence that such differentiation can be hold even in conditions of grouping of houses few hundred meters apart. Tensions between advantaged and disadvantaged places thus exist at different levels of the political system, including the local level and places that "don't matter" emerge even within very small municipalities. Similarly, the compendium shows that it is important to think about territorial representation in sense of very small localities even within municipalities.

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Czech Republic, amalgamation of municipalities was advised by NERV (National economic advisory board for government) and the fragmented local system is mentioned in several documents prepared by the EU Commision.

While centre-periphery cleavages are traditionally analysed at the national or regional level, my studies indicate that similar tensions persist within the micro-spatial structures of amalgamated local governments.

Methodological contribution is twofold. Firstly, using settlement unit, as the primary unit of analysis offers a high-resolution look at political representation that standard municipal-level data misses. Most of existing research treats the municipality as a kind of black box when it is captured as a single unit in the data, although there may be important heterogeneity within each case. Part of this heterogeneity is produced by previous mergers and it can be captured when settlement units are used as unit of the analysis. This study thus breaks that box open, revealing that there are significant political inequalities even within municipalities. Secondly, the final study of the compendium utilizes the exit-poll study to establish the link between individual level data and characteristics of municipalities and settlement units and provides quite unique research strategy to analyse local politics.

From a practical standpoint, these findings serve as a kind of critical cautionary tale for contemporary territorial reforms across Europe, where the push for municipal amalgamation is often driven by a narrow focus on fiscal austerity and administrative streamlining. While merging small municipalities may achieve economies of scale and reduce per capita governance costs, this research demonstrates that such "efficiency" may come with some democratic price in form of the various stage of neglect of peripheral settlements. When administrative centres are consolidated, the "local" in local democracy effectively disappears from the outskirts of municipalities, creating a vacuum in candidacy and a subsequent collapse in both descriptive and substantive representation and then followed by alienation to local government. By highlighting how local peripheries lose their political voice and access to services, this study provides a framework to evaluate the long-term trade-off between pursue for effectiveness and the maintenance of a healthy and inclusive local democracy. One of the studies shows that territorial representation by geographically connected candidates may mitigate these inequalities. Unfortunately, because peripheral and less inhabited units exhibit lack of representation, disadvantaged units may find themselves in a vicious circle of neglect. If marginal locations are not important enough for parties and candidates, services for these places will likely decline, which intensifies the vicious circle of neglect. Neglecting this spatial dimension of representation risks fostering a "geography of disconnect" that can fuel regional populism or lead to costly municipal fragmentation and secession movements.

## 1.2. The Case

The Czech Republic is almost ideal case for study centre-periphery relations because of several reasons. The most important reason is variance in important factors. Czech local tier is very fragmented, with 6,258 municipalities for population of about 10 million inhabitants, the average size of municipalities is the smallest but the heterogeneity is one of the highest in Europe. There are almost 400 municipalities smaller than 100 inhabitants, but in several European countries, it is impossible to find even municipalities smaller than 1000 inhabitants (e.g. Poland, UK, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway).

Secondly, there is high number of municipalities created just by one settlement (not-amalgamated municipalities) and also high number of municipalities consisting of several formerly independent municipalities. Therefore, the setting is close to conditions of natural experiment. There are three different groups of settlements – non-amalgamated municipalities, centres of amalgamated municipalities, and peripheries of amalgamated municipalities. Obviously, there is a problem with selection of cases into the groups. The selection is not random. Whereas central units are often towns or cities and/or municipalities well located in system of transportation, the peripheral units are often smaller and poorly connected. Although there are lot of non-amalgamated municipalities of the same size as many peripheral settlements within amalgamated municipalities, there had to be some difference between them in the role of civic society and local elites during early 90's when basically any previously merged municipality had the possibility to renew its independence.

Thirdly, these amalgamations happened in different times. Some bigger cities like Prague, Brno and Hradec Králové were joined by surrounding municipalities in yearly years of the first Czechoslovak Republic. First widespread amalgamation was adopted by German administration during the existence of protectorate. After the war, some municipalities split but some remain amalgamated (e.g. Frýdek-Místek). When Germans were expelled from the "Sudetenland", lot of municipalities have been merged there because of low level of resettlement in some, mostly mountain and peripheral areas. Most of currently amalgamated municipalities were merged during communist regime dominantly in 1970's.

This is actually connected to the fourth reason. The "ideology" behind socialist amalgamation followed Cristallers' (1966) theory of central places suggesting that central places should have more functions than peripheries what leads to complete neglect of any services in small settlements and it thus cemented the centre-periphery role in different parts of municipalities. The process is well described based on case of Sweden, where same theory was applied, but in context of democratic country. In the process of amalgamation each municipality is assigned to its "central place". As the result, inhabitants found themselves living in what perhaps best can be understood as "local peripheries" after merging of municipalities. They are more or less removed from the administrative and political centres, and by thus their distance from hubs for public services is greater now (Erlingsson et al 2023). In democratic system small municipalities expressed the fear during the consultation *"processes about to be absorbed by larger ones voiced fears that the distance to municipal services would increase, and that there would be problems cooperating between the older municipal structures within the new, larger local units"* (Erlingsson, Ödalen, & Wångmar, 2015). However, consultations have not been conducted in soviet type of amalgamation.

Because the forced amalgamations took place fifty years ago in socialist Czechoslovakia, the studies in compendium do not examine the immediate effects of amalgamation. It is important to say, that all analyses are dealing with present-day structure created by the forced Soviet-style amalgamation. In this structure, advantaged and disadvantaged units are reproduced in electoral competition, what enables the political neglect of some geographical units.

### 1.3. Research design

The research design employed in compendium follows multi-level quantitative framework intended to analyse the internal political disparities within amalgamated municipality. Unlike traditional studies that treat the municipality as a single, homogeneous entity, this design utilizes the settlement unit as the primary unit of analysis. Therefore, the thesis focuses on “natural” structure of spread of inhabitants across the physical space of the Czech Republic and on the interaction of this structure with administrative borders and local democracy. This approach is not something new, there are numerous articles especially about effect of amalgamation on electoral turnout (Bhatti & Hansen, 2019; Heinisch, Lehner, Mühlböck, & Schimpf, 2018; Lapointe et al., 2018; Koch & Rochat, 2017; Rodrigues & Tavares, 2020). However, the unique feature of the thesis book is variety of issues and variety of locations studied within the same framework. Using settlement units provides view allowing to isolate the effects of sub-municipal structural variables such as centre/periphery structure and relative population size on political representation. The statistical methodology is specifically tailored to the hierarchical nature of the data. Because individual voters or settlement units are nested within municipalities, the studies consistently utilize multilevel (hierarchical) modelling to provide reliable parameter estimates.

The second feature of the research design is the logic of natural experiment. Using the case with highly fragmented municipal level where external legal and electoral factors remain constant while substantial structural factors, such as the organization of settlements and size, vary significantly. Therefore, individual studies can reveal differences between various groups by comparing values across groups. However, because characteristics like size affects distribution of cases into groups, the comparison is conducted in controlled fashion with help of regression analysis. Various types of regressions are used depending on character of dependent variable. Negative binomial regression is used highly skewed count data whereas binary logistic regression is employed to analyse binary dichotomous dependent variables. Interaction terms are used within these regression models to test the crucial differences in effects of various factors in centres and peripheries.

### 1.4. Data

Data collection for this research is synthesized from several sources to build a comprehensive picture of local political representation. The nomenclature and spatial boundaries of settlement units are derived from the RUIAN database, while electoral data for the 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 cycles are sourced from the Czech Statistical Office. To identify the political and cultural-economic centres of these municipalities, the addresses of municipal offices, schools, libraries, and post offices obtained from ministerial registries, "ePusa" database and webpage of Czech Post are geocoded and merged with settlement boundaries. For last study of compendium, administrative data was supplemented by a large-scale exit poll of approximately 5,000 voters across 29 municipalities, capturing individual-level variables, such as political trust, perceived performance, and past voting behavior. The design also incorporates a content analysis component to investigate substantive representation. Specific mentions of locations are manually coded in 386 electoral manifestos from 82 municipalities, geolocating over

6,000 mentions to determine which settlement units received attention from political parties. This comprehensive mix of spatial, administrative, electoral, text and survey data ensures that the research design captures the full "vicious circle" of peripheral neglect from candidacy through representation to voters reaction on representation.

### 1.5. Content of the compendium

The text presented here takes the form of a compendium – a summary of publications which I wrote, or at least contributed as co-author, on the topic of the role of centre-periphery division of intra-municipal units in shaping political representation in municipalities in the Czech Republic. The purpose of this compendium is to present my expertise in the field and my ability to conduct research in field of local politics. This compendium is intended to serve as the presentation of theoretical model of relationship between the organization of settlement units in (amalgamated) municipalities and their political representation, and consequently as presentation of empirical testing of such model. This part presents a map or scheme of interaction between structure of amalgamated municipalities and political representation and connects individual studies into one meaningful framework. Besides the introduction of underlying theories, the text presents the research results, their applications and key terms necessary for understanding the effects of amalgamation on political representation at local level.

Specifically, the compendium consists of the following parts. After the introduction, Chapter 2 is originally the chapter for handbook of local elections. The chapter provides context of political representation on local level in the Czech Republic. This text shows basic outline of political representation and participation in municipalities of the Czech Republic and its development since early 1990s'. The text is descriptive quantitative study summarizing information about parties and candidates based on open data provided by Czech Statistical Office about local elections since 1990.

Bibliographic record: Voda, P. (2022). Czech Republic: Local elections in a fragmented municipal system. In A. Gendźwiłł, U. Kjaer, & K. Steyvers, *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe* (pp. 271-281). Routledge.

Chapter 3 is coauthored article published in *Political Geography*. The article covers the effect of centre-periphery and settlement size on candidacy in local elections. The results show that small peripheral parts are almost neglected already in stage of forming candidate lists and relatively small size of units decreases the number of candidates generally. The article includes multilevel negative-binomial regression model explaining the number of candidates in parts of municipalities. The main idea of article was formulated by Stanislav Balík. Theoretical part of article was mostly written by Petra Svačinová with small input by myself. Context was described by Petra Svačinová and Andrea Smolková. Data gathering, analysis and interpretation of results are done by me. Preparation of dataset was complicated process combining information from various sources and using geospatial methods to connect locations, socio-economic and electoral data.

Bibliographic record: Voda, P., Svačinová, P., Smolková, A., & Balík, S. (2017). Local and more local: Impact of size and organization type of settlement units on candidacy. *Political Geography*, 59, 24-35.

| Analytical work (%) | Supervision (%) | Manuscript (%) | Research direction (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|
| 100                 | 50              | 40             | 50                     |

Chapter 4 provides the assessment of the effect of centre-periphery divide on descriptive territorial representation. It brings more complex operationalization of centre periphery including role of size and presence of municipal services. The results indicate that the chances to be represented are vanished when intra-municipal units are getting smaller and more peripheral. Theoretical part of the article is written by Petra Svačinová. Sections on data and methods and analytical part of article was written by me. I also conducted the multilevel binomial logistic regression for analysis.

Bibliographic record: Voda, P., & Svačinová, P. (2020). To be central or peripheral? What matters for political representation in amalgamated municipalities?. *Urban Affairs Review*, 56(4), 1206-1236.

| Analytical work (%) | Supervision (%) | Manuscript (%) | Research direction (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|
| 100                 | 60              | 50             | 60                     |

Chapter 5 deals with the mechanism between absence of candidacy and absence of substantive representation. Based on sample of 360 manifestos from 82 municipalities using multilevel binary logistic regression analysis, it is demonstrated that small and peripheral units are rarely mentioned in local party manifestos but presence of the candidate from peripheral unit rises the probability that some problem of peripheral unit will be mentioned in electoral manifesto and thus partially mitigates the problem. Theoretical part of the article is written mainly by Petra Vodová with some input by myself regarding “geographic” hypotheses. Sections on data and methods and analytical part of article was written by me. I also conducted the multilevel binomial logistic regression for analysis.

Bibliographic record: Voda, P., & Vodová, P. (2025). Vicious circle of peripheries: Representation of sub-municipal units in local election manifestos in amalgamated municipalities. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 31(2), 248-265.

| Analytical work (%) | Supervision (%) | Manuscript (%) | Research direction (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|
| 80                  | 60              | 50             | 60                     |

Chapter 5 provides an insight into the feedback function in the whole model. The study examines the voting for incumbent government parties in municipalities in central and peripheral units. Using multilevel regression analysis on exit poll data from 30 municipalities, the study reveals the role of spatial distance between settlement units within municipalities. The more distant the periphery unit is, it is less like that voters living there will vote for incumbent parties, which indicates that governance does not saturate interests of people living in municipalities. Theoretical part of the article is written mainly by Jakub Jusko, I only did some changes in revisions of the article. Sections on data and methods and analytical part of article was written by me. I also conducted the multilevel binomial logistic regression for analysis.

Bibliographic record: Jusko, J., & Voda, P. (2026). From kilometres to detachment: examining electoral accountability in amalgamated municipalities. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. Online first.

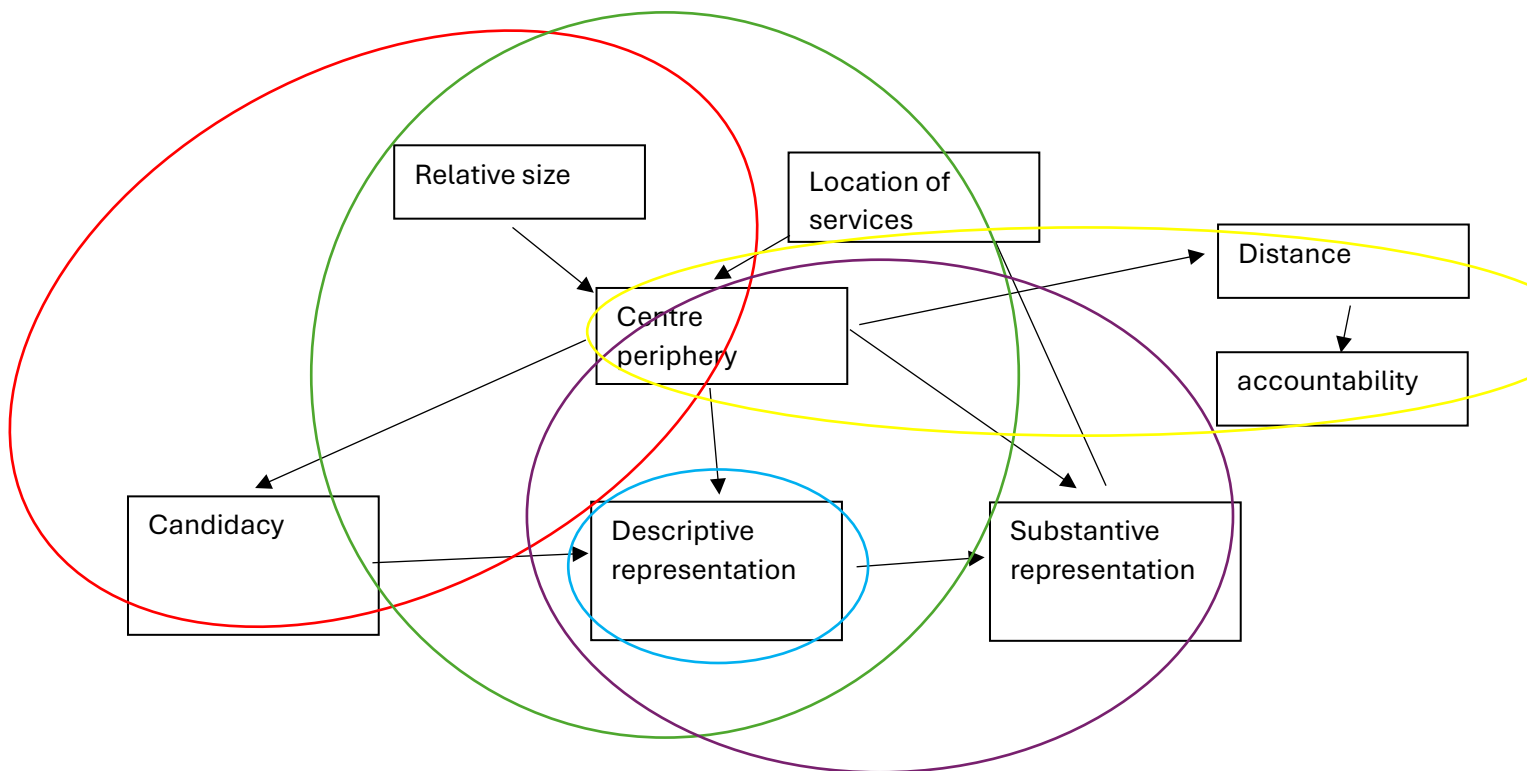
| Analytical work (%) | Supervision (%) | Manuscript (%) | Research direction (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|
| 90                  | 60              | 50             | 60                     |

## 1.6. Theoretical model

Publications included into the compendium cover different part of the same argument that composition of municipalities mainly caused by amalgamation affects the way how political representation works. For this reason, my other publications dealing with local politics, which are not directly connected to the argument, are not presented as part of the compendium. Therefore, the compendium consists of five key publications, which step by step fill the parts of the theoretical model and demonstrate the importance of the centre/periphery concept for creation and function of local political representation.

Publication 1 presents the context of local election in the Czech Republic and provides general framework for understanding the results of further analyses. Publications 2-4 serve as an empirical application of the different steps within model on local elections in the Czech Republic. Results of all studies indicate that both, descriptive and substantive representation is weaker in peripheral units than in central units. The results of publication 4 also implicate that even at the local level, descriptive representation is important to possibility of achieving substantive representation. Publication 5 captures the feedback loop focusing on voters “punish or reward” response to the centre/periphery structure of amalgamated municipality.

Figure1: Theoretical model linking Centre–Periphery relations of intra-municipal units with political representation



Note: blue – publication 1, red – publication 2, green – publication 3, violet – publication 4, yellow – publication 5

All texts – except rather contextual first chapter – deal with different stages of the theoretical model explaining the effect of intra-municipal centre–periphery relations on political representation. When talking about political representation, it is important to distinguish between descriptive and substantial representation (Pitkin, 1967). The descriptive dimension concerns the question of characteristics of groups whose interests legislators represent, or who, in Pitkin's terms, are they standing for. The substantive dimension asks how citizens are represented, i.e. how legislators act for their community (Pitkin, 1967). From a descriptive point of view, the ideal representative body should mirror the politically relevant characteristics of the represented community (Pitkin, 1972, p. 60–91). Substantive representation is reached when the interest of given group is actually represented in elected body. However, descriptive representation does not guarantee the substantive actions of the representatives. According to Pitkin, one can “assume that people's characteristics are a guide to the actions they will take.” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 89). In order to ensure the substantive representation of a community, the representative body should reflect not just characteristics but also the interests of the community in its decisions. In practical politics, the descriptive representation of some characteristics leads to the expectation that the represented group will bring a different set of attitudes and interests into the process of decision-making. For example, increasing the number of women in politics increases the expectation that everyday life will change (Bratton & Ray, 2002), especially for women. The study of descriptive representation is therefore reasoned by the assumption of substantive representation of the community by

its representatives. Therefore, degree to which peripheral interests are articulated and addressed can be signalled by presence of inhabitants of peripheral areas in electoral competition and then in municipal councils.

Another key concept what needs clarification is centre-periphery relation. The natural starting point for discussing the concept is the centre-periphery paradigm defined by Rokkan and Urwin (1983, pp. 2-3) for the within-country level. The centre is defined as the seat of political authority and peripheries as locations some distance away from the centre, but still within the territory controlled from the centre. Centres differ from peripheries in economy and culture because they concentrate financial and cultural activities in one place. Peripheries retain their specific identities. Moreover, there is also the size aspect in defining the centre-periphery divide: centres are usually seated in the most populated areas of the jurisdiction (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983, pp. 8-9). Furthermore, the compendium follows Jakobsen and Kjær (2016) in arguing that the centre-periphery cleavage likely exists also within municipalities. Amalgamation results in differently sized sub-municipal units and the creation of administrative centres and peripheries. The centre is thus intra-municipal unit where administrative institutions, political elites, and public services are concentrated whereas peripheries are spatially, socially, or economically marginal intra-municipal units.

Now, the link between centre-periphery and political representation may be established. The first step towards the representation is candidacy. Only when at least one person decides to run in elections, the unit may be descriptively represented in council. Technically, there are not any hard obstacles to become a candidate in local elections. If a citizen is anyhow connected to some political party, the only necessary step is to submit candidate list, which may include any number of candidates from 1 to total number of councillors elected in municipality (with some additional candidates serving as possible substitutes). It is also possible to candidate as independent candidate or as part of list of independent candidates but to use that option, certain percentage of voters have to sign the petition. Although these procedures seem to be neutral for inhabitants of centres and peripheries, there are some aspects which need to be taken into account. The first aspect is getting of signatures which is especially hard for inhabitants of small settlements within big municipalities. Citizens willing to form a candidate list thus need to get lot of signatures outside their home community. Secondly, for candidacy to be successful, it needs some network. The centre-periphery relations are quite strongly interacting with forming of such network. The first interaction is purely geographical. Connections more easily occur among people who meet more often, and distance is quite important factor. One usually meets neighbours more often than people from opposite edge of the municipality. Obviously, it is well known that candidacy is often build on existing networks (in the Czech Republic it is often the case of volunteer firemen and football players, see Škvrňák, 2021). However, inhabitants of peripheries have often more complicated ways how to commute for club meetings and there are less likely to be part of group who formed the club. Secondly, it is helping to share the same interest when the network aiming to get elected for council is formed. In this aspect, the centre periphery relations are probably even more profound than in previous case. When there is one person who wants to build sidewalks in one part of municipality and another person who wants the same but in very different part of municipality, then it is not very likely to find

agreement to make a candidate list together, especially when one of these candidates can find few more co-runners with exactly the same interest. Peripheral candidates thus face higher entry costs in terms of building networks and getting visibility across the municipality. Thirdly, the candidacy is not final goal but only the mean to goal which is to get a seat in the council (and hopefully to fulfil electoral promises). Therefore, candidates have to assess their chances to get elected which may be low when individual is based in small community which is smaller than threshold which is technically 5% but in municipalities with 7 councillors reaches effectively almost 15 %. When the candidate is a part of candidate list, then he or she needs to get 10 % more votes than average number of votes per candidate on list what is again more likely to get when the community is big than when it is small. To sum it, it is expected, that lower number of candidates is running in elections in peripheral units, compared to central units.

In second stage, the candidacy can be turned into descriptive representation or not. Although there are lot of uncontested local elections in the Czech Republic (Kouba & Lysek, 2023), it is not guaranteed that all candidates became councillors. There are usually more than 200 000 candidates but just about 50 000 seats in councils. In this stage, factors influencing the representation through candidacy may be omitted. However, factors related to electoral competition and more nuanced characteristics of centre and periphery may be important here. Firstly, the candidacy may be more easily turned into representation in centres, especially if considerable share of inhabitants lives there. This applies for situations when whole municipality constitute just one electoral district. Although there is possibility to form districts, only one municipality is doing so regularly. Secondly, the central places have advantage in location of services. Local politics is in huge extent limited to providing of basic services. Inhabitants of central units are advantaged, because they have lower costs not only to use these services, but also lower costs to obtain information. Moreover, location of services has some potential for electoral mobilization, because it is more in stake compare to units where the services are little to none. Finally, there can be some mediated effect through strengthening of sense of community because services like libraries, pubs, cultural facilities as well as schools and kindergartens stimulate more frequent contacts between inhabitants. Locating services in a central unit also means that more public jobs are distributed there than in peripheral units (Saarimaa & Tukiainen, 2016), which leads to the potential underdevelopment of the peripheries. On the contrary, those living in peripheries have greater costs for acquiring the same services and can feel disadvantaged in relation to inhabitants of the centre. All these mechanism lead into higher probability of representation of central areas and lower probability in peripheries.

The third part of the model is related to link between descriptive and substantive representation. Theoretically, the descriptive representation is not totally necessary to achieve the substantive representation. However, the descriptive representation can facilitate substantive representation through several interconnected mechanisms. Councillors who share social characteristics and lived experiences with underrepresented groups are more likely to recognize group-specific problems, put them on the political agenda, and advocate policies addressing those concerns. Presence of such councillors can also enhance the perceived legitimacy of political institutions. This applies also for territorial representation within municipalities. Because in this situation, the group is defined geographically, the problems are very often specific for different locations. The

living in some area makes problems more known for given person and also more salient. The missing crosswalk may be very easily apparent for people walking around their home than for person just passing through or who has never visit the place. However, the living in place is important but the overall organization makes easier to people from peripheries to represent interest of people living in centre than other way round. This is again connected with location of services and administration but also with logic of transportation when interconnection is usually more often located in centres. For that reason, the problems of centre are often quite familiar for people in peripheries, but problems of peripheries are not so apparent for people from centres. Furthermore, peripheral representatives even when they are present within the council may have limited bargaining power, especially if they represent settlement with few inhabitants. Representation in such situation may become symbolic rather than effective. Therefore, even when peripheral units achieve descriptive representation, they experience lower substantive influence over municipal decisions.

The final stage in model is the feedback loop. The representation is created through elections and every four years citizens may reflect whether local government performed well or not so well. This process is called electoral accountability. Theory expects that government is rewarded electorally by higher share of votes if good work is done during electoral term (Asworth 2012). On the contrary, when voters are dissatisfied, they may abstain or vote for opposition or new parties to punish the government. The analysis of voting patterns thus enable us to assess possible spatial heterogeneity in voting behavior originating in centre-periphery division within the municipality. Mechanisms in this feedback loop are just summarization of previous arguments with additional factor of allocation of resources. Peripheral parts are often underfunded although the councillors coming from the centre may think that distribution of resources is fair. The perfect example of such situation is visible in case of secession of Krhová and Poličná from Valašské Meziříčí. City representatives provided for both settlement units tables showing allocation in past years indicating much lower amounts than would these municipalities have for disposal even when table does not distinguish between sources from city own budget and EU funds (Valašské meziříčí 2012a, 2012b).

Furthermore, the parameter of distance is included into analysis of accountability. Different effects for the centre and periphery may result from the physical distance between units within the municipality. Firstly, increasing distance makes the flow of information more difficult. The change in physical and mental distance between inhabitants of peripheral units and local government is well illustrated by van Houwelingen (2017). One interview with a citizen from a peripheral unit of an amalgamated municipality includes the precise notion of the role of distance: "I used to know all the aldermen and civil servants..., now it has become more difficult; more distant" (van Houwelingen, 2017, p. 422). Moreover, distance is an important factor in actual peripherality (Lagendijk & Lorentzen, 2007). Distance between the centre and periphery may be also connected to geography of disconnect. Furthermore, distance may support a more persistent and resistant local identity.

## 2. Conclusion

The final part of this commentary synthesizes the research findings regarding the local political representation in the Czech Republic, focusing on the effect of centre-periphery structure created by municipal amalgamations. The structure can be described as strong inequalities between representation of central and of peripheral settlement units. Municipal amalgamation, while typically justified by the pursuit of administrative efficiency and improved service delivery, may simultaneously institutionalize a persistent centre-periphery divide that alters the landscape of local democracy in important way. In the Czech Republic, this spatial hierarchy is largely a legacy of forced mergers from the 1970s, which concentrated political authority and public amenities in designated central places while stripping peripheral settlements of their administrative functions. Decades after these reforms, the data reveal that these administrative centres, defined by the presence of a municipal office and in two studies also including location of service, remain politically and symbolically advantaged, whereas peripheral units experience a significant decline in political engagement and access to decision-making bodies.

### 2.1. Main findings

The main finding is a paraphrase of the established notion in local politics that “small is beautiful” (Schumacher, 1973; Avellaneda & Gomes 2015; Swianiewicz & Łukomska, 2019) related to the fact that democratic qualities are often better in small municipalities and decreases with size. All studies within the compendium clearly demonstrate that the size is still important, but when there are three settlements units of very same size, there will be very important differences among them if one of the settlements is independent municipality, one is centre of amalgamated municipality and one is periphery in much bigger amalgamated municipality. The central units (and independent municipalities) have higher rates of candidates and better descriptive and substantive representation (which is per se for independent municipalities). In more detail my study shows that the proportion of candidates relative to the settlement’s population decreases as the settlement’s population size increases. A much more important finding concerns the differences between independent municipalities and the outlying parts of merged municipalities. If there are two settlements of equal size, then is expected the same or a much smaller number of candidates in the peripheral part, depending on how large a portion of the municipality the peripheral part constitutes. If it is only a few percent, then usually no candidate from that part will even appear on the ballot. Even if the area constitutes half of the municipality, expected the number of candidates in that area is still one-third lower than in a settlement that constitutes an independent municipality. In the long term, amalgamation reduces voters’ interest in local politics, at least in terms of running for office. At the same time, it also appears that from the perspective of candidacy (and presumably also from the perspective of political participation in general), it is much worse to merge small municipalities with large ones than to merge similarly sized municipalities. Further research (Voda & Svačinová 2020) highlights the link between the centre/periphery and representation. As the research on candidates has already indicated, central areas are more likely to have a representative on the municipal council than peripheral areas. “Central” areas in this context refer to those where the municipal

office is located and/or where a service provided by the municipality is situated (again, these include schools, kindergartens, or libraries).

The research consistently demonstrates that a unit's administrative status and relative population size are the primary determinants of candidacy and descriptive representation. Furthermore, a "decline of community" is evident in larger settlements, where the absolute population size negatively impacts the relative number of candidates per capita. Potential candidates in smaller peripheral units face higher psychological and strategic entry costs, as they perceive a diminished chance of success compared to those in units that constitute a larger share of the municipal electorate. This descriptive underrepresentation transitions into a systematic "vicious circle of neglect" within the realm of substantive representation and electoral competition.

Political parties seem to behave as vote-seeking actors, tend to prioritize the interests of larger and central units not just by the composition of ballot for elections but also in their electoral manifestos to maximize their appeal. Peripheral and smaller units are significantly less likely to be mentioned in these documents. This may have serious political implications for future policy-making in this regard, because it indicates that for keeping the interest of inhabitants of small settlement units it is necessary to keep political representation of such places.

Crucially, the presence of a candidate from a specific unit is the only factor empirically found to effectively mitigate the bias towards peripheral areas. It turns out that if a party has a candidate from a specific area on its ballot, then the likelihood that that area will be mentioned in the election platform increases significantly compared to when the party does not have such a candidate in that area. This means that with the loss of candidates from peripheral areas, the ability of parties to offer solutions to the problems of peripheral areas in municipal elections also disappears. Whether this is due to a loss of expertise or interest, the impacts can be real. Unit-based candidates may act as essential territorial representatives who pressure parties to include peripheral concerns on the political agenda, at least in form of mention in electoral manifesto. Without such unit-connected candidates, disadvantaged areas are at risk of being ignored in final policy outcomes and service allocations.

Finally, the physical and mental distance between settlements creates significant barriers to democratic accountability and fosters resident alienation. Increased distance between the built-up area of the centre and the periphery significantly reduces the probability that voters will support incumbent parties, regardless of their actual performance. Each additional kilometer of distance decreases support for parties previously in local government, suggesting that a "geography of disconnect" emerges as voters in distant peripheries feel increasingly removed from the municipal leadership and administrative processes. In conclusion, these findings serve as a warning case for territorial reforms, suggesting that institutional efficiency may come together with high cost in form of local democratic quality. In this point, the time passed since amalgamations were conducted is actually beneficiary aspect of the study. The results in such setting show that the marginalization of peripheral settlements is not just some short-term transitional effect but it may turn into long-term structural reality that persists decades after amalgamation.

## 2.2. Limitations

Despite the robust empirical evidence across multiple dependent variables, different subsets of municipalities and several electoral cycles covered by individual studies, several limitations must be acknowledged regarding the generalizability and causal depth of this research. First, the study relies on the unique context of the Czech Republic, which is characterized by an extreme level of municipal fragmentation and a history of forced, "Soviet-style" amalgamations during communist regime and thus without any democratic mechanisms in the process. Although these conditions provide quite good conditions for almost "natural experiment," the findings may not fully translate to countries with voluntary merger processes or those with at least some democratic politics in time of merger or to even those with institutionalized sub-municipal governance that secures the rights of peripheral units.

Second, the methodology of all studies except the publication 5 utilizes cross-sectional and aggregated unit-level data rather than individual data. Moreover, the data do not allow to conduct any method with more robust causal interference such as difference-in-difference or regression discontinuity design. For such purpose, the data before and after merger are needed. This limits the ability to make definitive causal claims about the mechanisms driving individual political behavior, especially in motivations for candidacy or for the ways how places in municipality are omitted or included in manifesto. Furthermore, the use of exit-poll data specifically excludes the analysis of "abstention" as a political choice. Inhabitants of peripheries may not just vote against incumbents but may simply withdraw from local politics entirely—a "silent exit" option that remains largely uncaptured by these analyses.

Thirdly, any of included publications does not actually study the substantive representation as it is studied in national politics. Although the analysis of electoral manifestos is going relatively close to the desired destinations, it does not arrive to terminal station yet. The results inform us about what parties want to do, but it does not necessarily mean that parties will be able to fulfil their promises because of variety of reasons. Analysis of actual work of municipal council and boards is needed to fulfil such aim. With increasing availability of minutes, transcripts and broadcast of sessions of municipal councils and with detailed data about municipal budgets, this task seems to be doable in the near future.

Finally, the text does not completely exploit the potential of the Czech case. Because of strong wave of dissolving amalgamated municipalities in early 1990s, it is possible to study also the effect of municipal splits and thus to find out, whether the negative effects stemming from the structure created by amalgamation can be reversed or continue to last even when settlement is no longer just periphery of bigger municipality.

## 2.3. Further research

However, some of these limitations paths avenues for further research. Obviously, it is impossible to get data about political participation and representation for period 1948-1989 or obtain individual data to study motivations for candidacy in elections already passed. However, there are plenty opportunities still open. Firstly, it would be possible to study motivations for candidacy by survey. In situation when there are about 250 000

candidates in population of 8 000 000 adult citizens, it is expectable to have about 3 % actual candidates in any sample and even higher number of people who seriously considered the option. It means that already with sample size of 4 000 respondents, there can be relatively sufficient number of candidates to study their appearance at least with methods designed for rare events. Although the next option would be very costly because of highly decentralized nature of the Czech elections, combination of candidate survey and population survey with carefully designed questionnaire would allow to have very complete answer about mechanism how the centre-periphery structure interacts with motivations, considerations and most importantly with decisions of people regarding candidacy in local elections.

The very promising direction may be conducting qualitative research among candidates, councillors and inhabitants of central and peripheral areas in both amalgamated and non-amalgamated municipalities in few thoroughly chosen localities. The survey may provide generalizable results, but the input in the form of questionnaire is limited just to the current state of knowledge in literature and to knowledge, experience and interest of researcher. Therefore, it would be great to have some input also for people living in the conditions whose effects is seek to find.

The work on substantial representation is now in progress within the framework of OP JAK project on Peripheries. I am part of the team analyzing political representation in municipalities in various Czech peripheries. This allows us to study very specific question how peripheries of peripheries are managed. Similarly, I have already tried to extend the study of candidacy by analyzing electoral turnout. However, despite several important obstacles complicating such studies, the pattern is very similar just with less profound differences between different types of settlements. Research of municipal splits seems to be more promising. Firstly, the literature on this topic is rather limited. Secondly, the results of preliminary analysis indicate that the split leads into higher candidacy rate and lightly higher turnout compared to non-amalgamated not-split municipalities.

These proposals are just small slice of the all knowledge which is missing about relationship between amalgamations and quality of local democracy. Existing literature often mentions the important role of identity and political efficacy, which are supposed to be a part of mechanism leading into differences between centres and peripheries.

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