

Anna Bączkowska / Agnieszka Hess / Agnieszka Szymańska (eds.)

# **Linguistic and Media Studies Perspectives on Research into Social and Political Polarisation**

The Case of Poland



# Interdisziplinäre Verortungen der Angewandten Linguistik

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## Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Anna Bączkowska / Agnieszka Hess / Agnieszka Szymańska   |     |
| Introduction . . . . .   | 7   |
| Michał M. Bukowski   |     |
| Looking for correlations vs. telling the story. Two ways of thinking<br>methodologically about political polarisation . . . . .      | 11  |
| Jacek H. Kołodziej   |     |
| ‘Fear and Loathing’ between voters. Affective polarisation toward the<br>European Union in Poland . . . . .                          | 25  |
| Agnieszka Walecka-Rynduch  |     |
| Archetypes (in) Polarity. The media-linguistic dimension of political<br>communication in the MediaPolis . . . . .                   | 45  |
| Agnieszka Szymańska  |     |
| Bipolar trap with no way out – political polarisation in the opinion of<br>Polish journalists . . . . .                              | 63  |
| Monika Wawer   |     |
| Polarisation-oriented “journalism” – is it still a media information<br>genre? . . . . .   | 83  |
| Katarzyna Vanevska   |     |
| The language of minority media and marginalised groups – a handful of<br>reflections from own research . . . . .                     | 97  |
| Agnieszka Hess / Rokšana Gloc / Patrycja Hewelt  |     |
| A little homeland or a breeding ground for problems? District narratives<br>in the local Krakow 2024 presidential campaign . . . . . | 119 |

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|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Aleksandra Chmarzyńska<br>Political polarisation in Poland – Over a year after the parliamentary<br>elections, public sentiment remains divided . . . . .  | 139 |
| Anna Bączkowska / Dagmara Solska<br>The opinion of Poles about Ukrainian immigrants to Poland after three<br>years of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: a study of YouTube<br>user-generated comments . . . . . | 151 |
| Notes about the authors . . . . .  | 181 |

## Introduction

The objective of this edited collection is to present the areas, methodologies and research findings of Polish media scholars and linguists who investigate communicative and linguistic phenomena within the context of politically polarised Polish society. The collaborative research initiative of linguists and media scholars is not accidental: language is the primary vehicle of communication, and communication constitutes the *modus operandi* of social existence. Without social communication and, consequently, language, which functions as a cohesive force (a “glue”) of society, any society would be unable to organize itself or sustain its complexity. Nonetheless, language also possesses the capacity to divide societies effectively; therefore, it serves as a crucial indicator of the state of society in the context of political polarisation.

In this volume, language is not only seen as serving as a cohesive element but also as the foundational substance for media and language studies. It serves as both the object of study and the tool utilized for research purposes. The analysis of language utilised by various social actors provides insight into the social processes unfolding within a society.

Language holds significant importance in both media studies and linguistics, yet distinct approaches and methods are employed within these disciplines. The primary difference resides in what is typically regarded as the unit of analysis. In linguistics, the focus of investigation often centres on single words, collocations or sentences as well as how they compose a text beyond a sentence, i. e., at the discourse level. Linguists examine core meanings, contextual shifts in interpretation, and coherence and cohesion at the text level. Conversely, media scholars, while also considering language, explore a broader context in which an utterance appears; they study narration, text construction, genre, theme, interpretative frames and even the intensity of a debate itself. These elements of language and discourse reveal the social characteristics of a communicative situation.

Both linguistics and media scholars research themes, linguistic features in narration, language usage trends, and interpretative frames. The last element is intensely explored in cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis. In

media studies, language is used to diagnose various communication phenomena and is a subject of diagnosis.

The causes of polarisation existing in Polish society are multifaceted, and the trajectories of these divisions are neither linear nor readily apparent. They cannot be easily elucidated using ordinary demographic variables alone. Social divisions permeate various levels and aspects of social attitudes encompassing political beliefs and views, preferred solutions to social and economic problems, attitudes towards tradition and history, and perspectives on migrants and national, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. Additionally, contentious topics such as abortion and the role of women in society, attitudes towards the process of European integration or even the war in Ukraine, including the issue of war refugees, further contribute to these divisions. These represent merely a fragment of the myriad issues dividing Polish society.

The media exert influence on their audiences through various conditions of their presence, as well as the elements and components of their message. The manner in which the media present events and problems and the language they employ, significantly impacts the course and persistence of social divisions axes. The media have the capacity to unify and integrate society; however, they can also serve as a catalyst for reinforcing and perpetuating existing divisions, thereby either positively or negatively stimulating polarisation and potentially exacerbating it. It is essential to continually examine the media and critically evaluate their methods and impact on society. Without these investigations, understanding the social and political consequences of their presence becomes increasingly challenging.

The chapters in this publication refer to various aspects of language, actors present in the public sphere and its multiple levels, as well as specific elements (the language of electoral communication) in the context of political polarisation. **Michał Bukowski's** text is devoted to a general reflection on existing methodological approaches in the study of this phenomenon. The next two chapters present considerations on the specificity of polarisation in the Polish public sphere at the macro level. **Jacek Kołodziej** presents his research results on the affective polarisation of Polish society in relation to the EU, and **Agnieszka Walecka-Rynduch** on the archetypes of polarisation. The next three chapters are devoted to the meso level, i. e., the media as broadcasters and creators of discourse present in the polarised public sphere. In the first of them, **Agnieszka Szymańska** presents the results of interviews (IDI) with Polish journalists on the threats resulting from political polarisation and the importance of the media in the polarised debate. **Monika Wawer** investigates the discourse of polarised media in the context of dominant journalistic genres. **Katarzyna Vanevska** analyses the language of minority and excluded group media. The chapter by **Agnieszka Hess, Roksana Gloc and Patrycja Cheba** is devoted to the micro level

of communication in a polarised society, analysing the postulates of state decentralisation as an important element of political polarisation in Poland. The next contribution deals with considerations presented by **Aleksandra Chmarzyńska**, who analyses opinions and emotions expressed by street survey respondents and YouTube commentators about the ruling party in Poland. The volume concludes with a chapter devoted to opinions expressed on social media regarding the Ukrainian minority living in Poland, investigated by **Anna Bączkowska** and **Dagmara Solska**. They address Poles' strongly polarised and negative attitude towards the Ukrainian diaspora by resorting to grounded theory and several computational techniques used in discourse analysis.

Taken together, the volume delves into a range of social and political issues pertaining to polarisation, the leitmotif of this edited collection, and provides a comprehensive overview of methodologies used in media studies and linguistics, encompassing both established and novel, cutting-edge tools, which can be seamlessly applied to both disciplines and integrated into research that successfully combines linguistics and media studies.



## Looking for correlations vs. telling the story. Two ways of thinking methodologically about political polarisation

### Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss two different ways of dealing methodologically with phenomena such as political polarisation. I present the dominant “positivist” position, which promotes measurement and correlation. I also present the historical-narrative approach using Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory. These approaches have different theoretical commitments. I try to show that the narrative approach is better here, at least from one point of view. It is free of theoretically unfounded formalisms; it allows us to look at polarisation from a broader but somewhat different perspective. As a consequence, it allows us to make polarisation a less mysterious phenomenon.

**Keywords:** methodology, narrative, political polarisation, Immanuel Wallerstein

### 1. Introduction

The concept of polarisation emerged in science from the study of optics. The discovery that, contrary to Newton’s theory, the propagation of light resembles the propagation of waves rather than particles focused scientists’ attention on new ways to control light and thus use it for human needs. In electromagnetism, the concept of polarisation refers to the oscillation of electric and magnetic fields relative to the direction of wave propagation. Experimentally polarising an unpolarised or partially polarised wave leads to practical effects, such as reducing glare in a camera lens, which results in higher-quality photographs. The introduction of the concept of polarisation of light first required the existence of a coherent, elaborate, and experimentally supported physical theory along with a mathematical language of description. The concept of a field, central to the transformation of physics in the 19th century, played a special role. Polarisation in physical theory is neither good nor bad per se. The evaluation comes from

people and depends on the goals they want to achieve, and as such, is independent of the content of the physical theory.

The application of the concept of polarisation in the social sciences is different and raises a number of questions. Broadly speaking, polarisation means “the distribution of a group or population that tends toward the poles” (Garzón-Velandia et al., 2024, p. 191). However, no single theory in the social sciences defines what these “poles” are in a way that is unambiguous and acceptable to the scientific community, similar to physical theory. There are many incompatible theories, and each operates with a slightly different view of “poles” and polarity, hence the notorious problems with a general and consistent typology or classification (Garzón-Velandia et al., 2024; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). In the absence of consensus on the taxonomy (i. e., the structure of supertypes, types, and subtypes or classes) and in the absence of consensus on the inferential links between elements of the theory, each polarity researcher starts a little from scratch. It is worth remembering that no approach is privileged at the outset in the absence of a single dominant theory.

In this chapter, I focus only on contemporary political polarisation (with that caveat, I will write simply about polarisation below), defined broadly as “the radicalization of attitudes and behaviour toward political opponents.” Jan-Willem van Prooijen puts it neatly as seeing others as “enemies rather than opponents” (van Prooijen, 2021, p. 1). The key questions here are normative: whether this is how it should be in a democracy, and if not, (1) why polarisation persists and (2) what can be done to reduce it (cf. Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 144).

My question in this paper, however, is meta-methodological in nature. I am considering a situation in which the dominant conceptualizations and methods of studying polarisation in the literature lead us away from other “heterodox” conceptualizations that might better explain the same observable phenomena – i. e., mainly speech acts that are declarations of dislike and hatred toward those who have different ideas about living together in the state – but also reveal new problems that are invisible from the currently dominant methodological perspective.

The chapter is structured as follows. Although it takes the form of a theoretical reflection, I have tried to express it as methodically as possible. Thus, the next section discusses the narrative approach as a meta-method aimed at increasing the comprehensibility of the problem. I then argue why it is worthwhile to approach the methods currently dominant in polarisation research with caution and why they can be summarised as a relatively simple narrative of various attempts to uncover the mechanisms of polarisation. In the next section, I attempt to present this narrative on the basis of an unsystematic review of the dominant literature. In the next section, I present an alternative narrative. I try to present modern polarisation as a historical phenomenon, that is with its origin

and course in the form of a sequence of events. To do this, I use Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory. From this perspective, polarisation ceases to be a surprising phenomenon and, as such, ceases to be a particularly important scholarly problem in its own right. Rather, it becomes embedded in the history of contemporary liberal democracy. From a historical perspective, another problem becomes visible: polarisation was a normal part of the strategy of centrist liberalism (the dominant metastrategy of the world-system), but it got out of hand. Finally, I will briefly summarise the main ideas.

## 2. A narrative meta-method

My strategy in this article will be to contrast the dominant approach to polarisation with a systemic-historical view. In a non-obvious way, new approaches, discoveries, and developments in theorising in the field of cognitive science support the historical view of the problem of polarisation. Cognitive science is an important theoretical background here because research on polarisation generally tacitly, and less often explicitly, assumes the existence of such things as beliefs, desires, and thus attitudes as real mental entities. Their reality is assumed by constructed measurement tools such as the "feeling thermometer". However, the heterodox currents of modern cognitive science make it possible to propose explanations without recourse to the highly controversial and contested assumptions concerning the entitative character of beliefs, desires, attitudes, etc., or what is called the theory of mind.

Although I discuss some of the weaknesses of the dominant approach in the next section, this is not strictly speaking a critique of the dominant position, not least because I discuss it using a different meta-methodological framework than the researchers I discuss. My method – comparing the dominant narrative of polarisation with my preferred alternative narrative – amounts to a change of subject. The polarisation in my narrative is not exactly the same as the polarisation that Shanto Iyengar, for example, has been studying for years. However, that is the method I am using: I compare by changing the subject and thereby gain a different, presumably better, understanding of what the problem is. This is neatly discussed by Stephen P. Turner, who suggests that this is one way to make progress in sociology and other social sciences (Turner, 2022b, p. 210):

"In these cases, the new comparisons create a new puzzle with a new solution. In the strict sense, this amounts to changing the subject but changing it to one that swallows up the original puzzle and interpretation, and in this sense, it is progressive".

In order to be able to compare the dominant approach and the one I propose, I need to put them on common ground, i. e., to present the dominant approach

also as a narrative. Narrativising the dominant approach means that I narrate the results of other researchers while ignoring their original structure and methodological details. Is this acceptable, given that the so-called scientific method (let us call it “positivist” for the sake of argument) is not designed to tell a story about the world but to “study” it (measure, calculate, analyse, juxtapose variables, capture it in a “correct” research design)? The answer is the subject of a decades-long debate in the scientific world. In brief, I will only cite the most important arguments for not taking “positivist” findings in the social sciences too seriously and for treating them with a great deal of distance.

### 3. Public Language Dependency: Conversational Episodes

One methodological objection to the “positivist” approach is that the formal models prepared apply when they apply, i. e., their application range is unknown (Turner, 2022b, p. 208). Probability theory must be applied with great care because the entities under analysis (i. e., representations of something ontic in the world) are not interchangeable.<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this problem, I will quote Walter Weimer at length (Weimer, 2023, p. 115).

“The life and living sciences – biological and social domains – are in this sense fundamentally different from the so-called hard sciences in which what is studied are identical and totally interchangeable objects. The fact that this fundamental difference (that subjects can never be reduced to objects) requires a very different conception of the nature of science, the methodology of scientific research, and acceptable procedures of mensuration and statistical inference is undoubtedly one of the most important results of the last hundred years’ worth of research in the philosophy of science and in the methodology of scientific research, and also the origin of life. Amazingly, it is almost always ignored in the fields it should have transformed”.

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1 There are, of course, cases where units are interchangeable in social analyses, as in the classic statistical-descriptive surveys of social problems in the 19th century. One can reasonably assume that hours worked, wages paid, and the number of people in a household are such units. However, the “unitisation” of beliefs is already a conceptual disinclination, as interpreters of political polls find out emphatically and regularly when they discover that two “equal” votes in an election for the right-wing candidate, for example, cannot be considered “equal” indicators of a voter’s right-wing beliefs. A belief is not a thing but a way of exercising a person’s dispositional base. The concept of a person is a psychological concept, and the claim that persons are interchangeable is blatant nonsense. Persons constantly change under the influence of experience, and the fact that we speak of certain continuities, such as a person’s numerical identity (personal persistence), is due in part to the person’s fitness and ability to maintain that identity, which is an achievement (i. e., it does not happen by itself). It is largely a social achievement, realized differently in different cultures.

Another problem is the misuse of the terms “measurement” and “instrument” (Harré, 2002, p. 170). Measuring instruments are devices that respond causally to changes in the environment. Measurement is the use of symbols to read the state of the instrument. Other things being equal (which is at least partly determined by physical theory), when the air temperature rises, the mercury column in the thermometer also rises. Are questionnaires (like the feeling thermometer) measurement instruments? Harré asks. They are not. They are cultural, local models of conversation disseminated in the course of social learning of norms. An indication of the “temperature” of sympathy/antipathy toward a political opponent is not the result of an invisible polarised attitude on the part of the person being studied. Psychological questionnaires (and, of course, interviews) are conversational occasions in which participants co-construct an interactional episode according to their discernment of the norms applicable to such episodes. Whether the judgment is correct or not is revealed each time in the course of the conversation.

Another problem with the “positivist” approach in the social sciences is that it ignores the mediation of cognition through language. Those who take psychological measurement too seriously believe that the act of choosing an option on a questionnaire (or making a statement in an interview) is the causal effect of the influence of an internal mental state (e. g., liking a like-minded person). The task of the “positivist” researcher is to identify correlations between the explanatory variable and the response variable and to find robust correlations that allow one to speak of discovering some stability. The holy grail is to find such correlations that one can convincingly search for causality.

However, causation is only one instance in which correlation can occur. Harré (Harré, 2002, pp. 174–175) lists two other situations, both of which are strongly correlated with language. Correlation can occur when one of the correlated elements is part of the meaning of the other. For example, there is a negative correlation between “kiwi” and “fly” because part of the meaning of the word “kiwi” is “flightless bird”. Correlation can also occur when there are narrative norms, conventions according to which certain words should be spoken in certain situations. It is appropriate to respond to a greeting, even if I do not feel like greeting someone. Similarly, it is appropriate to agree across ideological lines on a national holiday, emphasising the primacy of belonging to a common nation.

If Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber (Mercier & Sperber, 2017) are right (and I think they are), it is public alignment with social expectations at any given moment that is a matter of social reputation, and this reputation is the engine of interpersonal communication. In the absence of the possibility of an entirely “private language”, as Wittgenstein persuasively argued, the recognition of expectations is a matter of public deliberation, primarily through language. We think publicly and collectively. According to Mercier and Sperber, concern with

public reputation is evolutionarily justified. However, like proponents of the new enactive and embodied approaches to cognitive science (see, e.g., Gallagher, 2023), Mercier and Sperber are sceptical that reasoning (and cognition) is based on individual, fully informed reasoning grounded in formal logic, i. e., theory of mind. Modern science shows us that there is a realm of tacit knowledge that is only minimally accessible to consciousness and is by no means logically structured. What is revealed to our consciousness is a situational and behavioural outcome that we narrate retrospectively, incompletely, and dependent on public resources, including linguistic resources that are “at hand”, – i. e., available broadly in a given culture as biological habits of using words in a certain way, but also narrowly in a given conversational episode, such as a scientific study using an “instrument” of the feeling thermometer.

A theoretical conclusion from the above is this: cognition, reasoning, thinking, speech acts, etc., have their origin in public situations, from which they become fixed as habits, forming tacit knowledge. What is perpetuated cannot be measured, because the “measuring” tools trigger a public conversation episode in which participants try to play it out as best they can, guided consciously and unconsciously by what they are accustomed to. However, then it is no longer tacit, and we have no guarantee that what is revealed in this way can be treated as representative of the tacit.

#### 4. Looking for correlations: the dominant story

I base this part primarily on recent reviews of the relevant literature (Garzón-Velandia et al., 2024; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019, 2012), focusing especially on the work of Shanto Iyengar and his team. What is common to the various studies reported therein can be presented as follows: the story of polarisation is a story about democracy and the principles of coexistence in a state. The implicit assumption is that there is a limited range of possibilities for realizing this common life. The concept of ideological polarisation presupposes something like this. Beyond its limits, ideological differences begin to imply unwanted “polarisation”. A citizen chooses among a variety of options, but only within the limits. When exactly does the diversity of options become a problem of polarisation? This is not addressed in the dominant story.

Instead, divisions and classifications are central in the dominant research on polarisation. The analytical approach must first lead to the proper identification of what and how it exists. Thus, the researchers primarily distinguish between ideological and affective polarisation and between elite and mass polarisation, hoping to secure some basic ontic distinctions. The latter distinction is somewhat

less relevant today – in the age of social media – because the communication of the one and the other is intertwined (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, p. 188, note 1).

Much more important is the first division, and especially affective polarisation. One of the questions in this area of research has been whether knowledge of ideological polarisation is sufficient to understand other manifestations of polarisation, including radicalization of attitudes and feelings toward political opponents. Iyengar's (Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 424) answer is negative: affective polarisation is not driven by ideological affinity. Clearly, the affective poses a much greater challenge to researchers because affect is not ordered in the way that officially expressed ideology is ordered.

So, we know that the semantic order of a political text is not the best possible way to learn about polarised emotional states, and that ideological and affective polarisation are distinct phenomena. I would like to suggest, however, that modern cognitive science offers a somewhat different perspective: official ideologies, once internalised as habits and reproduced non-inferentially by the embodied person (i. e., as patterns of neural activity), tend to lose their original semantic structure. Nevertheless, it is precisely the public exposure to and discussion of ideology that initiates the formation of these neural networks in the first place. It is therefore debatable whether the separation between ideological and affective polarisation is always necessary. Kubin and von Sikorski (2021, p. 193) criticise researchers who fail to clearly distinguish between these types, but perhaps such researchers are simply unconvinced that this separation reflects an ontic – or “real” – distinction. In the absence of a single coherent supporting theory, as exists in physics, distancing oneself from these “discovered” divisions may be a mark of caution.

A key thread in prevailing research is the attempt to identify the relationship between ideological and affective polarisation (let us stay with this distinction for the moment) and media content, media exposure, and media use. Interestingly, media content is often treated in isolation. Kubin and von Sikorski (2021, p. 193) discuss several studies examining whether and how the content of particular media is polarising. Krippendorff (2017) recently reminded us that it is methodologically odd, to say the least, to suggest that a text can influence someone without a human interpreter – that is, without being read. And different readers interpret the same text in different ways. Nevertheless, the correlation-hunting approach appears largely insensitive to such subtleties. The underlying assumption seems to be that “reading” can somehow be averaged, and that only the central tendency is analytically relevant.

Let us consider that what correlations reveal are certain conversational conventions – and that their mathematised form is, in a sense, ornamental. Iyengar, paradoxically given his preference for a “positivist” method, comes close to acknowledging the role of such conventions when he describes U.S. campaigns

designed to induce affective polarisation as “*son et lumière*” (Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 427). The supposed causal mechanism (“...a possible cause”, Iyengar cautiously writes) is that these campaigns disseminate stereotypical patterns of belief about political opponents. A similar conclusion is drawn by Kubin and von Sikorski (2021, p. 195), who note that research generally confirms that exposure to polarised social media content fosters ideological – rather than affective – polarisation among users. Media patterns tend to become entrenched in their audiences.

However, the correlative approach leaves it methodologically unclear how stereotypical content is actually “absorbed”. If the proposed mechanism lies within human cognition, then – following recent developments in cognitive science – we have good reason to be sceptical of any model based on internal “content absorption” followed by inference-driven behavioural output. The metaphor of a “*son et lumière* may”, in fact, better convey what statistical correlations and regressions struggle to: that participation in a political event, such as a campaign, is an embodied experience rather than a disembodied analytic process.

From this embodied perspective, the mechanism of “stereotype absorption” becomes more intelligible: it is the continual wiring and rewiring of neural circuits described by neuroscience. A bodily experience in a public context – like attending a light show, as both a spectator and a cognitively embodied participant – creates new neural structures and reinforces existing ones. These structures then shape future behaviour in similar social situations.

In a later review of the relevant research, Iyengar (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 135) acknowledges the complexity of causal relationships in the social world and that the correlational approach perhaps places too little emphasis on human agency and activism. When considering the impact of news media on audiences, Iyengar and his team point out that polarized media is chosen by people who are already motivated by something in advance to consume such content.

Many of the reported correlations in polarisation research lack robustness in the sense that they do not support the development of a generalizable theory. In the absence of a prior social theory that clearly outlines what should be expected in the course of “measurement”, it is difficult to avoid the impression that this line of research is somewhat adrift. Given that we do not yet have a coherent theory of polarisation – and that the findings of “positivist” research remain inconsistent and inconclusive – it becomes reasonable to question whether polarisation is, in fact, a real and stable phenomenon in the way that “positivists” would require it to be.

However, even without being entirely certain that the phenomenon under study is a real one, the dominant narrative emphasizes the urgent need to reduce and mitigate polarisation. One proposed direction is the enactment of new social

norms that would inhibit hostility toward political opponents (and the spillover of that hostility into areas outside of politics), similar to established norms regarding racial and gender differences. The question then becomes: how do we effectively create and implement such norms, i. e., achieve social change? I will return to this question in the historical story of the centrist-liberal use of polarisation.

## 5. Telling a story: the alternative approach

A look at the history of modern democracies and ideological rivalries presents a very different story. I will draw on Immanuel Wallerstein's work on the rise, triumph, and ongoing defeat of centrist-liberalism (Wallerstein, 2003, 2011). Centrist-liberalism is an ideology, a political metastrategy, and a program of action based on coherently linked ideas. The word "ideology" is as crucial to this narrative as the word "measurement" is in the story of correlations. As Wallerstein points out, all "systems" (both social systems and ideologies as systems of ideas) have lifecycles: they are born, they endure, and they eventually die. They are historical. Centrist-liberalism is an ideology whose meaning is discernible only in a world where political change is the norm. Such is the "capitalist world-economy" (a term from world-systems theory) after the French Revolution of 1789. I would like to emphasize here that the world-systems theory I prefer is, of course, not the only theory in the social sciences that could offer a historical view of polarisation. Metamethodologically, then, the starting point is the same as in the dominant story from the previous section: it is one of many.

The French Revolution posed a significant political challenge: how could the demands for universal sovereignty and equality of all people be reconciled with the interests of the notables of the *ancien régime*? (Wallerstein, 2011, p. 1). In the alternative history I present, the first metastrategy after the Revolution was conservatism. Clearly, conservatives opposed the Revolution and envisioned an unchanging order (in the form of the *ancien régime*) that would endure not only the upheaval caused by the revolutionaries but also, crucially, all other attempts to disrupt the "unchangeable" world, such as scientific rationalism. Faced with the impossibility of undoing the changes of the Revolution, conservatives' real political strategy was to promote caution and scepticism in the formulation and implementation of new laws. Wallerstein notes that the strength of conservatism was (and is?) rooted in the fact that various reforms – legal changes – often caused great disappointment for too many people. Conservatives then argued: Let us wait, do not rush, or another wave of disappointment will follow.

The ideology of liberalism began its "life" in opposition to conservatism. As Wallerstein notes (Wallerstein, 2011, p. 5), to this day it is not always clear what

exactly is meant by the term “liberalism”. But this vagueness is an inescapable part of liberalism as a political metastrategy. Liberalism since the French Revolution has promoted universalism: equal and universal rights for all. How to do that? From now on, we have to change the course of history (which the conservatives wanted to leave untouched) in the right direction. What direction is that? This must be determined in the free debate of “the people”. The radicals – the third ideology of the French Revolution – wanted change as soon as possible. This contrast earned the liberals a place in the “centre”. The centre, Wallerstein reminds us, is rhetorical. In public discourse, we can create such a centre depending on what we want to achieve. The great cleverness of the liberals was that they made the construction of the centre in political discourse a key element of their political strategy.

Here, one can see the beginnings of what social scientists centuries later would study as political polarisation (ideological, affective, and any other of a number of proposed divisions). If you can politically establish a centre at various points in the debate, you can also keep the views of others as far apart as current political tactics require. The thesis I want to formulate here (which is not explicitly stated by Wallerstein) is that the liberal strategy of establishing a centre is a way of creating the public impression of political polarisation, i. e., the impression that the political, programmatic, ideological proposals of other “participants in the debate” are too far apart to be wise, reasonable, rational, moving in the right direction, and so on. In any case, they are suspect. I point out that, in this interpretation, polarisation is not an ontologically self-contained phenomenon that can be measured, and those measurements correlated with something else. It is a way of dealing with the political world. Why has it proved so effective?

David J. Manning (in: Wallerstein, 2011, p. 7) draws connections between liberal ideology and Newtonian physics. In his view, three elements of Newton’s thought have been translated by liberals into the language of politics: the stability of the world depends on the balance of its components, an attempt to change the direction in which the world is going will shatter its order, under the right conditions and at the right time in the world, given structures will develop (here: the institutions of democracy). By establishing a centre in public discourse, liberals were able to control the meaning of “right” conditions, time, direction, etc. The links to physics that Manning recognised worked in the liberals’ favour. Physics (and chemistry) enjoyed spectacular engineering successes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Scientific knowledge tangibly and commonsensically proved to be useful knowledge and thus “true” in the ordinary, non-philosophical sense. The fact that the political camp was proposing a strategy twinned with what had already proven successful worked in favour of centrist-liberalism.

Nevertheless, from the beginning, liberals have been troubled by a problem: Who should participate in public discussions in which the establishment of the centre is used to achieve political victory? If, as postulated at the time of the French Revolution, it was “the people”, who would fall into that category? Both conservatives and radicals (later socialists) proposed that the sovereign agents of political processes should not be individuals. For conservatives, the proper actors were families, churches, and guilds. For radicals, it was all of humanity (Wallerstein, 2011, p. 13). Liberals proposed that only some individuals should be political actors. Thus, the essence of the liberal project was exclusion, even though the official rhetoric spoke of equality. I want to expand on Wallerstein’s thought here and interpret this theme through the lens of cognitive science.

Why was the liberal proposal successful? From the perspective of modern cognitive science, a person cognizes in an embodied way. We have a body consciousness from which, as Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff & Johnson, 2020) teach us, emerges the sophisticated and abstract thinking necessary for advanced social communication and coordination. The whole body is involved in cognition. While Mercier and Sperber’s proposals emphasize public reasoning rather than internal reasoning, they, too, assume that a person exists as a kind of centre that participates in common life. The sense of numerical identity – that I am always myself – is an essential experience of everyday life. There is no reason to think that things were different immediately after the French Revolution. From this point of view, the political program of the Liberals was perceived as personally appropriate.

The question for liberals was how to reconcile the project of equality in the debate with the fact of material polarisation (i. e., living conditions) that was a consequence of the booming capitalist world economy. The uninterrupted possibility of ceaseless capital accumulation for some meant a burden for others. This is the polarisation of living conditions – a real, tangible polarisation. Unlike considerations of political polarisation, the polarisation of living conditions has a coherent and objective “theory” behind it: the biology of life (hunger, thirst) and, in the extreme, death. We know exactly what to expect under certain conditions, and we know why.

In reconciling equality with material polarisation, liberals were aided by the concept of state and citizen. Only certain classes of individuals were allowed into the political debate: the citizens (Wallerstein, 2003, 2011, pp. 144–145). As in the case of establishing the centre, the concept of a citizen can be so vague and malleable that manipulating the boundaries of this class can help achieve political goals. The first procedure was to divide the category of citizens into two subcategories: citizens with active rights and citizens with passive rights. Passive rights are those that society is supposed to guarantee. Active rights are those by which society is created and maintained. As Wallerstein reminds us, binary

divisions have been known since the dawn of time (Lakoff and Johnson explain in part why they are natural to us) (Wallerstein, 2011, p. 146). What liberals have added to these divisions is a theoretical intellectual superstructure that justifies in various ways that these divisions are necessary. Necessities were then linked to the outcomes of public debates: the establishment of laws and procedures by which states (and societies of citizens) could function.

The story of the triumph of centrist-liberalism has many other threads. I will skip them and move on to explain the connections between liberalism and the current explosion of scholarly interest in the problem of polarisation. The liberal strategy worked well until the Great Depression of the 1930s. After the world wars and the revolution of 1968, the world economy entered a period of systemic disruption. However, this remained largely invisible in the media and public discourse, partly for reasons discussed by Chomsky and Herman in *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

An unexpected change came with the rise of the Internet, but more importantly, with the dot-com bubble of 2000. The collapse of the Internet companies of the 1990s turned the attention of centrist-liberals away from the then emerging social media. Not only were social media based on user-generated content and networking, but they were also personal and mobile, thanks to the revolutionary ideas of Steve Jobs. They were also revolutionarily useful, thanks to the ideas of Sergey Brin and Larry Page.

My thesis is that the centrist-liberalism curators (see Turner, 2022a) did not notice the change and underestimated the danger. Concentrating on controlling other media technologies, “new old” media like DVD and Blue-Ray, which could be controlled by roughly the same means as books and VHS tapes, they failed to see that the advent of social media would wrest from their already very weak hands the ability to control and manipulate the establishment of the centre in public debates. Controlled polarisation, previously a favourable tool for liberals, became uncontrollable. Hence, the impression that this is a new process in Western societies: treating opponents as enemies. However, from the perspective of the history presented here, this is mostly just an impression. Qualitative political change happened after 1789, not now.

The alternative story, based on Wallerstein’s work, is one about people – both past and present – and their ideas about how to live together. There are no hidden polarising forces to be measured, correlated, juxtaposed, and then generalised into an ahistorical explanation that resembles a scientific law but is not. Methodologically and metaphysically, the alternative story only requires the recognition that human beings, in their shared existence, are constantly searching for stable ways to organise their common life. People with different biological dispositions (neural networks) and histories of their own lived expe-

riences can behave very differently. Shared expectations and attention to public reputation help stabilise, but the stability they allow is not ultimate.

## 6. Final thoughts

In this text, I have attempted to contrast two approaches to studying the phenomenon of polarisation. I have referred to them as the dominant story and the alternative story. My aim has been to draw attention to the theoretical commitments that these narratives entail. I have expressed doubt that, from the perspective of understanding the discursive and socialised nature of action, the correlation/measurement approach to studying polarisation can be anything more than a semi-conscious documentation of an infinite number of different discursive conventions within conversational episodes. The results of social research conducted by “positivists” bear little resemblance to the findings of physicists like Young, Fresnel, Maxwell, and others, whose work laid the foundations for the technological inventions that benefit us all and helped legitimise the methods of physics in the eyes of non-physicists.

The alternative narrative allows us to see polarisation as a historical strategy that has been present in our lives for centuries but quite well camouflaged. But this narrative draws our attention to another current problem: uncontrolled political polarisation in the age of personal social media is being met with a reaction from governments and states. Various censorship solutions are being proposed and implemented, somewhat blindly, sometimes contrary to the democratic procedures, without knowing exactly what the effects will be. It seems unlikely that we will be able to restore a controlled polarisation of public discourse in the same way that centrist liberalism has practised over the past two centuries. It is also difficult to imagine the reversal of the revolutionary changes in personal communication brought about by social media and mobile technologies. A period of various, perhaps costly, political trial and error awaits us. Trying to figure out how this story might unfold with all the methods we know is a great challenge for social scientists.

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## **‘Fear and Loathing’ between voters. Affective polarisation toward the European Union in Poland**

### **Abstract**

This chapter explores affective polarisation among political party supporters in Poland, analysed through the lenses of their attitude towards the European Union. In many respects, Polish polarisation is typical of similar processes in Central Europe – fuelled by radical politicians and a group of biased media, it quickly encompasses other spheres of public and private life. Its complement and consequence are supposedly a dynamic and all-encompassing affective polarisation. While political polarisation is quite well described, its affective and emotional dimensions still require in-depth research and a methodology adapted to learn about the affective components of attitudes. This chapter is an attempt to examine and clarify whether Polish society, which has long been distinguished by its unanimous support for Polish membership in the EU, is already polarised with respect to support for the European Union. The empirical grounds are the results of representative surveys on adult Poles, covering four dimensions measured on the scale of semantic dissonance: attitude towards Poles, the level of hostility towards the EU, the sense of otherness towards the EU and the level of conspiratorial thinking about the European Union. A combined analysis of these four dimensions makes it possible to compare the strength and direction of voters’ attitudes between political parties, which in turn makes it possible to calculate indicators of polarisation among them. It turns out that all voters – with the exception of the Eurosceptic radical Confederation – support membership in the EU, but already at the level of individual components, there are significant manifestations of negative attitudes and conspiracy thinking. What differs the voters of the two largest polarised parties is the hiding Euroscepticism behind a mask of banal pro-EU sentiment by the right side and the exceptionally strong positive and pro-EU attitude of the liberal centre. The analysis also allows for a comparison of detailed and specific differences between groups of the Polish electorate.

**Keywords:** affective polarisation, polarisation index, social consciousness, Poles, European Union

## 1. Introduction

This chapter invites readers to explore the phenomenon of affective polarisation of the political party supporters in Poland. One notably significant issue is chosen here to serve as a proxy for polarisation presence, direction and intensity: the attitude of voters towards the European Union. Particular attention is paid to followers of the two leading groupings, both of which have maintained central political influence for over two decades.

It follows naturally that polarisation is initially grounded in the plane of political ideology (Sartori, 1976). Polish case seems to be slightly different, as indicated by the provenience of the preliminary stage of political conflict. It had not been triggered by a purely ideological clash. Before the elections in 2005, the two strongest political actors represented the same centre-right environment, which cooperated amicably and consistently to establish a common ruling coalition. Just before the election, they entered a fierce competition based on a political spin of hostility (Zagała, 2018, pp. 117–118). It often happens that the hostility between former friends knows no equal. Since then, this specific foundational split shaped by calculated, marketing-driven polarisation, has been embedded in the political identity of both leading polarising actors: the first, of the Kaczyński brothers surroundings initially grouped in Porozumienie Centrum, later named Law and Justice [from now on: PiS], described as *conservative*, *nationalistic* and *catholic*; and the second, of *liberal-democratic* Platforma Obywatelska, Civic Platform, later Civic Coalition [from now on: KO].

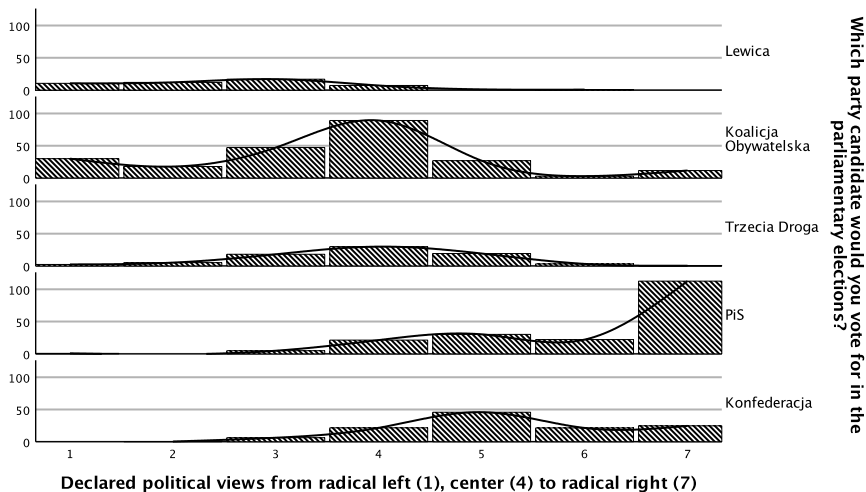
PiS won the elections of 2005, marking the logic of the polarisation divide, purposefully crafted in the periods of 2005–7 and 2015–2023 by fueling a highly emotional strategy of political positioning while being in power. Polarisation instruments proved to be an effective blueprint for sealing the cleavage. On the other hand, KO fitted within the scheme during its rule in 2007–2015 and again after the successful elections in December 2023. Thus, the binary division looks like a structural frame for all major socio-political win-and-lose strategies from then on.

Having identified the specific provenience of the mechanism, let us now introduce a second element, the apparently connected context: structural features of the political party landscape. One might find it interesting that in Poland, the picture is not very typical and symmetric, as marked by a shift to the right side and cumulation in the centre. This does not go hand in hand with a routine ideological categorisation of party systems (tab. 1).

Graph no. 1 includes all major parties during the Euro-parliamentary campaign in June 2024<sup>1</sup>. Voters' ideological left-right self-identification is here jux-

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1 Lewica – the Left, former Alliance of Democratic Left, Koalicja Obywatelska – KO, founded in



Graph 1. Social demand for political representation (left-right) vs party supply in Poland in June 2024 (7-point scale, 1 – radical left, 7 – radical right). Source: own – JHK, originally prepared questionnaire, carried out as part of the CBOS survey, 3–6.06.2024; weighted representative sample of Polish population 18+, CATI, N=1000.

toposed with their declarations of party support. One can see the shift from the left to the centre and to the right part of the scale of political demand. Interestingly, readiness to support PiS is distinct among those who define themselves as *radical right* (7 on a 7-point scale). Secondly, Konfederacja, the grouping that is perceived as quite consistent in its political right extremism, does not seem to match an equally corresponding electoral cohort. It looks like being spread across a wide range of voters holding centre-right to right-wing political self-perception<sup>2</sup>. The second side of the polarisation barricade looks equally thought-provoking. KO supporters are apparently spread across the centre-left spectrum. It thus becomes apparent that the structure of the phenomenon is quite specific: on the one hand, there is a coherent group of voters with a radically right-wing orientation; on the other, we observe more diffuse groupings clustered around the political centre. However, here, the *centre* may indicate political identity, ideological incoherence, and certain volatility. Based on that one may go to an

2018 by Civic Platform and Nowoczesna, then with Greens and Polish Initiative; Trzecia Droga (Third Way) – a coalition of Poland 2050 and Polish Peasant Party. Konfederacja – a radical right, libertarian and populist coalition founded before the European parliamentary elections in 2019.

2 Konfederacja is still not the main agent of effective polarisation, as it cares for its image as an anti-systemic and libertarian party that stands away from the PiS-KO clash. Recent voter research confirms that the party enjoys substantial support among young people with both right-wing and centrist views – a pattern that stands in contrast to its programmatic radicalism (Lewicka, 2015).

interpretative conclusion. In Poland, those who vote for the right (*populist*) party are more consistent in linking ideological perception with voting decisions, thus displaying greater congruence between ideological and affective factors.

By elevating the discussion to a broader plane, we arrive at more contextual grounds. Usually, polarisation serves as a productive category of explanation of political behaviour, paving the way for understanding broader macro processes and major tendencies. What seems particularly interesting here is the option to describe and explain the dynamics between the ideological facet of polarisation and the affective one. It should be emphasised that incorporating an affective component into the analysis has specific implications. For several reasons, it necessarily entails adopting a bottom-up perspective (demand rather than supply) and expanding the methodological framework to include the psychological foundations of human emotion.

Central Europe seems to be a good place to delve into the affective polarising dynamics. It represents the phenomenon in its rapid growth, supported by the seminal work by Andres Reilhan, “*Fear and loathing across party lines*” (*also*) in *Europe...* (2020). He validates the observation that, already in 2005, the affective polarisation in this region and Turkey was record-breaking and even exceeded that of the U.S. Also, research in Poland provides support for the existence of an enabling environment for such a tendency. Among many factors, one must admit existing of a generally weak democratic stabilisation of the region, making a specific breeding ground for the emergence of affective politics: not a merit-based orientation, but a demanding stance toward institutions, matched with electoral volatility and a tendency to follow those who promise the most. It is only natural, in such circumstances, that we observe the development of populism – not only as an ideology but also as a general social routine (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2023). These authors, in their *The Society of Populists*, provide confirming arguments for the crucial role of political cynicism among Polish voters (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2019), which should be looked upon as a symptom of another underlying dynamic: the general lack of social and institutional trust. In this regard, sociological research continues to yield new and striking findings. Social trust is marked by historically low levels in Poland, usually ranking among those at the very bottom of all. For example, the systematic comparison of 32 states published by IPSOS in the *Global Trustworthiness Index* (2024) exposes Poland’s ranking second to last – just ahead of Peru and just behind Chile<sup>3</sup>. Regarding the affective, social polarisation, it is important to highlight an extremely low trust in the core professions: politicians and ministers are lowest ranked (respectively

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3 The total score for net trustworthy for Poland is minus 319, compared to plus four as the global average. The survey was made on 23,530 adults under the age of 75 across 32 countries between 24 May and 7 June 2024 (IPSOS, 2024).

8% and 16% of trust), preceded by TV news presenters (18%), journalists (22%) and priests (13%). Obviously, social media influencers, with their 13% trust, follow suit.

## 2. The unbearable appeal of affective polarisation

When studying affects, it is justified to adopt the perspective of the voter as a feeling subject. Voters internalise and cognitively transform ideological stimuli as they arrive. This is observable within social interactions. Anne Applebaum's observation (2020) that, due to political divisions, ordinary people in Poland suddenly stopped talking to one another, even in their families, offers a haunting illustration of the nature of affective polarisation in action. A natural question arises: How can we describe these mechanisms by which politics is transferred onto the level of the affective aspects of human attitudes? It is about fear, uncertainty, anger, hate, compassion, satisfaction, and admiration, as much as the one of specifically managed affects, like contempt, aversion, disgust, hope, pride, etc. (Tomkins, 1962–1992; Brennan, 2004). This question opens into an epistemological issue: can we understand these processes assuming their basically latent character? Political affect, regardless of whether – and to what extent – is empirically knowable at all, cannot surely be left to descriptions of those contents which manifest overtly.

Because of that, as one might assume, affective polarisation is approached by researchers with a specific touch. Entering this line of inquiry necessitates careful consideration of the core contributions made by researchers in the field. Their insights bring basic contours for this interpretation. These contours can be initially grouped into six premises.

First, from a classical perspective (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), the affective polarisation is conceived as an extension and complement of the ideological one. The tension between political party declarations and the effective systems of voters' impressions is convincingly described by Zagała (2023), who highlights differences between the two planes. It is now almost natural that the ideological declarations made on the left–centre–right dimension do not impose any strong explanatory model (111–112). The classical proposition by Russel J. Dalton (2008) and his innovative followers (Reiljan, 2020; 2021) must nonetheless be amended for this aspect. There are more reasons to assume that the ideological categories used as the base for polarisation are simply false – in the sense that there is a sharp difference between what is declared on one hand and what is perceived, understood and later adopted as one's shared, internalised and accepted value. This observation is well argued by Yphtach Lelkes (as cited in Zagała, 2023, p. 111). Besides, what is crucial for the essence of affects, as opposed

to emotions, the former are pre-linguistic, raw and not necessarily consciously realised (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995).

Second, the process of mutual conditioning between the political top-down message and cognitive mechanisms of internalisation essentially operates within the configuration of what we call *social consciousness* – a complex network of ideas, ideologies, stereotypes, myths, systems of norms and values etc., which provide a lot of additional factors. One of many additional aspects worth pointing out here is the process of social control and the real and well-experienced practices of making politics by management of affects.

In their classical text about affective polarisation, Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood (2015) come up with yet another important insight, based on behavioural markers as much as on the tests revealing the hidden elements of attitudes. It is truly shocking what comes out here: the nature of social conflict rooted in political cleavage is profoundly engaging and emotionally entrenched and thus felt more deeply, in some cases, than the affective charge associated even with racial issues. The surprising depth of affects in polarisation makes the third premise.

The next, the fourth one, is presumed to be drawn from observations of the nature of the phenomenon under study, which metaphorically resembles a sponge. It has surpassed the ideological domain (2015, pp. 698–700), absorbing successive spheres to turn them into a market of bipolar competition. The ecosystem of polarisation dynamically devours successive layers of social and symbolic life: the constructions of ideological meaning ascribed to traditional political categories (such as left and right), the dimension of the meaning of the past and history, reimagined through dichotomous frameworks of heroes and traitors, the axiological dimension, in which perceived and shared value hierarchies are reshaped to fit divisions proposed by political actors; and the dimension of customs, cultural practices, and the Sacred – to name only a few of the fundamental processes at play.

As a consequence, affective polarisation may encompass everything that can only be imagined as politically relevant. It feeds on what fuels conflict most intensely in party politics: personal animosities and disputes over core values. The latter is particularly important because, at the axiological plane, any political or social fight is basically inconclusive: no consent over the universality of one's values is possible, so to win, one must eliminate an opponent rather than use political argumentation. That makes the fifth premise supported by the empirical evidence in Poland. It proves right to conclude that the Polish socio-political polarisation has axiological roots correlated with instrumentalised ideological claims framed in the long-standing, deeply rooted divisions, periodically inflamed for persuasive purposes. This process has its effects in the notion of *two Polands* based on the two identities like *Poland A and Poland B*. This division has

a social face (two-tribal hostility), a spatial face (left or right from the Vistula river), and a political face – two political identities (Zagała, 2023, p. 123). One might find some interesting insights into these aspect in the reports of Concilium Civitas (Jasiewicz, 2021/2022) or in Piotr Radkiewicz's socio-psychological analyses (2017).

The sixth premise stems from the psychology of affects, as opposed to emotions. The core assumptions here, and the crux of the problem is the tension between the two – especially insofar as the first tends to undermine traditional concepts of emotional influence and social control in politics. Affects are said to be biologically rooted, pre-linguistic impulses organised within the human neuro-reactive system – as explained by the already mentioned authors of *Shame and Its Sisters* (1995) – whereas emotions are said to be born only as a result of cognitive and cultural, external expressions. It follows from this distinction, then, that the process of political persuasion is based on managing emotions by successfully triggering affects in a cultural sense (Ahmed, 2004). This connects to the assumption that affects are, in a sense, an automated sequence of consequences triggered by stimuli – and, as such, are uncontrollable after being set to movement. The very notion that one might influence people's attitudes by evoking automated reactions is diabolical in its character – and it also implies that the process inevitably sets in motion responses over which one will ultimately have no control. It is like letting the genie out of the bottle. It may nevertheless be unsettling to consider the conclusion drawn by some researchers – that the core of polarisation appeal lies in the feeling of specific, biased engagement itself. In this sense, being biased and emotionally involved against the other side has become one of the attractive social rituals. Part of this puzzle is the ease of putting aside ethical consequences – deontological political norms lose their appeal.

These premises are by no means thick or complete. But it should look convincing enough to plant the idea that it still remains insufficiently explained from the perspective of voter response. In this context, a number of questions arise concerning the scope and intensity of this phenomenon in Poland. This chapter undertakes an attempt to examine these dynamics through the lens of a single issue: attitudes to European integration. Has the sponge of affective polarisation already absorbed Polish voters in terms of their attitudes toward the European Union? Some researchers already suggest that it has (Zagała, 2023, pp. 120–121). But does this mean that Polish traditional strong pro-European position has begun to erode? Are there visible effects of this shift? Where exactly does the alleged erosion happen – what is the nature of its manifestation? And, finally, what does it all tell us about the nature of the polarisation itself?

### 3. Methodological grounds

All empirical data here come from a broader, personally designed, exploratory survey research conducted in collaboration with the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) in Warsaw<sup>4</sup>. The research problem was the associative meaning of the European values among Poles and the affective components of Poles' attitude to the EU. It was no coincidence that the data was collected at a politically heated moment of the EU election campaign, when the two polarised groupings were allegedly bound together by the knot of political conflict, with Europe looming in the background. The answers reveal three types of information. Firstly, the closed-ended questions, when cross-referenced with the socio-demographic section, offer a way to outline the profiles of party voters<sup>5</sup>, especially when set as polarised political tribes.

Secondly, the semantic differential was implemented to trigger and collect affective components of an attitude towards the EU. The Union was described typically for this methodology – as an entity endowed with anthropomorphic qualities, designed to elicit responses analogous to those typically directed toward another human being. The 7-point scale offers its middle as 4 (neutral stance), minus 3 – the most intense measure on the negative pole of the given component, plus 3 – the most intense measure on the positive pole. Every question started the same way: “Taking everything into account, would you say that the European Union is, in your view...”. The follow-up statements were as specified below:

1. ...weak or strong?
2. ...a threat to our national identity or a reinforcement of it?
3. ...hostile or friendly?
4. ...more like a stranger or like family?
5. ...undemocratic or democratic?
6. ...cynical or honest?
7. ...a German conspiracy or a genuine community?
8. ...if it ceases to be financially beneficial – should Poland leave the EU, or should it remain longer?

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4 The survey was completed in June 2024, between 3–7th, on the national representative weighted sample of adult Poles (1000 respondents, CATI). The questionnaire counted 40 variables, both quantitative and qualitative, including one open question coded in 5 textual fields to collect associations with European values, as well as a multi-item question with eight scalable answers, following the semantic differential methodology (Osgood et al., 1957; Osgood, 1962; Snyder & Osgood, 1969), in order to measure and interpret the affective components of Poles' attitudes to the European Union.

5 How would you describe your political views on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents strongly left-wing views, and 7 represents strongly right-wing views? If a parliamentary election were held today, which party's candidate would you vote for? (respondents are provided with a list of political parties).

It is important to present the functions of these eight markers since they had been deliberately figured out to capture four elementary dimensions of the EU perception synthetically and comprehensively. Components 1 and 3 measure hostility, allowing an assessment of both on a friend–foe axis. Components 2 and 4 assess the perception of the relationship between *us and the EU*. This dimension pertains to Polish identity as measured through social distance and fears. Thirdly, components 5, 6, and 7 evaluate susceptibility to conspiracy thinking. Thus, this is operationalised through three axes: perception of the EU as either honest or cynical, as a community or a *German conspiracy*, and as democratic or undemocratic. The final item, 8, was a direct question concerning the respondent's opinion on Poland's potential exit from the EU if membership ceased to be financially beneficial<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4. Results – affective components of Polish attitude toward the EU in the light of party supporters' polarisation

Should Poland leave the European Union according to the Polish electorate? Framed in the appropriate context, the question emerges as follows: Is Polish society, traditionally highly supporting the membership in the EU, already affected by the political party polarisation? If yes, does it go hand in hand with the ideological divide?

According to the survey, 66,17% of Poles want Poland to stay<sup>7</sup>, even if it ceases to be financially beneficial. Interestingly enough, it reveals the role of factors other than financial benefit. On the other hand, every fifth respondent would support Polesit (22,62%). One may conclude that the polarisation has not left its mark at the level of general attitude without delving into specific aspects of integration.

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6 Unfortunately, the third type of information gathered could not be included here due to space constraints. The part of a survey concerning associations with European values, collected in five rounds in open questions, makes the richest and most diversified type of data, much exceeding the scope of the present section.

7 It is important to note that this result is significantly lower than the outcome of widely publicised longitudinal surveys measuring Polish support for EU membership, like Eurobarometer or CBOS. The latter reveals a difference of 13% (according to the CAPI/CATI/CAWI survey on N= 981 carried out on November 18–21<sup>st</sup> 2024 (Roguska, 2024) by stating the level of support as high as 80%. This discrepancy illustrates how much depends on the specific wording of the question, the number of available response options, and – above all – the methodology employed.

Tab. 1. Should Poland leave the European Union if it ceases to be financially beneficial?

|  | N   | % of column N |
|--|-----|---------------|
| definitely should leave -3                         | 135 | 13.47%        |
| -2   | 57  | 5.67%         |
| -1   | 32  | 3.24%         |
| difficult to say, neither the first nor the second | 121 | 12.12%        |
| 1  | 70  | 7.01%         |
| 2  | 107 | 10.65%        |
| definitely should stay +3                          | 478 | 47.83%        |

Source: own – JHK, originally prepared questionnaire, carried out as part of the CBOS survey, 3–6.06.2024; weighted representative sample of Polish population 18+, CATI, N=1000.

But the devil lies in details – when you limit respondents' ability to assess issue-specific facets of EU membership (especially those used in electoral rhetoric thus connected with affective polarisation), the support for the EU belonging looks unquestioned. The level of EU optimism is apparently lower when researchers ask about issues like support for further integration or federalisation of the EU, consent for a common currency in Poland, common security and foreign policy, common European armed forces under one command... In the context of affective polarisation, it is highly likely that these specific issues – when they align with existing or emergent *banks of anger* (Sloterdijk, 2012; Budyta-Budzyńska, 2018) – organise the whole set of Nietzschean resentment: deep, affective responses, a form of moralised revenge born from uncertainty, frustration and perceived humiliation. This is a real and particularly fertile battleground within the broader marketplace of political emotions. The synthesised results are presented in Table 2.

Tab. 2. The results of semantic differential broke by political support of the electorate. Indexes of hostility, otherness, conspiracy thinking and support for Polesxit. Grey zone – main polarised groups

| Which party candidate will you vote for in the forthcoming elections to the parliament? | Konfederacja |       | Lewica (the Left) |      | Trzecia Droga (the Third Way) |      | KO (Civic Coalition) |      | PiS (Law and Justice) |       |
|---|--------------|-------|-------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|----------------------|------|-----------------------|-------|
|   | net total    | mean  | net total         | mean | net total                     | mean | net total            | mean | net total             | mean  |
| Is the European Union truly weak or strong?   | -73          | -0,59 | 73                | 1,55 | 120                           | 1,51 | 429                  | 1,83 | -191                  | -0,91 |

(Continued)

| Which party candidate will you vote for in the forthcoming elections to the parliament? | Konfederacja |       | Lewica (the Left) |      | Trzecia Droga (the Third Way) |      | KO (Civic Coalition) |      | PiS (Law and Justice) |       |
|---|--------------|-------|-------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|----------------------|------|-----------------------|-------|
|   | net total    | mean  | net total         | mean | net total                     | mean | net total            | mean | net total             | mean  |
| Is the European Union genuinely hostile of friendly?                                    | -43          | -1,21 | 102               | 2,05 | 151                           | 1,35 | 590                  | 2,34 | -84                   | -0,41 |
| <b>HOSTILITY (marker 1)</b>   | -116         | -0,9  | 175               | 1,8  | 271                           | 1,43 | 1019                 | 2,09 | -275                  | -0,66 |
| Is the European Union truly a threat or empowerment for our national identity?          | -151         | -0,34 | 94                | 2,17 | 107                           | 1,91 | 547                  | 2,51 | -165                  | -0,79 |
| Is the European Union truly like a stranger or a family?                                | -87          | -0,7  | 94                | 1,99 | 120                           | 1,52 | 545                  | 2,32 | -183                  | -0,89 |
| <b>OTHERNESS (marker 2)</b>   | -238         | -0,52 | 188               | 2,08 | 227                           | 1,72 | 1092                 | 2,42 | -348                  | -0,84 |
| Is the European Union truly democratic or undemocratic?                                 | -132         | -1,06 | 89                | 1,88 | 126                           | 1,6  | 578                  | 2,46 | -234                  | -1,15 |
| Is the European Union truly cynical or honest?  | -226         | -1,81 | 62                | 1,31 | 72                            | 0,91 | 426                  | 1,82 | -333                  | -1,59 |
| Is the European Union truly a German conspiracy or a communicaty?                       | -87          | -0,7  | 102               | 2,16 | 135                           | 1,74 | 569                  | 2,43 | -281                  | -1,36 |
| <b>CONSPIRACY THINKING (marker 3)</b>   | -445         | -1,19 | 253               | 1,78 | 333                           | 1,42 | 1573                 | 2,24 | -848                  | -1,37 |

(Continued)

| Which party candidate will you vote for in the forthcoming elections to the parliament?            | Konfederacja |      | Lewica (the Left) |      | Trzecia Droga (the Third Way) |      | KO (Civic Coalition) |      | PiS (Law and Justice) |      |
|--|--------------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|----------------------|------|-----------------------|------|
|  | net total    | mean | net total         | mean | net total                     | mean | net total            | mean | net total             | mean |
| Should Poland leave the European Union or stay longer once it is no longer financially profitable? | -50          | -0,4 | 124               | 2,62 | 157                           | 2,01 | 595                  | 2,53 | 47                    | 0,22 |
| <b>POLEXIT</b>   | -50          | -0,4 | 124               | 2,62 | 157                           | 2,01 | 595                  | 2,53 | 47                    | 0,22 |

Source: own – JHK, originally prepared questionnaire, carried out as part of the CBOS survey, 3–6.06.2024; weighted representative sample of Polish population 18+, CATI, N=1000.

In sum, these data stand for the collective Polish imaginary of the European Union. Negative numbers show that a respondent preferred to assess a given element with a more rejective approach, e. g., that the EU is rather weak, hostile, makes a threat to identity, is a stranger, not democratic, cynical, etc., and positive scores indicate the opposite. The differential reads as a whole for the complex attitude, but every element is also indicative. Total numbers show the scope of the social impact of an opinion, and the averages reveal its intensity and direction.

Accordingly, the table may lead to a conclusion that the affective approach to the EU in Poland is relatively mild, as top radical feelings do not appear. Having observed that, one should focus on the meaningful differences between electorate groups. First and foremost, there is a gap setting apart supporters of PiS and Konfederacja: the latter group is not hiding its support for Polesxit, whereas the first manifests their support for the status quo. What is important, this part of the electorate confirms their tendency of conspiracy thinking. The populist-right voters express conviction that the European Union is basically undemocratic, cynical, and, after all, is a German conspiracy. Interestingly, PiS supporters are most determined here.

Focusing on the two main collective actors of polarisation, PiS and KO (grey highlight at tab. 2), the interpretation confronts a puzzle because both sides are emotionally pro-European, at least at the level of the decision to stay or to leave. Taking into consideration the elementary components, however, one can see a major difference: PiS supporters consistently express the majority of negative emotions; however, it would be inaccurate to describe them as radical – their

responses tend to cluster around low numbers. What makes a fundamental difference is a directional positive bias to the EU among KO voters. Notably, the level of positive affect among liberal-democratic voters is significantly higher than the degree of negative sentiment expressed by the right-wing populist electorate. The score difference on hostility is 2,75 percentage points, on identity otherness – is 3,26 points, in conspiracy thinking – climbs the way up to 3,61 points.

The above difference makes the current battleground of the affective polarisation among party voters in Poland. The EU imaginary is divided into two. Woven from negative emotions and anchored in specific issues, or positively charged even to higher levels among KO voters.

These findings lead to more questions of an interpretative nature. First, the affective battleground reveals a specific phenomenon: for some reason PiS supporters, when emotionally approaching the European Union, are not ready to break the line of overt Euroscepticism in their most general attitude – what would have made the battle more classic. Among hypothetical reasons, there are two most apparent explanations. Firstly, the European Union, in general, is really perceived by all Poles as an unquestioned value, a *condition sine qua non* for Poland's future. It may not be perfect, which brings a couple of problematic issues, but still, it is the end game. The second option is that the data reveal only the top of an iceberg. They may suggest an undercurrent process of anti-EU resentment, rooted in a cultural bank of anger fueled by anti-German prejudice, and Polish national pride, drawing on a general lack of social trust. As a negative *topos*, Germany has been deeply embedded in Polish cultural memory for centuries and was particularly reinforced during the communist era. It continues to function as an operational metonymy for the burdens of a difficult past – always ready to trigger negative affect. In such discourse, Germany comes to stand simultaneously for Berlin and Brussels, for the *rotten West* and southern *illegal immigrants*, for bureaucracy and autocracy, and finally for Angela Merkel and Donald Tusk – effectively condensing a wide range of negative associations into a single symbolic figure.

A systematic review of media narratives – particularly those fond of playing the German chord – reveals a recurring rhetorical feature. In light of Eurosceptic discourse, it is commonplace to frame the Poland-EU relationship through a very specific structure: *We always have been for Europe – but...*, where the second clause erodes the stone, paving the way to political gains. In that case, it would be compelling to conclude that the anti-European stance is a rather clear political option, cherished by some propagandists within the paradoxical category of *pro-European Euroscepticism* – the populist discourse merging well-masked ethnocentric or nationalistic bias with politically correct language.

## 5. Indexing affective polarisation map among party voters

The *quantitative data* from the differential allow for a comparison of indices for individual parties, in accordance with an interesting tradition initiated by Russell J. Dalton (2008) and developed in subsequent works of continuators, e.g., by Andres Reiljan (2020, 2021), containing a broad description of *the* method of indexing polarisation. Proceeding along this line, here we propose our own version of such an indicator. One should call it the index of affective social polarisation (IASP).

IASP is calculated as follows:

- A, B – electoral groups compared
- 1, 2, 3 – constituent markers of a given attitude
- $X_A, X_B$  – tabulated means based on respondents' answers, scale -3 do +3 (intensity of a given attitude constituent)
- $Y_A, Y_B$  – summary net totals for A i B (scope of hypothetical social impact)

Conditions<sup>8</sup>:

- If the means  $X_A$  and  $X_B$  are both positive or negative, then  
 $X = |X_A - X_B|$  – the smaller value is subtracted from the larger,  
 and reported as an absolute value.
- If the means  $X_A$  i  $X_B$  differ in sign, then  
 a sum is calculated and reported as an absolute value;

Accordingly, X is calculated using this rule for every marker:

$$\begin{cases} |X_A - X_B|, & \text{if } X_A \text{ and } X_B \text{ have the same sign} \\ |X_A + X_B|, & \text{if } X_A \text{ and } X_B \text{ have different signs} \end{cases}$$

Y is calculated as the sum of absolute net values for each marker:

$$Y = |Y_A| + |Y_B|$$

The overall index formula:

$$IASP_{AB} = w_1 \times [(X_1 + 3) \times \log(Y_1 + 1)] + w_2 \times [(X_2 + 3) \times \log(Y_2 + 1)] + w_3 \times [(X_3 + 3) \times \log(Y_3 + 1)]^9$$

8 This condition is justified by the assumption that in search for polarisation-independent variables, one needs to highlight the range between the compared entities, including the direction of attitudes, so if, e.g., the number for A is +2, and for B is +1; or if it is -2 for A, and -1 for B – where both A and B have the same sign, the result should say 1, what shows polarisation range as relatively low. In the second option, where A and B have different signs, the polarisation index must include the sum of both absolute values. E.g., for A = +2 and for B = -1 the result is 3.

9 In constructing the index, the principle of maintaining proportionality of components, as well as the principle of limiting extreme output values were taken into account. For these reasons, a logarithm (Y) is applied to ensure that the influence on the index is controlled. The log (Y+1)

Where

- $X_1, Y_1$  – a partial indicator of polarisation for the marker 1
- $X_2, Y_2$  – a partial indicator of polarisation for the marker 2
- $X_3, Y_3$  – a partial indicator of polarisation for the marker 3
- w – the weight determined for 1 = 0,3; for 2 = 0,3 and for 3 = 0,4<sup>10</sup>.

After application of the formula to the data (tab. 2), we obtain the following results for the paired groups of electorate:

Tab. 3. Index of affective social polarisation IASP for Polish political parties in June 2024

| Political parties in pairs | IASP  |
|----------------------------|-------|
| KO – PiS                   | 13,88 |
| KO – Konfederacja          | 10,61 |
| PiS – The Left             | 10,2  |
| KO – The Left              | 9,41  |
| PiS – Konfederacja         | 8,81  |

Source: own – JHK, based on a weighted representative sample of Polish population 18+. To ground the scale it was assumed the scope of theoretical minimum = 1 (for X = 0 and Y = 1 ≈ 0.90) as well as theoretical maximum = 25 (for X = 6 and Y = 600).

The index of affective social polarisation reveals the overall differences between the supporters of parties grouped in pairs. Given that the only factor and measure used for pairing, in this case, is the attitude to the EU, which, moreover, is specifically framed with the intention of accessing latent associations, the results must be taken with a decent range of prudent criticism in the context of looking for any broader generalisation. The operationalised scale range between 1 and 25 can lead to an observation that the reconstructed polarisation is not quite expansive: the hypothetical index of zero would mean a complete lack of polarisation, and of 25 – the extreme polarisation. However, such results do not occur in reality, as much as they are not likely to appear because of the principle of the statistical distribution of responses in questions involving this type of variables, which suggests answers within the interquartile range (in the middle of the 50% of the distribution), what counts between 9 and 17 on the used scale. It proved to be right.

The two biggest groups of party supporters are apparently differentiated by the public political message they receive but also by the affects and emotions that

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avoids taking the value of zero, and X+3 allows a potential X=0 to be treated as significant without causing the entire index to be zeroed out.

10 The rationale for attributing a slightly higher weight (0,4) for the marker of conspiracy thinking relates to the author’s assumptions that irrational factors are increasingly more crucial as a ground for political attitudes, which goes hand in hand with the general lack of social trust in countries of the region.

are born, developed and nest in their consciousness. The index also suggests that the relationship between party A and party B is the same in both directions, which is not necessarily true. This aspect is one of the points worth checking.

From the data on the absolute number of indications (table 2), we can read yet another thread, although because of the low numbers, it should be treated with due caution<sup>11</sup>. In this respect, IASP may be read as a directional indicator of the socially mobilising power of a given attitudinal element. This premise is supported by the concept of the spiral of silence, making it justified to think that the evaluations declared by a more significant number of people resonate more powerfully and thus become increasingly influential when compared to the shrinking down opinion voiced by minority (e.g., the net imbalance for plus 590 responses by KO supporters pointing the friendly connotations of the EU, compared with 84 voices of PiS supporters dipping into the range of negative associations.

## 6. Summary and discussion

First and foremost, the phenomenon of affective social polarisation toward the EU is thus corroborated for Poland. The confirmation of its presence in the sphere of Polish attitudes toward the European Union opens a broader discussion – both on the limits of polarisation and on the potential for its further investigation and deeper understanding.

Affective polarisation appears to be both a cause and a consequence of deepening social divisions. It undoubtedly functions as a powerful political instrument whose dynamics resemble the unleashing of a genie from a bottle. In this sense, polarisation operates as a mechanism that disarms political rationality. Like a sponge, it absorbs and expands beyond the boundaries of reason. Its eerie appeal lies in its capacity to activate latent, long-term affects acting in concert with the banks of anger – a potential that becomes disturbingly real when coupled with political cynicism and declining social trust.

In Polish society, the latter two premises are strongly substantiated by empirical evidence – a factor that likely contributes to the rapid pace of polarisation. Global data on professional trust reveal a profound crisis of credibility to politicians: across 32 surveyed countries, only 15% of respondents expressed trust in politicians, making them the lowest-ranked professional group. Against

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11 The sum values represent net scores, making it difficult to directly compare them with the total sample size (N=1000 respondents). In this context, results near the zero point on the scale do not necessarily indicate low salience or limited significance of the phenomenon. Instead, they may reflect a balanced distribution of responses – with similar proportions of agreement and disagreement cancelling each other out.

this backdrop, Poland fares particularly poorly. Only 8% of Poles trust politicians, while trust in government officials and ministers stands at 16%, social media influencers at 13%, journalists at 22%, and television news anchors at 18%. Strikingly, what deserves additional discussion, Poland also reports the lowest global level of trust in priests and clergy – just 13% (IPSOS, 2024).

Further evidence or factors of a similar nature could easily be multiplied. However, in the present context, the more pressing question is what deserves special attention in studying this phenomenon in order to grasp its most essential dimensions. Two aspects appear to be particularly crucial in the discussion.

First, there is a need for deeper insight into the affects and emotions that operate at the intersection of political ideologies, supply and demand, their internalisation practices and communication. A thorough understanding of politically activated affective systems and documentation of the roles played by political influence agents constitute one of the necessary steps forward. Particular attention should be paid to the carriers and transmitters of political emotions, as they play a critical role in shaping public perception. This focus becomes even more justified in a society where many voters perceive conspiracy thinking as a legitimate form of political reflection – a context in which culturally embedded prejudices can be easily triggered. To support some evidence, a recent IPSOS study on this year's presidential campaign shows that negative emotions and resentment have dominated social consciousness. The hierarchy of all emotions is ordered as follows: anxiety, disappointment, discouragement, helplessness, rage, confusion, hope, indifference, peace, contentment and pride.

Second, any attempt to describe and explain shifts in social consciousness within the context of polarisation must account for the interconnected nature of co-occurring phenomena – those that operate as conglomerates with consequences that are difficult to grasp. A compelling framework for this complexity is the metaphor of a three-headed dragon of our time, combining *polarisation*, *populism*, and *post-truth* – the phenomena described together by Moisés Naím (2022). At the heart of Naím's model lies the authoritarian conception of power. While perhaps a simplification, it is nonetheless a useful hypothesis to consider each of the dragon's heads as playing a distinct role: populism equips cynical authoritarian parties with the tools needed to prepare for and seize power, while polarisation serves primarily to sustain that power – by managing uncertainty through the imposition of a dichotomous, mirror-like socio-political division. It is particularly significant that the dragon's third head has grown so dynamically as if ready to devour the others.

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## Archetypes (in) Polarity. The media-linguistic dimension of political communication in the MediaPolis

### Abstract

In the article, the Author considers how the polarisation of the public sphere, as observed in politics, affects the emergence of archetypes and how, applying the concept of an archetype (of a politician, of the public sphere), an analysis of the polarised public sphere can be conducted. The Author points out the important role of the media in this process. She presents a chronology of archetype development, illustrating how they are transforming the field of political communication. The Author delineates the new eras of political communication (the fifth and sixth eras) by presenting the evolution of the communication paradigm and the role of the media. The analysis presented in the article remains within the broad spectrum of Media Linguistics.

**Keywords:** Polis, MediaPolis, the archetype of a politician, Showman, MediaEgo, HyperEgo, eras of political communication.

### 1. Introduction

The analysis presented below has been conducted in the spirit of media linguistics with elements of political-linguistic discourse in terms of the processes observed in political communication. I particularly draw attention to and emphasise this media-linguistic aspect since it is its domain to study the use of language, symbols, and designators depending on the media-communicative conditions, i. e., the factual, technical, and institutional assumptions of text production and reception (Stöckl, 2015, p. 38)<sup>1</sup>. Discourse is understood in this analysis as communicative events that set certain cognitive frameworks and

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<sup>1</sup> See more: B. Skowronek. *Mediolingwistyka. Wprowadzenie*, Kraków 2013; B. Skowronek, *Mediolingwistyka dekadę później*, Kraków 2024; D. Kępa-Figura, *Gatunek jako kategoria mediolingwistyczna a działy mediolingwistyki otwartej*, 'Prace językoznawcze', XXV/3, 2023, pp. 61–73.

schemata for the conscious shaping of perceptions and meanings in accordance with shared political goals.

This micro-analytical approach shows how, using the concept of the archetype, an analysis of the polarised political sphere can be conducted while indicating the role of the media in this process.

## 2. The concept of the archetype

Extracting a definition of the archetype from the discourse is crucial in light of the attempt to understand how the “archetypalisation” of the socio-political space affects the process of polarisation. The starting point for these considerations is to draw on Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious and the related notion of the archetype. Establishing a link between what Jung referred to as the image and the later notion of the archetype is important from the perspective of research on the concept of archetypes even today, especially since this concept is popular today in the sphere of a variety of studies, including media linguistics. Jung referred to the collective unconscious as the archaic material located in the human psyche, which is a form of inheritance acquired from the most ancient ancestors. It contained certain universal forms, which he called archetypes, images inscribed in the unconscious, to which parallel mythological images found in various cultural circles correspond (Neuman, 2023, p. 119). As he stressed, archetypes always *a priori* constitute the contents of the collective unconscious (Ibid). Mircea Eliade, using a comparative method, discovered and described the archetypes underlying all religious and cultural phenomena. The world, he stressed, reveals itself to humanity through the language of symbols, and in order to understand this language and comprehend the phenomena taking place, one must know the myths and be able to decipher the symbols (Zaręba, 2007, pp. 272–274). An archetype, therefore, as has been shown, is a time-specific symbol. It is even perceived metaphorically, most often in the form of a fable, myth, parable, or daydream. Jung distinguished, for example, the archetypes of the father, the mother, the hero, and the warrior (Spalińska, 2019, pp. 11–12).

The study of symbols in political communication (as a derivative of cultural communication) draws on the entire reservoir of axiological meanings of anthropology and sociology. Symbols are, therefore, of great importance because of their ability to identify individuals and social groups and because of their ability to create “bonds of understanding” within the group (Maj, 2009, p. 421). The world of politics, as political scientists, media scholars, and media linguists emphasise, cannot function without symbolism, connotation, figuration, ceremonies, and rituals. Intangible signs, like material ones, become the object of

reference for the recipients of content because it is through them that concrete political information is conveyed, but also a concrete stimulation of emotions, thinking, and political attitudes occurs, which in effect leads to the polarisation of the public and political sphere.

The archetype as a meta-symbol is characterised by a condensation of meaning and precisely by a polarisation of the areas of connotation (Ibid). It contains an abbreviated message but appeals to the general knowledge of the audience, their feelings and values, including religious and figurative imagery.

Having a symbolic apparatus at one's disposal and outlining an archetype with which individuals can identify appropriately or precisely through a constructed symbolic message people want to identify with helps to shape a specific political identity. It allows the creation of a so-called "political ethnomyth". (Ibid, p. 424) based on a "politics of symbols" rich in tales, myths, legends, and affects.

### 3. The ontic status of polarisation

Politics arises out of the existing plurality of subjects, which is why, as Hannah Arendt has observed, one speaks of political pluralism. The apparent contemporary drive towards polarisation is a derivative of the observation made by Carl Schmitt that we should take into account not only the assumptions about what politics should be but what it actually is. Two trends are evident here. Firstly, the importance of historical knowledge is increasing, often linked to the prominent role of contrast of background. On the other hand, in the mediated public sphere, it is a fact that all (pre-existing) boundaries are blurring: between high culture and pop culture, politics and entertainment. There is, therefore, a need to highlight turning points or lines of demarcation in the process of transition, and here archetypes appear not so much as excerpted Jungian sets of the traits that make up a given archetype but become concrete archetypal models that evolve and, in the process, constitute these turning points – showing how things actually are. In the light of communicological, media studies, and media linguistic research, these turning points can be regarded as: a. a paradigm shift in political communication, evident, *inter alia*, in the exchange of archetypes and the symbolic dimension of polarisation; b. the evolution of the eras of political communication; c. the emergence of a public sphere permeated by different communication channels – the MediaPolis. All of these form the premises for contemporary processes of political polarisation. In the broad sense, polarisation is defined as "a clear marking of differences between some concepts, views, etc." (<https://sjp.pwn.pl>) It is important to note that these differences are not necessarily antagonistic. It is a specific division of a complex whole, e.g., a social group, a system, a structure, a society, as well as a clear division in opinions,

views, or attitudes. The specificity of this division lies in the production of a binary, bi-collective, bipolar system (Ziółkowski, 2020, p. 57). It is, therefore, clear that polarisation can be understood as a state (static or dynamic), a social phenomenon, or a process of distancing between positions (Ibid, p. 56). On the other hand, as an ontological category, it also draws attention to the role of an attribute, i.e., a characteristic that defines the totality of a social group or structure. In this respect, polarisation rounds out the morphology of the totality (its structure) of social structures. A polarised structure is a structure that is clearly divided into two parts, split in half, e.g., Rulers-Governed (Ibid, p. 58). It is a process of producing an atmosphere of conflict, forging an ethos of axiology and identity for the political community in the spirit of Manichean axiology – a dialectic of contradiction (but not necessarily overt conflict). A kind of Jungian dyad of archetypes emerges. On the one hand, according to the ethical discourse of political communication, there appears the archetype of the father, the Leader against the archetype of the Enemy and the Other. According to the pragmatic discourse, we would rather say the archetype of the Leader against the archetype of the Guest<sup>2</sup>. The axiological dimension of polarisation involves the occurrence of relevant communicative contexts in the discourse that frame a whole range of social behaviours within a given structure<sup>3</sup>. They show that in the broader view, however, it is necessary to deviate from such a division of archetypes, and to shift considerations to a higher structure, showing polarisation in the light of the fluctuations of the archetype of the structure (of the public sphere), the archetype of the political party, the archetype of the politician, and the accompanying role of the media, and on the basis of these to indicate changes in political communication leading to or intensifying polarisation.

From a media linguistic perspective, we can also speak of a polarising narrative, as Ziółkowski emphasises – a mythocentric one – a simplified story about the nature and mechanics of the world (Ziółkowski, 2020, p. 69). It presupposes the emergence of a specific communication pattern that draws the audience's attention to the main assumptions of the conducted narrative (topos); an appropriate definition of sides; a labelling that disrupts the social order; a pauperisation of language – a vulgarisation of the message; and the communicative isolation of one's own camp (Ibid.). The reinforcement of these processes by the media simultaneously leads to the domination of communication channels whose rules are set by the groups involved in the discursive struggle. The evolutionary change in communication evident in the above description is part of a

2 For more on this topic, see K. Klosińska, *Etyczny i pragmatyczny Polskie dyskursy polityczne po 1989 roku*, Warsaw 2013.

3 For more on this topic see W. Paruch, *Polaryzacja aksjologiczna w wyborach europejskich w Polsce w 2019 r. Assessments in the press*, [in:] J. Nowak, L. Pokrzycka (eds.) *Wokół historii (i) komunikacji*, Lublin 2022, p. 133.

deepening polarisation and, at the same time, a certain historical regularity: a change in the reach and use of the media in terms of political action.

Table. 1. The impact of polarisation on the choice of political communication media. The media linguistic perspective

| Function of the medium | Political communication media  |
|------------------------|--|
| intended               | <b>new narrative:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- typification of communicative messages, communicative archetypes, and topoi</li> <li>- pauperisation of the language</li> <li>- new rhetoric based on the mechanisms of propaganda, populism, demagoguery, post-truth</li> <li>- emphasis on narrative identity; emotionality of the message</li> </ul> |
| broadcast              | <b>associative communication:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- inclusion of new media and (non-)new media channels in the communication process with the electorate</li> </ul>   |
| fulfilled              | <b>performative communication:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- performativity of communication channels (performative media)</li> <li>- communicative mimicry and mimesis, social media, communication platforms, email services, gossip portals, online and TV platforms, gamification, creative non-fiction literature</li> </ul>                       |

Source: Own elaboration by A. Walecka-Rynduch (2019).

It seems important to ask the question: is it possible to distinguish specific elements (symbols, topoi) of communication that have been reproduced through various communication channels in political discourse and that contain specific archetypes through which the realised function of the media influences the process of polarisation narration? It is worth mentioning that in the terms of classical rhetoric, the creator does not invent themes but “invents them in reality, memory, common places” (Korolko, 1990, p. 54). These common places are “invention topoi or sources and stores of evidence and ideas” (Ibid, p. 60). The field encompassing these concepts “may be an indefinite place – thought, or a definite place – sign (symbol, gesture, word, writing)” (Ibid). Aristotle distinguished two main types of invention topoi: common topoi – “referring to common, general issues”, and special topoi – “inherent in a particular matter, located in a particular field of knowledge” (Ibid). These are reflected in contemporary communication topoi that influence the image of a politician. The following topoi present in Polish (and other countries’) political discourse are worth mentioning: the topos of community – building one common world with the audience; the topos of the community of experiences – reference to common history, patriotism, Great Poland (a great Nation); the topos of the village and the people, living according to the laws of nature; the topos of faith, common prayer and reference to supernatural forces; the topos of the hero of the people, the

heroism of the ordinary person; the topos of family, origin, social empowerment, and being in the family, the role of mother, father; the topos of hard work, mission and service to the country and the nation. These topoi are reproduced in the polarised public sphere through the various communication channels of traditional and new media. In doing so, the following directions and types of broadcasters can be identified: top-down institutional channel – explicit; top-down institutional channel – implicit; bottom-up grass-roots channel – explicit; bottom-up institutional channel – implicit. Of particular interest to political broadcasters are the top-down explicit, top-down implicit, and bottom-up implicit channels. It is in these that the transgression of archetypes is realised, exacerbating the existing polarisation. The fourth of these, the bottom-up explicit, obviously has its respective political significance and in some cases is as important as the others.

Table 2. Communication channels in the polarisation of political discourse

|            | <b>Top-down institutional explicit channel</b>              | <b>Top-down institutional implicit channel</b>   | <b>Grass-roots institutional implicit channel</b>   | <b>Grass-roots social open channel</b>   |
|------------|---|--|---|--|
| Sender:    | Official, political institution                             | Anonymous, Material created by institutional broadcasters, political or media actors, but implying either objectivity of judgement or authorship by another actor: a political or media actor. | Anonymous, Material created by institutional broadcasters, political or media actors, but suggesting membership of a grass-roots group (implicit, by understatement an explicit group of supporters or opponents) | Unofficial, anonymous, social media participants; supporters and opponents of specific political options |
| Objective: | Phatic function, relational and emotional interest building | Phatic function, building a sense of community, community of views.  | Phatic function; building a sense of identity community, community of views, ritualisation of messages  | Phatic function; building a sense of identity community, community of views, ritualisation of messages   |

(Continued)

|                    | <b>Top-down institutional explicit channel</b>   | <b>Top-down institutional implicit channel</b>  | <b>Grass-roots institutional implicit channel</b>  | <b>Grass-roots social open channel</b>  |
|--------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Type of materials: | Commercial, persuasive materials   | Persuasive material (in favour of a political or media actor), referring to objectified content, rationalising the message.   | Persuasive material (for the benefit of a political or media actor), referring to individual content created by participants in a given communication community  | Materials individually created by participants in a given communication community   |
| Tools:             | New media: social media accounts, own (TV) channels, YouTube accounts, vlogs, animations, videos, games, memes, TikTok posts.<br>Traditional media: radio, press, television and the use of (non-) new channels in a performative way. | New media: platforms, instant messaging, YouTube accounts, vlogs, animations, videos, games, memes, TikTok posts.<br>Traditional media: radio, press, television, and the use of (non-) new channels in a performative way. | New media: platforms, instant messaging, YouTube accounts, vlogs, animations, videos, games, memes, TikTok posts.<br>Traditional media: radio, press, television and the use of (non-) new channels in a performative way. | New media: platforms, instant messaging, YouTube accounts, vlogs, animations, videos, games, memes, TikTok posts.<br>Traditional media: radio, press, television and: the use of (non-) new channels in a performative way. |
| Exhibition space:  | Traditional media, BIP, PKW. Social media, online platforms, party committee websites, social media accounts of parties and individuals, streaming channels (of parties and individuals).  | Traditional media, social media, online platforms, dedicated groups in the networking environment, communication platforms.   | Traditional media, social media, online platforms, party committee websites.   | Traditional media, social media, online platforms, dedicated groups in the networking environment, and communication platforms.   |

Source: Own elaboration.

#### 4. From the archetypal *Polis* to the archetypal *MediaPolis*

The aforementioned need to capture turning points or demarcation lines in the transition process can be seen primarily in the evolution of the *Polis* archetype to the *MediaPolis* archetype.

The archetype of the *Polis* means the state and the city, but especially “a collectivity, a community of people living together” (Oniszczyk, 2019, p. 8). The *Polis* is also seen as a form of government in the ancient Greek world that allowed equal citizens to directly oversee the government. In model terms, as emphasised by Oniszczyk, it is a community of citizens characterised by independent and self-governing citizens (Ibid.). The *Polis* was “not only a political community but also a religious, economic and social organisation” (Hansen, 2011, p. 164). The archetype of the *Polis* in the archaic and classical periods had two contexts of meaning: the *Polis* as a settlement, and the *Polis* as a community (Saplińska, 2019, p. 31). The archetype of the *Polis* was, therefore, a specific structural form in which laws were created, and certain mechanisms of power were at work. Their evolution led to the deprivation of the private sphere, indicated by Arendt, and the proliferation of a public sphere in which individuals do not act but survive. Arendt identified the ancient *Polis* with freedom and openness and contrasted it with modernity, in which society dominates the public sphere, causing distinctions and differences to become the private affair of the individual. Modern equality was possible because action, as the main type of human bond, was replaced by behaviour. In antiquity, the public domain was reserved for individuality; now it became, as Arendt emphasised, conformism (Arendt, 2000, pp. 47–48). Superimposing the optics of the development of the media on this, looking at the development of communication channels and the blurring of pre-existing boundaries in the public sphere, the archetype of the *Polis* evolved into the archetype of the *MediaPolis*, i. e., a public sphere that emerged at the interface of high and low culture (politics and entertainment) and encompassed a multiplicity of different communication channels and media, which, with its persistence, evolved into performative media. “Performative media” are media that undergo change resulting from the content presented. These include areas in both new media (platforms, portals, social media, online TV platforms, gossip portals) and traditional media (creative non-fiction, biased TV channels, converted press and radio). In these performative media, the act of repetitive political messaging based on specific symbols and communication topoi is carried out on a large scale. Thanks to the performative nature of the media in the *MediaPolis*,

the selected communication contexts will be available to the entire population, regardless of their preferred media<sup>4</sup>.

The *MediaPolis* belongs to the fifth of the so-called eras of political communication, in which communication between political broadcasters and the electorate is multidirectional and multifaceted. It is characterised by the disaggregation and fragmentation of communication, which causes or even contributes to a radicalisation and deepening of the polarisation process. These eras of political communication and the archetypes of the party, the media, and the politician realised within them were defined in the 1940s. Outlined at the end of the 20th century (1990s) by two researchers, Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh (*The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features*), the three eras of political communication highlighted how political communication is influenced by changes in postmodern (late modern) society and the media themselves. In the first era, which occurred in the 1940s and 1950s, political communication was subordinated to relatively strong and stable political institutions and beliefs. Political communication was issue-based and not processed by the media. It was also a time when mass media reception was absent. In the second period, dating to the 1960s, faced with a more mobile electorate, parties increasingly “professionalised” and adapted their messages to the values and news formats of television, which was defined as the dominant medium. Conversely, voters showed less and less party loyalty in favour of selecting different content from the media space (the tactics of receiving the news). In the third era (contemporaneous with the authors), there is an abundance of media. Political communication was shaped by independent trends: increasing professionalisation, increasing competitive pressures, anti-elitism/populism, processes of “centrifugal differentiation”, and changes in the way people perceived politics. Authors stressed that this system, full of “tensions and increasing pressures”, set new research priorities through the ubiquity and increasing reach of the media – the development of permanent campaigning; and rapid journalism with no time for reflection. The possibility of policy-making based on building a sense of identity with audiences developed, while the need for politicians to use professional institutions (political public relations) increased; the involvement of politicians in image creation increased, while the lack of interest of the electorate in current politics (disappearing voters) became apparent, probably resulting in a shift towards an increased role for so-called “attack” campaigns. (Piontek, 2011; Walecka-Rynduch, 2019; Łukasik-Turecka, 2023). The next era of communication (the fourth) is already related to modern times, i. e., the 21st century. It was evoked in 2013 by Jay Blumler during a keynote speech at a workshop on

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4 For more on this topic, see A. Walecka-Rynduch, *MediaEgo w MediaPolis. W stronę nowego paradygmatu komunikowania politycznego*, Kraków 2019.

online political communication, at which time he spoke of the so-called “Internet Age” (*The Fourth Age of Political Communication*). This phase is characterised by an even greater role and “abundance” of communication in terms of the number of media available and, consequently, the possibility of communication’s impact on audiences. This communication is characterised by a two-sided or even a “two-stage ecology of communication”. It is also emphasised that in this era: (a) the audience/viewers/receivers of political messages changed, and who, even if they were politically indifferent, were unable to avoid being “bombarded” with political content in a mediated reality; (b) the role of so-called “centrifugal diversification”, which was one of the markers of the third era of communication, increased. The development of the internet accelerated and further enhanced two-way communication through the growth of civic associations, making it easier for them to mobilise support, coordinate activities, and maintain regular contact with members and supporters. All of this contributed to the emergence of a dynamic communication sphere, offering new opportunities for expression, exchange, as well as education – hence, it is noteworthy that the fourth era of communication saw an incomparable increase in the importance of impression management and all issues related to the image-building of a politician – a political actor in the media space (the plane of personalisation, public relations, and celebritisation). The fourth era of communication was also a time of disaggregation and fragmentation of communication, which contributed to radicalisation and political polarisation, which are also the result of selective and profiled communication.

Nowadays, as I signalled above, we should consider that we are in another – fifth – era of communication, which is primarily characterised by the changing paradigm of political communication and politicians’ communication with the electorate. This era, from the point of view of political communication, will be characterised by the following premises: (a) the definition of the public sphere – the archetype of the MediaPolis; (b) the presence on the political scene of a new identity and media type of politician – the archetype of the MediaEgo; (c) a change in the way political actors communicate with the electorate – evident in the formation of a new paradigm – the archetype of media performativity.

The next upcoming era that will characterise political communication – that is, the sixth era – is one that will symbolically begin in the 2030s. This will be the time of the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on political and social action. Themes related to disinformation in the context of cognitive warfare and the influence of non-political actors on the direction of state policies. A consequence of the development of the digital society is likely to be a shift in the importance of the party archetype (no longer the party machine, but satellite opinion leaders will set the course) to the archetype of the HyperEgo politician. More on this follows.

The evolution of the eras of political communication described above, combined with changes in the archetypes of parties and politicians in the light of media developments and their impact on the deepening phenomenon of political polarisation, is schematically presented in the following table.

Table 3. Era of political communication and the evolution of archetypes constituting political polarisation

| The era | Time       | Party archetype   | The role of the media  | The archetype of the politician            |
|---------|------------|---|--|--|
| Era I   | 1940s–50s. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– strong political parties</li> <li>– strong party identification</li> <li>– a high level of confidence in political institutions</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– limited role of the media</li> <li>– the media as a transmitter of political content</li> <li>– no mass reception</li> </ul>  | Homo politicus/leader                      |
| Era II  | 1960s–80s. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– reduced party loyalty among voters</li> <li>– the gradual disappearance of party-linked communication channels (e. g., the press).</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– dominance of television</li> <li>– broadening of the political discourse through greater citizen participation</li> <li>– the intense but short-lived impact of television on the polarisation of attitudes</li> </ul>  | Homo politicus/leader                      |
| Era III | 1990s.     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the rise of populism and anti-elitism</li> <li>– development of permanent campaigns</li> <li>– professionalisation of political public relations</li> <li>– personalisation of politicians</li> <li>– voter disaffection with politicians and politics</li> <li>– increase in the number of “disappearing voters”</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– increase in media coverage and scope</li> <li>– expansion of the field of political discourse by expanding the field of information that the voter needs to know about a politician/party</li> <li>– growth of stabilised communication channels and interest in them.</li> </ul> | Political persona/politician with a “face” |

(Continued)

| The era | Time  | Party archetype  | The role of the media   | The archetype of the politician |
|---------|---|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Era IV  | First decade of the 21st century                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– decline in the importance of political parties</li> <li>– the declining role of ideological narratives</li> <li>– fragmentation of political parties</li> <li>– the rise of political leaders</li> <li>– direct (mediated by the chosen communication channel) access of politicians to the public</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the rise of digital media</li> <li>– the development of so-called distorted political communication</li> </ul>                 | Showman/celebrity               |
| Era V   | Second decade of the 21st century               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– polarisation of attitudes</li> <li>– political radicalisation</li> <li>– the rise of ideology</li> <li>– the growing importance of topoi and archetypes selection in political communication</li> <li>– populism</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the rise of performative media, and the polyphonic nature of communication channels and media.</li> </ul>                      | MediaEgo                        |
| Era VI  | The third decade of the 21st century and beyond | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– increasing political polarisation</li> <li>– increasing fragmentation</li> <li>– party fragmentation</li> <li>– the rise of non-party leaders.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the rise of AI, disinformation, and computerised propaganda in various communication channels (performative media).</li> </ul> | HyperEgo                        |

Source: Compiled from: J. G. Blumler, D. Kavanagha, *The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features*, "Political Communication", 1999, vol. 16, no 3; J.G. Blumler, *The Fourth Age of Political Communication*, "Politiques de communication", 2016, vol. 6, no 1; D. Piontek, *Komunikowanie polityczne i kultura popularna. Tabloidyżacja informacji o polityce*, Poznań 2011; A. Łukasik-Turecka, *Teoretyczne aspekty komunikowania politycznego* [in:], *Komunikowanie Polityczne w teorii i praktyce*, ed. P. Kuca, W. Furman, Rzeszów 2023; A. Walecka-Rynduch, *MediaEgo w MediaPolis. W stronę nowego paradygmatu komunikowania politycznego*, Kraków 2019.

## 5. From the *Homo Politicus* archetype to the *HyperEgo* archetype

The evolution of the public sphere outlined above and the change in the archetype of political parties took place at the same time as the evolution of the archetype of the politicians themselves. The development of the media, and with it the development of political communication, political marketing, and political

public relations, has also impacted these seemingly enduring archetypes. The basis for the functioning of each of the politician archetypes is the construction of a community of world and language with others. Such activity is naturally a condition for “full understanding” between the sender and receiver of a message. The sender of the communication tries to create the semblance of some “We” that will include him/her together with the recipients. This gives a sense of the existence of a common world of experiences and values and the use of previously tested and accepted linguistic conventions and signs (Barańczak, 1975, p. 52). This procedure is intended to emphasise bonding and solidarity, fraternity, and the immediacy of contact (Ożóg, 2005, p. 96). Each archetype expresses the subconscious longings of many voters, who often do not consider whether a given promise can be fulfilled (Ibid, p. 90). The archetypes presented below, from the point of view of the “poetics of reception”, have a conative and essentially persuasive function. This is because the sender seeks to have a real impact on the recipient’s thinking and behaviour (Barańczak, 1975, p. 47). Each archetype has three components: membership of a communicative community (collective subjectivity), axiological identity (mental, cultural, symbolic, ideological), and a set of communicative practices and skills (Poprawa, 2012, p. 94). The resulting strong socialisation results in specific archetypes (in their time) playing specific roles (neo-tribal), changing “stage costumes” (Maffesoli, 2008, p. 123). New audiences are thus built on the pattern of new tribes. The time-appropriate creation of a model (archetype) politician constitutes a kind of “manual of reality”. And thanks to the role of the media in each of the communication eras demonstrated above, it is possible, referring to Howard Kurtz, to continually expand the field of what the audience needs to know and through which medium this information will be delivered to them (Kurtz, 1993, p. 144). The play of archetypes creates and at the same time polarises reality.

### 5.1 The Archetype of *Homo Politicus*

This archetype is realised on the basis of considerations, traditional in the literature, of shaping the image and role of the politician from the perspective of political marketing (mechanisms external to the politician). It is traditionally linked to so-called electoral marketing. This approach to the philosophy of politics is based on the assumption that the actors in political life, particularly political parties and candidates for the highest public offices, are guided primarily by concern for the needs of society (or at least its majority). The competition of politicians, and their programmes and strategies in the political market for the votes of the electorate, is a prerequisite for a democratic marketing policy (Jabłoński, 2009, p. 66 et seq.). Two processes can be identified that have

served to develop this archetype. The first is the development of television. According to Sartori's theory, the televisual message has generated significant changes in social life. Television as a provider of entertainment and leisure caused the evolution of humanity, the emergence of *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 2007), and with it, the *homo politicus* archetype. *Homo ludens*, a human being capable of having fun and loving fun, in turn combined fun with the role of the media referred to in the Second Era of political communication, allowed for the creation of relevant performances in which the *homo politicus* archetype was established. This aspect of television's influence is commonly referred to as the spectacle. The role of television has caused a kind of contextual shift and awakened the need to shape the image of the politician in the context of an existing audience. This archetype incorporated psychological, political, social and communicative aspects into the interpretative spectrum. In the following years, these became the main indicators of archetypal change.

## 5.2 The Persona Archetype

The archetype of persona is based on two phenomena (which have been framed by academic theories): the media visibility theory of John Thompson and the political theory of persona of Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. The former is related to the category of publicness, which can be analysed from the traditional form related to the need to be present in a shared public space to the need to function in a media space. Based on Thompsonian archetypal theory, media visibility management is described as a political art. Thompson sees media visibility management as an old political art (Thompson, 2006, p. 137). The rise of the media has meant that political leaders have had to focus increasingly on presenting their persona to audiences that previously did not require their presence in time and space (Ibid, p. 138.). This phenomenon is addressed by the second of the theories constituting the archetype – the political persona, which is concerned with the creation of a “persona”, i.e., a screen image of a person appearing in the media. It draws attention to the created symbolism of the character, emphasising that there is no correspondence between the actual personality traits of the persona appearing in the media and those presented to the viewer. The persona is thus an illusion of a direct relationship with the performer, a story that is broadcast by the media (Horton&Wohl, 1956, p. 215). The archetype of the persona, according to Horton and Wohl's assumptions, is seen as a typical and indigenous figure of the social or political stage who is presented by the media and who, in order to function in the media, must fulfil the following determinants: to identify with the fictional role he or she plays in the theatre; to create and maintain a sense of “intimacy” between himself or herself

and the crowd of the audience, e. g., through the use of colloquial, easy, understandable language for all audiences. “The persona takes on the role of an ‘actor’ who, whether playing himself or acting in a fictional role – is seen to be involved with others, often moving into the position of ‘spectator’ – then using the direct mode of speech, talking as if he were talking personally and privately” (Ibid, p. 217).

### 5.3 The *Showman/Celebrity* Archetype

The archetype of the political persona outlined above was based on the creation of an image, an idea of what a politician should be and how they should function. This type of politics was referred to as the “age of image fabrication” (Newman, 2005, p. 149).

The celebrity archetype is another way of influencing audiences that is used. However, this one has the least (of all the others) polarising effect. It is based on a system for valorising meanings and communication (Michalczyk, 2022, p. 53). A celebrity is a well-known person, a kind of star who has a clearly defined and so-called ‘publishable’ personality. Stanislaw Michalczyk stated that the emergence of this archetype is “the result of the development of a consumer society, in which there is an increasing expectation of spectacular events in every area of life. This fosters the creation of events and persons of questionable importance, but who satisfy expectations”. They are the result of media creation caused by the desire for profit. This archetype was used to reach groups of audiences (the electorate) generally uninterested in politics as a process but for whom the persona itself, with whom one could identify in some way, was important. Hence, this archetype was predominantly pursued by characters from the world of entertainment who wanted to appear in the world of politics. A strategy embedded in this archetype is the use of affective instruments to manage the will of voters.

### 5.4 *MediaEgo* Archetype

The MediaEgo politician construct is distinctive, also in terms of political communication, type of political actor, another after the politician “with a face”, the image showman and the celebrity (Michalczyk, 2022, pp. 50–53), which pursues certain indicators: a. media focus; using communication strategies and techniques to promote one’s own image while using many different communication channels; c. Recognition building – because he is unknown to the wider public, he needs to gain the trust of voters in a relatively short period of time; d. Trust building – use of elaborate forms of storytelling to present his persona against the

background of political and historical events; e. Emotional component – appeal to ontic values, use of appropriate communication topos to drive the narrative (Walecka-Rynduch, 2019). Thus, its distinctive features are: “new”, “identity”, “personal”, and “media”. He is a politician completely submerged in the world of the media, who mainly builds his political position in them. The MediaEgo, more than the representatives of the other archetypes, refers to the entertainment/fun formula of spectacle/presentation signalled in the Second Era of Communication, according to the Goffmanian principle of appearing before others. This archetype of the politician has the ease of transgression and of using all available media (of a performative nature) for its actions.

### 5.5 The *HyperEgo* Archetype

The evolution of the MediaEgo politician archetype into the HyperEgo archetype is a natural consequence signalled in the analysis of the archetypes of the public sphere. With the development of the media and their increasing role, with the simultaneous change of social reality (the Sixth Era of communication indicated), there will be an intensification of the phenomena of political polarisation, fragmentation, and fragmentation of political parties, with a simultaneous increase in the importance of non-party leaders. In terms of the role of the media, we will see a significant increase in the importance of AI, disinformation, and computerised propaganda, with the further development of the performative nature of communication channels. The distinctive feature of this archetype of politician will be a kind of inversion of the political-media relationship. The HyperEgo type will use their own media to promote themselves. Now, politicians (or opinion leaders, since, as has been pointed out) this archetype will be realised among politicians *per se* as well as among non-party leaders, who will nevertheless influence political orientations through the shaping of their media and communication channels. The ability to use disinformation and computerised propaganda will also be important. Deprived of the value of intersubjective verifiability, political reality will become fully polarised and fragmented.

## 6. Summary and conclusions

The theoretical analysis presented in this paper is based on a schematic view of three elements that can be considered constitutive of the contemporary media-saturated public sphere. The conclusion that emerges first is the apparent relationship between the processes of deepening and expanding political polarisation and the existing relationship of the three elements: the archetype of the

party, the archetype of the politician, and the changing role of the media and the phenomena and processes emerging in its background. The eras of political communication cited in the paper clearly illustrate how this relationship has changed over the decades and how it has influenced various aspects of polarisation, especially in its ontic dimension.

The deepening polarisation has changed the pattern of the use of political communication media and has led to a specific pattern of communication that draws the audience's attention to the main assumptions of the narrative being pursued. To this can also be added changes in the appropriate definition of parties, the use of labelling that disrupts the social order, the deepening pauperisation of language – the vulgarisation of the message and the communicative isolation of one's own political camp (see Table 1). In addition, this process has also highlighted changes in the construction of broadcast communication channels, fragmenting the structure of both general and grassroots broadcasters (see Table 2).

The interplay of the archetypes used, and the accompanying media have shown, first of all, what their role is in the process of polarisation, but also, through the presented scheme of eras of political communication (Table 3), the successive change of all elements is visible. Therefore, archetypes' role is the dominant premise in attempts to analyse political polarisation.

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## Bipolar trap with no way out – political polarisation in the opinion of Polish journalists

### Abstract

The media are a fundamental element of democracy, as they constitute a key instance of the public sphere and create a space for public debate, thus integrating society. This task is difficult to achieve in a situation of political polarisation. The strategy adopted by the media can deepen or eliminate existing polarisation, as the media create the language of public debate. The chapter presents the results of in-depth interviews (IDI) conducted with 13 Polish journalists from mainstream media in May 2023 as part of the Jean Monnet Chair Project, “Media Freedom, Trust, and Transparency in the European Union” (subproject: Political Polarisation and Media Credibility). The research results clearly showed that Polish journalists are fully aware of the seriousness of the situation and the resulting threats. However, the existing market conditions and the logic of polarisation itself make it difficult for them to see a way out of this situation without systemic support, including legal and economic solutions, which depend on the will of political actors whose actions are one of the causes of the political division of Polish society and media system.

**Keywords:** political polarisation, media polarisation, integrative function of the media, journalists’ research

## 1. Introduction

The media are a fundamental element of democracy, as they constitute a key instance of the public sphere and fulfil essential social and political functions. Among others, they inform citizens, control the authorities, and create a space for public debate, thus integrating society (Schulz, 2011, p. 54). The latter task becomes a particular challenge in a situation of political polarisation, which is not indifferent to the conditions in which the media operate (Müller, 2018). In turn, the strategy of action and communication adopted by the media can deepen or eliminate existing polarisation, as the media are a highly relevant actor, co-creating the space and language of public debate (Vlasic, 2004, pp. 33–43).

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The results of the MPM report for Poland, published by the EUI Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, showed that Poland indicates a very high level of risk to the political independence of the media. This indicator is influenced by the method and scope of financing public media in Poland. According to Klimkiewicz: “between 2016 and 2022, PSM’s funding from the state budget has grown more than six times thus being highly disproportional in comparison with other news media in Poland (...) Data for different pro-vaccination campaigns carried out through 2020–2022 suggest that some media actors had significant advantage over the others, while media with a critical stance towards the government were completely excluded from the funding” (Klimkiewicz, 2023, p. 9). In turn, the Reuters Institute Report 2023 indicates Poland as a country with one of the highest avoiding news indicators (44% with an upward trend), which indicates a strengthening of the selective media consumption attitude among media consumers in Poland, who avoid certain topics in media coverage. According to this report, the media in Poland enjoy relatively low trust (Polish media users’ trust in information is only 42%), and the attitude towards the media is characterised by higher levels of criticism, which “combined with the post-pandemic headwinds and government pressure, this has deepened the long-standing crisis in independent news outlets” (Newman et al., 2023, p. 90). Previous reports also indicate a high level of political polarisation in Poland (Newman et al., 2020, p. 78).

In this context, it is worth determining how the issue of polarisation is perceived by journalists, who are the creators of the language of the mainstream media and, through this, also a political public debate. This chapter presents the results of in-depth individual interviews (IDI) conducted in May 2023 with Polish journalists as part of the *Jean Monnet Chair Project Media Freedom, Trust and Transparency in the European Union* (subproject: *Political Polarisation and Media Credibility*)<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. The Project *Political Polarisation and Media Credibility* – research methodology

The project aimed to analyse the relationship between the deep political polarisation of Polish society, clearly visible also in the media sphere, and the credibility of the Polish media and the level of trust their recipients have in them from the perspective of Polish journalists. The study included two stages: a detailed analysis of the results of public opinion surveys regarding various areas

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1 Project website: <https://freemed.wzks.uj.edu.pl/research-activities/jmc-research-activities/research-agnieszka-szymanska/>.

of trust in the public life of Polish society (including trust in the media and opinions on their credibility) and IDI interviews with representatives of various types of media.

### 2.1. IDI as a research method

The in-depth individual interview (IDI) is a classic qualitative method successfully used and applied in the discipline of media studies (see Jabłonowski & Gackowski, 2012, p. 21; Jabłonowski & Jakubowski, 2014, p. 22). Research of this kind is exploratory. Exploratory cognitive activity as a qualitative procedure has an interpretive character and is close to an idiographic explanation. Thus, it is in the tradition of hermeneutical cognition (Sztompka, 2007, p. 41). Its aim is not to establish the existence of a hard dependence or correlation, which can be expressed in the form of a verifiable or falsified research hypothesis, but to empirically search for new dependencies by deepening knowledge about the already established dependence, better recognition of the circumstances accompanying its course, etc. (Krauz-Mozer, 2005, p. 48). The results of the research discussed below are, therefore, an adequate basis for deepening the reflection of the role of the media in the situation of political polarisation.

Due to the specific nature of the journalists as a professional group, an in-depth individual interview is a very useful research method in the area of media studies. However, it is complex and very demanding in terms of the organisation of the research task. Once conducted, an interview cannot be repeated or supplemented, and journalists themselves are generally not easy respondents. They are alert, have experience in the interview situation (which Bukowski calls ‘a conversational episode’ in the first chapter of this monograph), and are skilled speakers who use an extensive linguistic code. To eliminate the threats mentioned by Bukowski in the first chapter, it is necessary to carefully prepare a list and order of the questions within the interview guideline, to take care of their right form (open questions) and plan the appropriate placement of specific control questions in the interview scenario (Szymańska & Köhler, 2018). Details of the research procedure used in the project are presented below.

### 2.2. Research objective, research questions and sample selection

The first stage of the research aimed to identify the initial situation and assess the state of public debate in Poland during the second term of the Law and Justice government. The second stage of the research, the results of which are presented in this chapter, included in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with Polish

publishers and journalists working in various types of media, including news portals, local and national dailies, weeklies, radio and television stations (both public and commercial), and fact-checking media. Altogether, 13 interviews were conducted. The composition of the respondent group is presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Structure of the research sample

| Respondent               | Professional experience |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|                          | 1                       | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Beata Biel               | X                       |   |   |   |   |   |   | X | X |
| Jacek Gądek              |                         | X | X |   |   |   |   |   | X |
| Jonasz Jasnorzewski      |                         | X |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |
| Piotr Jędrzejewski       |                         |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |
| Marek Kęskrawiec         |                         |   | X | X |   |   |   | X | X |
| Piotr Kozanecki          |                         | X |   |   |   |   |   |   | X |
| Michał Kuźmiński         |                         |   |   | X |   |   |   |   | X |
| Marcin Kubat             |                         |   |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |
| Bartłomiej Maziarz       |                         |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |
| Michał Płoszaj           |                         |   |   |   |   |   | X | X |   |
| Mariusz Marcin Pulit     |                         |   |   |   | X |   |   |   | X |
| Paulina Socha-Jakubowska |                         | X | X | X |   |   | X | X | X |
| Monika Szafrńska         | X                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

Source: own elaboration. Professional experience in: 1. fact-checking media, 2. news portals, 3. local and national dailies, 4. weeklies, 5. public radio, 6. commercial radio, 7. public TV, 8. commercial TV, 9. other (different types of independent media activity).

The table does not include any indication of the affiliation to the specific editorial office, as most of the journalists invited to the interviews have extensive professional experience in various types of media (this was a key criterion for selecting the sample), and their answers often included references to working in editorial offices other than their current employers. By the standards adopted in the research, the statements and opinions obtained during individual interviews are discussed below, maintaining the anonymity of their authors. Quantifiers regarding the type of medium used in the evaluation of the statements obtained are generally used separately so as not to facilitate the identification of the author of the quoted statement. The adoption of such standards was necessary to recruit the respondents for the research.

The interviews took the form of *semi-structured interviews*. The interview guideline used in the research was composed of 12 questions in total (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Interview guideline

| Interview questions |   |
|---------------------|---|
| 1.*                 | What is today the greatest threat resulting from such a deep polarisation of Polish society?  |
| 2.                  | What are the causes of polarisation of Polish media?  |
| 3.*                 | Who loses and who gains in connection with the polarisation of Polish media?  |
| 4.*                 | How should the media function in a polarised society? What is their role?   |
| 5.                  | In 2013, editor Paweł Lisicki announced the EDITOR'S DECALOGUE, point 6 of which reads:<br><b>Guard your own identity.</b><br><i>Identity is probably the key word for understanding what journalists are/should be today. In most Western societies, the fronts of the culture war run across each other, the war between defenders of old traditions and supporters of further emancipation. (...) The winners on the market will be those magazines and those journalists who conclude the culture war and can be the most important voice in the formation of environments.</i><br>How do you assess his postulate? |
| 6.                  | What is the relationship between media polarisation and recipients' trust in the message?   |
| 7.                  | How does polarisation affect the credibility of Polish media?   |
| 8.*                 | How can the media mitigate existing divisions?  |
| 9.                  | Which media have the greatest impact on deepening polarisation?   |
| 10.*                | How does media polarisation affect the way journalistic materials are prepared and the work of a journalist?  |
| 11.*                | What is the biggest challenge in the work of a journalist in Poland today?  |
| 12.*                | What may be the consequences of the current situation in the future for the media and society?  |

Source: own elaboration.

This chapter analyses and presents selected answers that refer to threats resulting from political polarisation and its manifestations, including, in particular, the features of the language of public debate, postulates regarding what journalists believe to be appropriate communication strategies, the possibilities of the media mitigating existing social divisions, as well as ideas about possible solutions to the existing situation. Most of the quotes below come from answers connected to the questions marked in the table with (\*).

These research results were intended to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What kind of threats are journalists aware of in the context of existing political polarisation in Poland?

**RQ2:** How does, in the opinion of journalists, political polarisation manifest itself in the language of public debate?

**RQ3:** What do journalists think is necessary to alleviate existing divisions? Are the media in a position to alleviate existing social divisions?

Answering these questions allows us to understand what barriers limit the Polish media in fulfilling their integration function in the current situation.

### 3. Poland's political polarisation in the opinion of Polish journalists – research results

#### 3.1. Awareness of threats resulting from deep polarisation

When asked about the threats resulting from political polarisation, Polish journalists indicated many aspects of social and political life. Respondents indicated a far-reaching impairment of public debate, which, by reinforcing extreme political attitudes and deepening social and political divisions, prevents dialogue and the development of political compromise and thus destroys democracy.

This impairment of public debate, observed by the journalists, means that Poles are losing the ability to talk with each other and to think critically, and public debate is becoming poorer because the number of topics that must be avoided is constantly growing:

“[Polarisation] makes conversation very difficult. It causes an increase in the number of topics that are not discussed, both among friends and family. If the temperature of the dispute around a chosen topic is high, the possibility of conversation disappears”;

“The all society loses. Because it is not forced to think. It is given a ready-made thesis on a plate (...), and if it does not reach for another source, it will receive and indeed receive a cut-out image of the world”;

“We are losing the ability to think critically from a sober assessment of the situation and, as it were, also verifying reality. I think that is the greatest threat”.

The price that society pays for polarisation is also very high; basic interpersonal relationships suffer:

“This translates into the way families function, in society in general, that people argue very easily now”;

“[A manifestation of polarisation is] Family quarrels. Some conflicts and skirmishes between acquaintances and friends. This is, in my opinion, political polarisation, which is transferred to the social sphere between contacts of the closest”;

“[Polarisation], of course, harms recipients' emotions because we often hear that people talk mainly about politics in Polish families. During Sunday dinner, what you saw, in

which TV program... also these TV narratives themselves also cause deep discussions and divisions in families. I think that this emotional zone is critical here”;

“Both in the journalistic world and society (...), we have simply stopped being a community, we have stopped looking for what unites us, we only look for what divides us and even if, I don’t know, we agree on 90 per cent, we disagree on 10 per cent, we will turn those 10 into a reason for war, a war with bombs and heavy artillery, I observe this all the time”.

The public debate is also impaired in the opinion of the respondents because the information is replaced by emotion, and this is facilitated by a negative dichotomy (WE versus THEY) around which the narrative is constructed:

“We are unable to conduct a reliable substantive public debate, it is increasingly emotional, focused not on convincing, but on defeating, on literally ploughing over the adversary, who has ceased to be an adversary, because he has already become an enemy”;

“The entire political struggle today and the entire political dispute is heated; it is a negative dispute. That is, it is built around the thesis that ‘we’ are anti-‘they’ (...) parties are less and less likely to have a positive program for their voters, for citizens. They focus their attention, focus their support around being ‘anti’-opponents, to be in opposition to something, and not as part of support for some positive idea. This is probably the greatest threat resulting from polarisation”.

In addition, information is currently fighting an unequal battle also with opinion, which has imperceptibly, yet on a massive scale, replaced information in the media discourse:

“Publicism has reached the news media, somewhat imperceptibly, because news journalists have become commentators in their supposed news materials, and this is a threat. Instead of getting a clear report and facts, people get an opinion”.

The media discourse is also very fragmented and focused on some less critical elements of events; it omits many topics, which in effect leads to the recipients being uninformed:

“(...) society is uninformed – this is the least characteristic adjective to describe the current situation. At this point, people are interested in what others are discussing. They do not delve into matters. They do not look for reasons. They do not read into them. They only repeat what they heard somewhere, or someone told them”;

“There has been a strong thematic narrowing of various things; certain phenomena are not noticed at all because everything is subordinated to politics”.

Political polarisation has also led to a rather absurd situation in which journalists are not allowed to judge and criticise the option that is closer to them as harshly as their political opponents (the threat of an offensive accusation of so-called symmetry), and most right-wing media deal exclusively with criticism of the

opposition, although the political weight of its actions is much smaller than those of the government. All this leads to the disorientation of society:

“There is already such a level of activism among journalists (and I believe that a journalist and an activist are two completely different professions and should not be combined) that it is enough to deviate from this anti-PiS orthodoxy by 5 inches and you end up in a box marked ‘symmetry’, and this paralyses some journalists”;

“In the 90s, when I started working in the media (...), the government was attacked from every side. It doesn’t matter in which editorial office you worked (...) and, who was at the head of the government and from which political option. We were simply checking. However, in this perspective of 20 years, it has happened that some media check everything, and others publish everything. They are a propaganda mouthpiece because they either want to be on the side that is right for the government or on the side that is against the government. This worries me because now, as a media recipient, I don’t know where the truth is”.

The way the debate is conducted in Poland also encourages the strengthening of extreme and intolerant attitudes:

“[Polarisation causes] the arousal or stimulation of such extreme moods, i. e., homophobic and transphobic, and others”;

“Fueling these extreme moods is a threat in many, many areas (...) I mean women’s rights and minority rights”;

“These two sides are simply radicalising, so I see also this as a danger”;

“We are participating in the public debate less and less consciously, and it is becoming more and more full of pathologies and littered”.

The shape of the current public debate and the deepening political polarisation are evidence, in the opinion of the respondents, of the progressive erosion of the democratic system in Poland and its dismantling:

“Since 2015, we have been living in a country where the political system has been changing in real terms, moving away from the democratic system and approaching an autocratic system. This (...) gives polarisation a fundamental dimension. The current state of polarisation of Polish society has a direct impact on its future”;

“This is destroying the foundations of democracy as a system that relies on reaching an agreement on the shape of the country in which we all live. This is a fundamental threat to democracy. The lack of dialogue between the parties to the dispute is a fundamental threat to democracy”;

“If we have a situation where the media only starts to care about their side [political option], then in a sense they are abdicating from this function of being an element of the democratic system as such”;

“We are no longer able to develop solutions that serve all citizens in the state”;

“We are losing as a society, we are losing as a nation, and I think we are also losing as a country. Because politics is constantly being conducted not based on what good can be done, what solutions can be improved, and what will be good for the country. Only on solutions that will allow one option, one or the other, to gain and maintain power”;

“This kind of debate serves populists who always present the simplest solutions to complex problems but never solve these problems”.

This dichotomous, polarised public debate also destroys the sense of security of journalists, who are often the target of direct, personal attacks:

“This polarisation increasingly often ends in attacks against journalists, let’s call it from the ‘other’ political side. These attacks come from both the media environment and the recipients, Internet users, so I think that this is also a loss for the security of a journalist’s work. Democracy also loses because this public debate is, of course, very limited by this strong polarisation”.

Another threat to democracy is the withdrawal of the media from the implementation of the control function of the government:

“Some media have completely got rid of their role as watchdogs”;

“We have editorial offices that today do not undertake this task at all. Or they see their role as ‘watchdogs’ in keeping an eye on those who are not in power today or are not leading state institutions”.

This, in turn, leads directly to opening the field for disinformation:

“The recipient’s lack of trust in information is just a breeding ground for disinformation. It is also a breeding ground for the expansion of this very polarisation, for the growth of social tensions and this growing phenomenon of everyone’s loss of trust in simply everything”.

In this way, polarisation, by destabilising the internal situation, favours external actors, including Russia, and poses a serious threat to Poland’s security:

“This is a beneficial situation for anyone interested in destabilising democracy in the country. And who today wants to destabilise Western democracies? Well, it is quite obvious. So such joyful submission to polarisation, also through the media, somewhere, in the end, does the work for those who would otherwise have to try very hard to put us in conflict like this”;

“Manipulation and management through conflict is easy to see, so to speak, in the doctrines of great empires since the Roman Empire, and today’s great empires also willingly use it. I don’t know if it was clear or if I should specify that I mean Russia”.

Such a strong intensity of the debate with the rhetoric of threats and dangers, which are supposed to arouse fear and thus mobilise society to choose which side of the political barricade causes, in the long run, anaesthesia of society and

devaluation of the importance of the media as an important element of the early warning system:

“People are sceptical about the information that is being provided. Ultimately, it may be that citizens are less attentive to various types of warnings that are being provided by the media”;

“We will lose the safety device that would warn us about various bad things”.

Deep political polarisation ultimately contributes to the decline of – already low in Poland – public trust not only in the media but also in other important social and political institutions and members of society in each other:

“The growing lack of trust in public life institutions, broadly understood, as well as public life figures, starting with politicians through state institutions such as the Sejm, Senate, state offices, various types of institutions such as the police, but also the media, i. e., such an all-encompassing state of lack of trust. But also social tensions, leading to an increase in hate speech and, unfortunately, also violent behaviour. I hope that if anything were to happen (I hope it won't, but if it did), I would like to believe that it would only be verbal, linguistic manifestations of aggression, however, the growing polarisation can unfortunately end in different ways. So I am primarily concerned about this growing lack of trust, the growth of such aversion between people”;

“We live in times of a lack of trust in Poland. If we look, this trust in public life institutions is one of the lowest in Europe”.

Very disturbing phenomena directly related to political polarisation, which are further enhanced by social media algorithms, are, in the opinion of respondents, information bubbles and echo chambers:

“Recipients are less well informed and do not know what to believe. Or they believe only one side. This is a problem that identity journalism causes”;

“Lack of reliable information means closing yourself in a bubble”;

“Each information bubble often has its media, its publicists, its journalists, reporters, bloggers and so on”;

“It's partly the fault of social media. They make it a lot easier, the algorithms make us stay in our groups”;

“At some point, this becomes a kind of closed circle. That is, if the media do not try to confront their recipients with slightly different visions of the world (...) that differ from such bubble beliefs, then they somewhat lock themselves in an echo chamber... And this circle closes. Because if we do not have an ear for the other side, we do not know what is going on there, we do not try to understand it, we do not try to start some kind of dispute, polemic, I do not even want to say dialogue with it. Then we start living in two separate realities. And each side of the dispute begins to have its vision of the world”;

“People start to lock themselves more in their information bubbles because of this. They do not have a pluralism of views or even a pluralism of certain knowledge”;

“I am sometimes shocked at how much this process can format a specific person’s brain. After a few years, a person speaks the narrative of one television. And there is no chance to engage in any discussion with him”.

Political polarisation and information bubbles are compounded by economic problems that have plagued the Polish media market for years. This, in turn, makes the current situation, according to the journalists surveyed, a trap with no way out:

“The level of journalism in Poland has probably never been particularly high (although I don’t have the impression that it is very bad either), but it has fallen in recent times. This is related to the pauperisation of this environment, which promotes polarisation”;

“This is the first element, the financial one, the most mundane one, for which journalism is getting worse and worse. People are simply earning less and less. The second element is that everything here is politics. And I observe this not only on the right-wing side but unfortunately also on the side that pretends to be tolerant and liberal”;

“The media themselves are formatting themselves for people who are often radicalised, polarised. As a result, the media themselves are polarised and very radicalised, because in the end, they have become prisoners of their recipients in this shrinking market of media readers”;

“This is a trap that the media will chase themselves into in such a bipolar world, that at some point they will become hostages of their recipients”;

“Gaining new recipients today and expanding the readership of portals is very difficult nowadays. And that’s because they are perceived as on the right or left side”.

According to the respondents, it should be remembered that political polarisation has a deep economic dimension. The specificity of the Polish media market, consisting of the extremely significant importance of advertisements coming from the state institutions sector (see Klimkiewicz above), means that economic issues are very conducive to this polarisation:

“For the media, this is a bad phenomenon, but there are also media for which this polarisation is good. Precisely in financial terms, because they can achieve better results than if it were not there. Thanks to the fact that they very clearly stand on the chosen side, which is the ruling party at a given moment, they have a chance to get more advertising, sponsorship and other various types of funding. Then this polarisation from such a business point of view, or ‘protection of the interests’ of a given medium, can be beneficial. At the same time, it would be very difficult for me to find any reason why polarisation could be good for the media recipient. For the recipient, I would not find such positive aspects at all”;

“The current situation de facto means that the government is pumping large amounts of money into the pockets of specific people, publicists, who present views close to those of the government. To sum up, a publicist has the right to fight for his worldview and lead some movement, but it should not come down to the government giving someone money for expressing some views. Because if you pay, then such a person who receives money may want to format their views according to the expectations of the government. Such a process seems natural – to enforce the loyalty of publicists or some social activists”.

### 3.2. Manifestations of political polarisation – the language of the public and media debate

In the opinion of Polish journalists, the language of political debate is a clear indicator of the existing deep political polarisation and its instrument. By analogy, the evaluation of their statements also included both dimensions. That is an indication of specific and deeply disturbing elements of the language of public and media debate, which the respondents emphasised in their opinions, as well as the language of their statements. The respondents’ answers included phrases indicating their full awareness of the existing divisions and their nature.

And so, the journalists surveyed were concerned about the presence of the rhetoric of conflict and even culture war or simply war, the bipolar world, excessively charged language, especially hate speech, excessive emotions, etc. At the same time, many interviewees emphasised that the journalistic description of the world should be made using the most neutral language possible. Among the many interesting formulations obtained during the interviews, a metaphor that appeared in the statements of several different interviewees deserves to be distinguished. It used the figure of the *political church*, which gathers *believers* instead of ordinary supporters. Another interesting linguistic device one of the interviewees used was the term *waiter journalism*.

In the context of the rhetoric of war, journalists link it to the way identity journalism is practised, the presence of which they considered common and responsible for the propaganda nature of media coverage in Poland:

“If a journalist joins the culture war, then this is already ‘identity journalism’”;

“We have too much ‘identity journalism’”;

“This ‘identity journalism’ is very strong today”;

“There has been a clash, one could say – a media war – between two sides, as if on a media pitch. A battle that has caused the recipients, unfortunately, not to receive pure information, but information already with a thesis, propaganda like”;

“It seems to me that it is an army, simply. Such an editorial office has a general, a captain, and soldiers. It looks a bit like that. There may be some discussion about how to make some material, but how it should be made is known. And now, each editorial office has its army. In addition, both of these armies have been fighting each other recently. So some kind of a media war with this polarisation has started, and there is no mercy there”;

“It is close cooperation, and it seems to me that it is based on such a military principle, such a level of organisation that you cannot even stick your nose out of something there. Because if someone does something not the way they want, there is an immediate reaction to it”.

In the group of respondents, several journalists defined this type of affective relationship using the term of a *political church* addressed to its *believers*:

“To (...) have their own permanent, loyal fans, listeners, recipients, lovers, followers, whatever they want to call them, the media co-create their ‘political church’”;

“Two ‘churches’ are being built... polarisation is causing the construction of two such churches gathering believers”;

“The media are creating their die-hard followers”;

“Today we have people who believe fervently in what TVP, for example, says and people who believe fervently in what TVN says”;

“Journalists are like ‘prophets’; this is often what causes people to sign up for a specific church or order of one or the other option”.

The journalist who used the term *waiter journalism* in his statement defined it in opposition to qualitative journalism, which neutrally presents both worldviews while maintaining respect for both sides:

“I would like there to be as much of this content, such journalists and such conversations [qualitative journalism] as possible. And not so-called ‘waiter journalism’, i. e., where you serve questions on a plate, someone just drinks the coffee, says what he wants, and does not respond to other questions. The waiter leaves. Perhaps there is even still payment for it; I hope not”.

Among the problems with the language of public debate, journalists also pointed to excessively marked language, the dominance of emotions and hate speech, and clumsy, devoid-of-finesse propaganda:

“Compared to the communist period, Telewizja Polska [Polish Public Television] is sometimes even ‘worse’ than it was then. They use similar techniques, spoiling the attitude of Poles towards the European Union, towards the Polish-German relations that have been built for many years, terribly inciting against refugees, especially those with different skin colour”;

“(...) I mean inciting, I mean frightening, I mean stoking moods that can be dangerous”;

“I mean the spreading hate speech and stoking anti-minority moods”;

“We can only discuss such major topics as LGBT, as anti-Semitism in such an extreme way”;

“Everything is emotional”;

“We are at such a very, very affective level”;

“Heating emotions around a dispute makes the dispute cease to be substantive, and becomes a matter of life and death, becomes a matter of dignity, becomes a matter of survival”;

“For society to function well, we need to abandon this war rhetoric and return to the rhetoric of openness to others, openness to another person, to another recipient, to a person who has a different identity, a different worldview, different views on several different issues”.

According to many respondents, social media is also responsible for the spread of many linguistic pathologies related to political polarisation:

“You already know everything about the fight against journalism, about journalists’ ‘camps’. It’s happening in the real world and the virtual world of applications. Twitter is a kind of journalistic command centre; there are journalistic scuffles there, trolls get involved, and it’s a big information swamp if you can call it that”.

Respondents were also concerned about the practice of focusing media attention on details of reported events that do not contribute much to the debate, which only serve to fuel the conflict. In their statements, they also drew attention to acts of intentional disinformation of recipients or conjuring reality:

“Nowadays, you don’t need too many substantive arguments to prove that someone else is an idiot. I have the impression that earlier (although I don’t want it to sound like journalism was particularly outstanding before), you had to be well prepared to write a text, you had to have more substantive arguments”;

“It’s like grinding the same thing over and over again, constantly relying on emotions, some idiot from PiS says something, and they grind all day long. And there is a whole set of more complicated topics that you would have to delve into to describe them”.

A separate category of respondents’ answers referred to the language used to describe bipolar reality and provided interesting remarks regarding the observed strategies of attributing bad intentions and ill will to political opponents:

“We perceive the world as bipolar, as divided into the forces of good and evil”;

“There are two worlds. One Poland, one ruling party, two political camps and two journalistic camps. Very strongly fighting each other”;

“Politics has ceased to be a dispute over some idea, it has become a dispute over firmly established boundaries, where there is ‘us’ and ‘them’. And they are completely... well, the process of dehumanising political opponents has intensified in recent years and contributes to such polarisation”;

“People adopt some kind of totems in connection with this; I do not fully understand what is hidden behind these totems. These are very shallow embedded views”;

“We are 100 per cent good, and they are 100 per cent bad. And of course the other way around”;

“You assume bad will on the part of the other side of a political dispute, a total bad will, right? So we are the good guys, and they are the bad guys. The others are always the bad guys. Therefore, the others should be eliminated from public discourse”;

“We are so divided, and we already hate each other, we already think that this one stinks, and the others (meaning us, from our bubble) are the ones who serve the Germans or Brussels”.

According to the respondents, the language of political polarisation shows the features of intentional disinformation. Interestingly, in their opinion, it is sometimes used to conjure, to bewitch up reality, which, by not naming it, is to become unreal, or by naming it, is to become as it should be seen:

“There are a lot of media that are for sure created for disinformation”;

“For example, at some point, some media started publishing pro-Russian content”;

“This imposition that this is a German agent is disgusting; it is something I did not think I would see in a democracy”;

“If instead of ‘says’ you write ‘thinks’, ‘believes’, or even ‘insinuates’ or ‘shouts’, well, you can gain something from it”;

“The way it’s done now is that there’s a lot of hype. I’ve also noticed, for example, very flashy headlines in the media. (...) There are so many of these scandals that, despite my experience, I sometimes can’t tell whether it’s a real scandal, almost scandal, or a fake scandal”.

To sum up, it should be emphasised that the surveyed journalists had no doubts that the language of public and media debate deforms and distorts reality and is an element that positively stimulates the deepening of social divisions and political polarisation.

### 3.3. Mitigating political polarisation & the role of the media

Among the possible solutions to the situation, the surveyed journalists indicated, on the one hand, very specific solutions. These included, among others, the implementation by the media of such elementary postulates as taking care of the purity of the debate, returning to the obligation to control the government, and refraining from repeating pathological communication behaviours related to war rhetoric or hate speech. According to the journalists, it is necessary to:

“(...) purify the debate. Let’s learn to differ nicely”;

“(...) change a lot certainly at the level of language. And this is a fundamental thing. First of all, it is worth refraining from treating the political side with which we disagree in demonic categories”;

“(...) objectively present both sides of the coin and rather not inflame”;

“(...) do not inflame”;

“(...) do not stir up such pseudo-scandals”;

“Inform. But in such a way that it does not inflame such hostile views of each other even among the recipients”.

Among other solutions, respondents emphasised the importance of efforts to possibly broaden the spectrum of debate and educational activities aimed at society, which should be sensitised to all manifestations and forms of potential disinformation:

“You should not be afraid of topics that your bosses theoretically consider to be politically incorrect. It is sometimes worth looking into other people’s views”;

“There are more and more initiatives aimed at reducing this polarisation, bringing this debate to the centre, to dialogue”;

“There is a need to simply break this vicious circle. That is why I am returning once again to the need to educate society about these threats and the need to say ‘I am checking’ concerning various actors in social life, including the media”;

“Work at the grassroots level, right? That is, education not only of the youth but of society in general”;

“There is a need for proper media education”;

On the other hand, however, the respondents also expressed voices indicating the need to introduce systemic solutions that could counteract the perpetuation of existing divisions. Without such solutions that would change the legal situation of the media and the conditions of their financing, it will not be possible, according to at least some of the respondents, to improve the quality of public debate and, consequently, to alleviate the existing polarisation:

“Maintaining your integrity, independence, and moral backbone has probably been even more difficult for a journalist recently than before. Considering the Polish political and economic realities”;

“We are not here to examine polling charts. We are here to pick on the authorities first and foremost”;

“Well, first of all, political will is necessary, which is not there yet, and it is not known when it will be”;

“We lack a sense of legal stability. Various threats appear to threaten freedom of speech, such as attempts to punish the media for journalistic work. The so-called ‘slaps’, i. e., actions intended to hinder the work of the editorial office. You can read a lot about this in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, for example. Journalists can get a pile of lawsuits for one article, for example, about Zbigniew Ziobro. There can be 16 lawsuits for one article because Zbigniew Ziobro wants a correction as a citizen, wants a correction as the Minister of Justice, but also wants a correction as the Prosecutor General, etc. So he sends three corrections each time, but he sends them to the airwaves, sends them to the portal, and sends them to the news station, so in the end, the editorial office is pulled away from such normal work because it is known that the lawyers will prepare a response, but before the lawyers prepare a response, the editorial office has to take a stance. Then, first of all, the journalist is pulled away from work. That is why he will think 10 times about doing another article about such a person, a politician, because he knows that it will be the same; there will be dragging in the courts. In addition, as part of dragging in the courts, security is being put on the journalists’ assets (...). This cage for the freedom of journalistic activity is powerful”.

Among other problems, journalists also pointed to difficult access to information:

“We have no access to information. Government institutions do not respond to us, they make it difficult to find answers, often extending the response time, but above all by not responding at all”;

“Not every party always wants to talk to us. Sometimes we have allegations against someone about some irregularity, but we do not have their comment, because they do not talk to us”;

“If the person we accuse does not respond to us, and then it turns out that they put some additional arguments on the table, we had no way of verifying them because we did not receive the answers earlier. So this is a big problem”.

The situation is not improved by the lack of a sense of agency/effectiveness of one’s actions and solidarity in the journalistic community, which is probably why at least several respondents indicated the need to develop a common code of journalism standards. According to the respondents, the British BBC’s code of standards could serve as a model:

“Sometimes I have a feeling that our work lacks the sense of agency, that we cannot reach a larger social group, a larger group of recipients. This lack of sense of agency is also something that certainly bothers many journalists. That is, that we produce material after material, reveal irregularities, and nothing happens. This also builds up a feeling in the recipients that ‘they revealed a scandal, and nothing has changed, so maybe it wasn’t a scandal at all’. This lack of agency has always bothered journalists, but I have the impression that it has bothered us more in recent years”;

“The media and journalists have never been an environment with solidarity. Just like miners, who are united and protest. Just like doctors or nurses who go out into the streets together and protest. They are united, they know how to organise. Have you ever heard of a protest by journalists who go out into the streets and demand pay raises because they earn an embarrassing amount of money? Or they do not agree to the government’s interference in the press law, which imposes some kind of shackles on us?”;

“We probably need to create a certain standard that could function in the media space that would be a point of reference. We have such examples in the world. In Great Britain and elsewhere, such a model is the BBC. You can have various accusations against it because the world is not ideal, but the BBC has developed a standard of a reliable medium, right? It is a point of reference for others”;

“(…) please pay attention to how the Anglo-Saxon media write, like, I don’t know, The Guardian or The New York Times, or the BBC”;

“I have such a journalistic dream that such a standard would be created. I don’t know if it is still in force at the BBC, but there is such an impression that at the BBC, everything is done as it should be, right?”.

Many of the respondents’ comments also referred to the need to restore and focus attention on the ordinary and most basic journalistic skills, i. e., individual attention of each journalist to his work skills.

#### 4. Conclusions

The statements obtained during the interviews clearly show that the Polish journalistic community is highly aware of the threats resulting from the existence of deep political polarisation (RQ1) and indicate the diverse aspects of threats (of political, economic and social nature), both internally (disintegration of society, erosion of the democratic system) and externally (susceptibility to disinformation coming from outside, from Russia for example). Interestingly, the level of this awareness is not conditioned by the type of medium in which the journalist is employed nor by the type of ownership of a given medium.

The journalists surveyed responded equally unanimously to the deeply disturbing manifestations of political polarisation in the linguistic dimension

(RQ2). They unequivocally and decisively condemned the linguistic pathologies present in the debate, such as the excessive emotional charge of its language, the presence of hate speech and the rhetoric of the bipolar world or war, which they often used in their statements to convey the character of the debate. Of the strong emotional attachment of supporters of certain political options in Poland, they even used the term *political church*, whose supporters they called *believers*. An interesting rhetorical figure was used by one of the respondents, who spoke of *waiter journalism*, wanting to emphasise the servile nature of some journalistic activities. This term perfectly describes a certain evolution in the way of practising so-called *identity journalism* in Poland. The term *identity journalism*, known and used for over a decade, refers to an ambitious and necessary (regardless of its ultimate social consequences) postulate from the point of view of some journalists to create and gather around themselves supporters/partisans of a specific worldview. The journalist was to be their leader, the subject of a certain social movement. In the reality of a politically polarised society, he became only a service provider, working on political orders.

Polish journalists who took part in the interviews indicated many possible ways out of the current situation (RQ3). The solutions indicated included many very basic postulates, such as the return of the media to the realisation of their basic social and political roles and functions or the development of specific principles for the functioning of the media environment, including, in particular, a uniform code of journalistic standards (modelled on the code of the British BBC). Nevertheless, the respondents' statements also included critical remarks and doubts as to whether repairing the current situation is possible at all. The reasons why this should be impossible, in the opinion of some journalists, were usually related to the broader context of economic, political and legal conditions of the media market. Without changes in this area, which they called systemic changes, it is impossible to improve the condition of the Polish public and media debate and to bridge the existing social and political divisions. The problem, however, is that such systemic reforms are beyond the reach of the journalists as a profession. The driving force behind these changes, with all the instruments to carry them out, must be politicians, who, as is clear from the description of Polish political reality presented above, are not necessarily interested in changing the current state of affairs. A glimmer of hope can, therefore, be found in the fact that, in light of the results of the interviews, the Polish media community is not only aware of the existing threats but also tired of this media war on the front of political polarisation. This fact may have a positive impact on their readiness to exert appropriate influence on political actors. Especially since the last Polish parliamentary elections have changed the boundary conditions of the situation. Moreover, in the era of the new world order emerging before our eyes in recent weeks and the growing threat of hostile disinformation flowing from beyond the

eastern border of Poland, the readiness of politicians to take care of the purity and quality of public debate in their state will certainly increase.

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## Polarisation-oriented “journalism” – is it still a media information genre?

### Abstract

The basis of this article is the assumption that in neo-television, creators adapt the textual and discursive conventions of the news media genre in such a way as to construct a polarised social reality. Therefore, we are dealing with a significant departure of news creators from the textual and discursive news media genre patterns. As a result, the authors ultimately abandon neutral, reliable reporting of reality in favour of a biased narrative, the assumption of which is a worldview, social, and political polarisation. The fundamental question that arises in this connection is whether we can still speak of a news media genre or perhaps of some other para-genre, which we can tentatively call, for example, polarisation-oriented “journalism”. In the empirical part of the article, qualitative research will be conducted using the proposed analytical framework, which is based on news genre patterns. The research sample includes news magazines broadcast in the first quarter of 2025.

**Keywords:** news, genre, polarisation, conflict, infotainment

### 1. Introduction

Many researchers have been interested in social and ideological polarisation for years. Definitions of this phenomenon consider many aspects and focus on its various components. Still, researchers usually agree on emphasising several features of polarisation: lasting attitudes and differences in worldviews, affectivity in expressing different views, and the inability to exchange arguments rationally.

On this occasion, questions arise about how much the media reports polarised reality and to what extent they construct it using the social and ideological division framework. The television text is perceived by researchers, e.g., in cultural studies, as the result of the production and reception of meaning. Stuart

Hall emphasised that transmitting an event in its “raw” form on television is impossible. (Hall 1980) Events are transformed into visual and audio signs of television discourse, transformed into stories, and communicated in this form. The media genre is the carrier of specific meanings, including ideological values. This category is a stylistic, iconographic, narrative pattern and a set of specific thematic and discursive threads.

In the rest of the article, we will deal with the phenomenon of polarisation framed precisely within the framework of a media genre understood as a set of textual and discursive determinants. We will look at the phenomenon in question from the perspective of creators who must answer many questions and make many choices in the process of creating news:

1. What is the topic of the news?
2. Who are the main characters?
3. How will we tell this story? Where will we start? Where will we end?
4. What are our implementation possibilities?

From the very beginning, we will be accompanied by an essential distinction between media reports that report on events characterised by polarisation and those that contain clear procedures that polarise reality, i. e., construct the story of events in such a way as to achieve the effect of division, or even a political, ideological rupture. (Miloni, 2022) In the latter case, polarisation expressed in opinions, attitudes, and values is a desired and expected effect of a television program by a journalist. This aspiration of television creators is closely related to the principles of building the structure of programs based on conflict and struggle, creating narrative tension. (Galtung, Ruge 1981). This second type will be represented by works that exceed the framework of the information genre on many levels.

The basis of this article is, therefore, the assumption that in neo-television, creators adapt the textual and discursive conventions of the news media genre in such a way as to construct a polarised social reality. Therefore, we are dealing with a significant departure of news creators from the textual and discursive news media genre patterns. As a result, the authors ultimately abandon neutral, reliable reporting of reality in favour of a biased narrative, the assumption of which is a worldview, social, and political polarisation. The fundamental question that arises in this connection is whether we can still speak of a news media genre or perhaps of some other para-genre, which we can tentatively call, for example, polarisation-oriented “journalism”.

In the empirical part of the article, qualitative research will be conducted using the proposed analytical framework created based on news genre patterns. The research sample includes news magazines broadcast in the first quarter of 2025. Randomly (using a number generator), 16 main editions of news magazines

broadcast on TVP1, TVN, Polsat, and Republika television channels, which enjoy the highest viewership in Poland (Pallus, 2025), were selected. The analysis will aim to identify those news items that represent the concept of conflict-oriented journalism, where conflict is used as a paradigmatic mode of presentation. Then, a textual and discursive analysis will be conducted, allowing us to relate these materials to news genre patterns and indicate probable directions of the evolution of news magazines.

The following research questions were asked:

1. What textual and discursive properties of news coverage allow it to be assigned to the polarisation-oriented journalism type?
2. In which news magazines can we identify the most works of this type?
3. Does the highlighted polarisation-oriented journalism belong to the paradigm of the information media genre?
4. What socio-cultural effects may result from strengthening the tendency towards polarisation-oriented journalism?

### 1.1. The phenomenon of social, ideological, and political polarisation in Poland

Social polarisation is a deep conflict between specific groups of people who emphasise their identity identification within the group. Polarisation usually has a strong affective basis and prevents rational exchange of opinions. It constructs an image of the world with a clear division into “us” and “them”.

We cannot understand polarising conflicts as disputes, discussions, or quarrels because they concern the foundations of a community’s existence and its constitutive meanings. We are talking about extraordinary conflicts at the highest level that trap a given country’s politics. The bipolarity of these conflicts means that the space for possible agreement between the conflicting options disappears.

We can distinguish between ideological and affective polarisation. Ideological polarisation concerns opposing political differences of views, ideas, positions and concepts. At the same time, affective polarisation is expressed in emotional involvement resulting from belonging to a specific group, thus becoming a form of identity politics. (Kubin, von Sikorski 2022) Polarisation often concerns the most important issues, such as values, worldview, and ideological identity. It can refer to different types of attitudes or ultimately be a type of behaviour expressed through, for example, verbal expression, patterns of interaction or other actions.

Many researchers seek the sources of the current ideological polarisation in the systemic transformation that began in 1989. At that time, a system of liberal democracy began to take shape in Poland, based on expanding the sphere of

freedom in social and political life and introducing free market principles typical of the capitalist economy. The ownership structure of the economy underwent a fundamental transformation, reaching a state in which about 75% of professionally active people work in the private sector (Ruszkowski, 2018).

The axis of polarisation in the years 1989–2004 ran between post-communist and anti-communist circles. Later, with the advent of the dominance of post-Solidarity parties, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* and *Platforma Obywatelska*, this division lost its original meaning but began to serve evaluative categorisations. A new division gradually emerged, described by sociologists as post-transformation, with groups of winners and losers in the transformations after 1989. (Nowicka-Franczak, 2022) This polarisation was sealed by the Smolensk disaster (2010) and the theory of an alleged assassination attempt on Lech Kaczyński. After the elections won by PiS in 2015, polarisation took on a clear and still valid form of PiS and Anti-PiS.

A division of worldviews characterises this political polarisation: one aligned with the PiS formation, which embraces conservative values, and the other associated with KO-related circles, which are oriented towards liberal values. An analysis of the polarisation phenomenon regarding class and stratum consciousness reveals the presence of relatively stable boundaries between these segments of society. The political resources of both sides are comparable in value, meaning that the social potential for advocating change is equal to the social potential for resisting it. In this context, the phenomenon of polarisation reflects a state of chronic tension within the social system.

In the rest of the article, we will look for examples of polarisation in the news magazines of various television organisations, understood as a phenomenon that has a strong affective basis and prevents rational exchange of opinions. It constructs an image of the world with a clear division into “us” and “them”. in emotional involvement resulting from belonging to a specific group, thus becoming a form of identity politics.

## 1.2. The phenomenon of media polarisation in Poland

One of the most important research problems that Polish media and political scientists are currently facing is the problem of the increasing polarisation of the media in Poland. In this case, researchers see the genesis of the phenomenon in 2001, when the most significant political parties in Poland were established: Law and Justice and Civic Platform (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2010). Another important date in the escalation of the current division is 2015, when the United Right, which took over power, began a series of changes in the public media, resulting in their complete subordination. The government also attempted to interfere in the

functioning of private media that were critical of the government, the broadcasters TVN and TVN24 belonging to the Warner Bros. Discovery concern.

After the 2023 elections, won by the Civic Coalition, the division between pro-KO and pro-PiS media deepened. The management and supervisory boards of public media were changed, and journalists from *Telewizja Polska* moved to *Telewizja Republika*, which is now considered a pro-PiS medium.

Journalists perceive the division between PiS and anti-PiS media as an obvious fact (Nowicka-Franczyk, 2022). The study conducted in 2021 aimed to provide an initial diagnosis of the discourse awareness of symbolic media elites. The researcher emphasises that this belief in polarisation is expressed by journalists in war metaphors and is associated with the vision of two warring camps composed of soldiers who must be disciplined and loyal to their side. Media polarisation is being naturalised and normalised, and the division into PiS and anti-PiS media is becoming a mental horizon – it is hard to imagine that it is possible to cross it, claims Nowicka-Franczyk.

### 1.3. Information as a media genre

The contemporary way of thinking about genres owes much to the work of Michael Bakhtin, for whom genre is a fundamental concept in communication theory. In Bakhtin’s view, learning to speak is learning to create specific, genre-shaped texts. Texts do not exist outside the category of genre. (Bakhtin, 1979)

Therefore, genre and its modifications and transformations impact how we think about and construct an image of the world.

This way of thinking about genre results in the approach to its definition. The question is whether we will perceive it as a pattern of text organisation, a set of conventions. We will also consider whether the text is its concretisation. In this case, referring to the information genre, we will focus on such features of the television text (program) as formal conventions: place of realisation, iconography, style of realisation, selection of characters, and narration.

Alternatively, we could look at genre as the articulation of specific discourses. In this sense, one of the essential practices of articulating information as a genre is the so-called “factual pact”, related to the social obligation to inform public opinion. Moreover, related discursive threads concern truth in the ontological sense and the epistemological sense (reliability, objectivity, and neutrality are equally important.)

The aforementioned levels of understanding of the genre are necessary for analysing a news program. For example, transforming texts representing the traditional modernist version of television journalism into a postmodern version can be analysed by referring to formal conventions and discursive threads. Thus,

we will see the abandonment of such principles as truthfulness, adequacy, contextuality, credibility, lack of commentary, conceit and linguistic clarity in the form of the realisation of the news work and at the level of discursive threads entwining the text. Similarly, we will perceive also transgressions in the direction of fragmentation, gamification, personalisation, the dominance of the expressive function, and self-referentiality at these two levels. (Wawer, 2020)

Within the news genre, there is an apparent tension between the factual pact between the journalist and the viewer and some so-called news values, which consist of conflict, significance, simplification, personalisation, surprise, reference to elites, and negativity. The way to reconcile both models is to move away from the textual genre pattern towards the discursive aspect.

Therefore, based on broadcasting decisions lies a construction standard for the sender and the recipient regarding the available information. In this approach, formal elements and the context of publication are genre signals of the pattern, which facilitate the initial identification of the text as information by the recipient. If the recipient, quite obviously, decodes the text as information, then they will consider the data contained in it to be accurate, referring to facts and therefore – credible. Based on formal elements, they will consider a given text to be a discursive practice appropriate to a specific discourse – in this case, journalism.

## 2. Methodology

A genre framework at the textual and discursive levels defined the methodological approach. We, therefore, assume that the media news genre determines the program's subject matter, textual pattern, and discursive threads. If we were to look at these components in a more specific form, we would get the following essential list:

1. Subject matter
2. Textual pattern:
  - a. Place of production
  - b. Iconography
  - c. Style of production (shots – number, length, film sets, frame composition, rhythm, sound, light)
  - d. Narration
  - e. Characters
3. Discursive threads

This analytical grid was used to isolate works in the research material that exceed the framework of the news genre. The study considered the news magazines of

four television stations with the highest viewership (Fakty, Wydarzenia, 19:30, Dzisiaj Informacje Telewizja Republika) broadcast from January 1 to March 31, 2025. Using a number generator, 16 magazines were selected and subjected to a thorough qualitative analysis using transcription, the Maxqda tool and Final Cut image analysis software.

The analysis allowed us to distinguish television works that present examples of affective polarisation, understood as defined above, as a phenomenon with a strong affective basis and preventing the rational exchange of opinions. It constructs an image of the world with a clear division into “us” and “them”, in emotional involvement resulting from belonging to a specific group, thus becoming a form of identity politics.

Most materials of this type were found in the Dzisiaj Informacje Telewizja Republika, where they occupied the first part of the magazine and always constituted over 50% of all news. All works from this magazine devoted to political topics belonged to the type we previously defined as polarisation-oriented “journalism” (they do not so much report conflicts with polarisation features but rather construct media polarisation and use it to build a narrative.)

This type of news construction also occurred in the Fakty TVN magazine. In the 19.30 magazine, several statements by journalists could be described as biased; however, in the collected research material, finding information that could be classified as polarisation journalism was impossible. The same situation concerns the “Wydarzenia” magazine.

## 2.1. Empirical analysis of examples of polarisation-oriented “journalism”

### 2.1.1 The subject of the analysed news does not concern specific events but refers to the improper behaviour, actions, and attitudes of negative characters

Politicians of the December 13 coalition at every level are capable of surprising. Moreover, those from the PSL, who, after taking the risk of re-cooperating with Tusk and facing the vision of functioning outside of parliament, have chosen a risky third path of conducting local politics using magic.

Radosław Król, the PSL governor of Warmia and Mazury, inspired by the words of the Minister of Health

Izabela Leszczyna decided to repair local roads with the help of a magic wand. At the same time, Marshal Hołownia is creating accounting in a new way (...) (announcement by Danuta Holec, Today Information Telewizja Republika 26.03.2025)

The fact that it was revealed that the first Donald Tusk government planned to defend Poland on the Vistula River and surrender Warsaw to the Russian invaders is a thorn in

the side of the current government. Hence, the motion of the prosecutor's office under Narowa to lift the immunity of Mariusz Błaszczak, who, while he was the head of the Ministry of Defense, informed the public about these scandalous plans, fortunately already archived at that time (announcement by Danuta Holecka, Today Information Telewizja Republika 10.02.2025)

Representatives of these groups admit that the more significant coalition partner is eating them. Is there a way for them to escape from Donald Tusk's plate? Donald Tusk has long satisfied his appetite for power by devouring subsequent appetisers. As can be seen, it is difficult for him to stop this habit, even if consumption were to end with a stomachache and loss of power. (announcement by Danuta Holecka, Today Information Telewizja Republika 26.03.2025)

This type of material also contains elements of metacommunication. It refers to problems with a negative character, such as not answering questions or not accepting an invitation to a TV studio.

It is difficult to summarise Karol Nawrocki's answer to the question about the polling bypass, colloquially speaking with Sławomir Mentzen in one sentence. You have to see it. (FAKTY 25.03.2025)

Moreover, later, the reporter continues the thread he started:

Reactions to questions are the weakest element of the campaign of this presidential candidate, who, if he wins, could pardon Marcin Romanowski, a former deputy minister of justice from PiS, who fled to Budapest from the Polish justice system under the care of a foreign government.

Later, the reporter presents only negative information about the candidate, including the media's reported information. The news about the next candidate, Sławomir Metzen, is similar:

The scenario is always the same. The meeting is public, and the speech is 20 minutes long, with no questions, explanations, or confrontation with the sovereign. Sławomir Mentzen quickly leaves the meeting on a scooter or running if necessary. It works because the second round is getting closer. (announcement by Grzegorz Kajdanowicz, Fakty 25.03.2025)

However, the information about Rafał Trzaskowski's campaign looked utterly different. In this case, the journalist was optimistic about the candidate, who had the opportunity to speak out on several important issues. The news concerned the candidate's chances of winning and his strategy (e. g., take care of women's votes and distance himself from Tusk's government).

## 2.1.2 Textual pattern

### *Place of production*

The materials are characterised by significant use of archival recordings and a limited number of current shots. Current recordings usually contain statements commenting on the opposing character’s inappropriate behaviour.

### *Iconography*

A typical iconographic device is the placement of a ticker during the announcement of the material attacking or ridiculing the negative character: “Foreign media on lawlessness in Tusk’s state” “Tusk ‘eats’ political appetisers” (Dzisiaj Information Telewizja Republika 26.03.2025). The negative character is shown unfavourably or inadequately, e. g., he is shown smiling or even laughing, but this reaction does not fit the issue discussed in the material.

### *Style of production (shots – number, length, frame composition, rhythm, sound, light)*

The materials’ narrative axis is the voice of the program host and later the voice of the reporter. The reading style often resembles chanting.

The reading style in which we deal with over-accentuation helps journalists create the impression of commitment, competence, and dynamics, and it also contributes to arousing interest among recipients. Raising the voice draws attention, and calling for help by shouting is a natural example. Higher tones are used in the sound signals of emergency sirens. In reading news services, raising stressed syllables is supposed to fulfil a similar function – to draw attention to important matters. The problem occurs when too many syllables are realised in this way – then we talk about over-accentuation, which can become tiring for recipients. (Bloch, 2019)

A journalist’s narrative is usually illustrated with archival shots, often very short, which gives the impression of artificial dynamics. Below is an example of a journalist’s statement, which lasts 20 seconds and contains 10 shots.

Simple? Yes, it is. In Warmia, wands, and Podlasie, invoices are done differently. And 160 zlotys.

Army Europe commanded from Berlin. Health education instead of religion from Nowacka. Offended

America. LGBT and abortion clinics on every corner. Crosses removed. Sawing Nitras.

If not, you will raise your head again. Such is the coalition... (Dzisiaj Informacje Telewizja Republika 26.03.2025)

Often, in materials of this type, significant shots are repeated many times. The already quoted material about the wand of shame was built around an archival, three-second

statement from 2022 by the current Minister of Health Izabela Leszczyna: “These problems will disappear as if touched by a magic wand”. The statement was taken out of context and used in the material about alleged magic in management by politicians from KO as an axis and leitmotif. Often, the materials contain additional embellishments, probably aimed at making the material more attractive, e.g. repeated clips by former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki transferred from the X platform and enriched with sound and graphic effects: “Give me a man and I will find a paragraph for him – that is the motto of the prosecutor’s office”. (Dzisiaj Informacje 26.03.2025)

### *Narrative*

The narration of the materials is intertextual in the diachronic and synchronic sense, which means that it refers to the past and the present in the form of current materials shown by opposition editorial offices. This means that the recipient of news magazines watches a series with endless political threads featuring well-known characters who are one-dimensionally positive or negative.

### *Characters*

The authors construct a clear division between positive and negative characters, and this stigmatisation remains unchanged. The authors of individual materials and the hosts comment on and evaluate the behaviour of negative characters. For example, Roman Giertych is the informal leader of the team that is to take revenge on PiS. He is responsible for a group of internet trolls who “spread hatred on social media”.

Donald Tusk appears in most of the political materials of the Republika TV magazine; he is a mega-negative character equipped with numerous repetitive attributes:

Who should Poles believe? The Germans, who are supported by the documents? Or Tusk, who has repeatedly deceived Poles (Dzisiaj Informacje 10.02.2025)

### 2.1.3 Discursive threads

The discourse of the discussed materials concerns the basic polarisation threads:

The division into “us” and “them” is emotional involvement in building the identity of one’s group, which is naturally associated with negating all the other group’s actions, attitudes, beliefs, and values. An important discursive thread in these materials is the incitement to a fierce, endless war with the enemy, which cannot be forgiven in the case of Republika television. In Fakty TVN, an element of playing with the opponent, irony, and even sarcasm appears. One thing is sure – both war and game invalidate the factual pact and undermine news values. The authors of the materials and their editors grant themselves the right to bias, lack of objectivity, lack of reliability, and manipulation of form and content.

Moreover, sometimes, they sacrifice information to play with words and images, which become only attractive packaging.

### 3. Results

Three research questions were formulated at the beginning of the article:

1. *What textual and discursive properties of a news piece allow it to be assigned to the polarisation-oriented journalism type?*

The analysis of the research material allowed us to find common properties of pieces broadcast in news magazines, which we defined as polarisation-oriented journalism. The characteristic features of these materials include:

- Defining the topic by identifying an opposing hero from the “them” camp and punishing him with severe criticism/punishment
- Excessive use of archival materials in comparison to current materials
- Playing with graphics, including so-called news tickers
- Showing hostile heroes in an unfavourable composition or light
- Creative television editing
- Serialisation of news by telling stories from multiple perspectives
- Discourse on “us” and “them”; invalidation of the factual pact, undermining news values

2. *Does the highlighted polarisation-oriented journalism belong to the paradigm of the information media genre?*

The answer to this question depends on the adopted definition of media genre. For example, we can assume that the basis for broadcasting decisions is, therefore, a construction standard for the broadcaster and the recipient regarding what information is. In such a situation, the viewer will initially assign the text to the information genre. This can be done based on those features of the program that impose an information genre frame: a news television studio, formal attire of the presenters and reporters, the sound layer, graphics and colours, the structure of the program consisting of the division into individual segments with reportage materials, the style of production with shots, plans, frames typical of a news program. In this approach, formal elements will constitute genre signals of the pattern, facilitating the initial identification of the text as information by the recipient. However, the discursive layer of polarisation-oriented “journalism” clearly negates the fundamental features of the information genre, such as reliability, objectivity, and lack of bias, and negates the factual pact and the information function of the program in general. The materials discussed are often poor in content; they are ritualistic and self-referential (their authors deal with

the fact that the politician does not answer questions, has schematic meetings with residents, or explores the fictional theme of officials ruling with the help of magic).

However, if the recipient decodes the text as information, they will consider the data contained therein accurate, factual, and, therefore, credible. It may, therefore, happen that, based on formal elements, they will consider a given text to be a discursive practice appropriate to a specific discourse – in this case, journalism.

### 3. *What socio-cultural effects may result from strengthening the tendency towards polarisation-oriented “journalism”?*

The presence of this type of journalism on such a significant scale already blurs the framework of the information genre. Moreover, it is about the genre and broader categories such as fact, entertainment, and fiction. The gamification in the analysed materials, the predominance of the author’s commentary, and repetitive clips with pseudo-philosophical slogans mean that information recedes into the background. Of course, information associated with the social function of journalism informs public opinion. However, suppose we decide to move away from fact towards entertainment or fiction. In that case, we must ask whether the phenomenon of affective polarisation has entertainment potential and whether the analysed materials can entertain recipients. Of course, we know the answer to this question and know it is. This is evidenced by numerous websites with strip generators that allow recipients to create their own (implicitly grotesque) text, games and quizzes in which the participant’s task is to guess the true and false inscription. A word game has also been created: “The language of political information”.

These tendencies towards gamification in the information space may be reinforced by the increasing technical capabilities enabling increasingly faster and more invasive image processing.

## 4. Discussion

Not all journalists perceive the negative aspects of the phenomenon of media polarisation. In the already cited 2021 study, journalists expressed their opinion that creating materials presenting the phenomenon of polarisation can be profitable for the media because it attracts a specific audience – the right-wing press has ardent readers and liberal – fans (Nowicka-Franczyk). Several journalists admitted that media polarisation promotes an expressive and provocative way of communicating, a personal opportunity for them (it allows them to maintain or improve visibility in the debate) or a community opportunity.

With the increasing availability of technology, which can strongly influence the editing and modification of the image, the authors’ awareness of news materials is important. The few studies on how journalists approach media polarisation show that they tend not to notice their role as animators and constructors of divisions. They blame political parties. (Nowicka-Franczyk)

Researchers from Germany noted the same phenomenon of low awareness of the news production process. They surveyed 215 journalists reporting on conflicts (Hoxha, Hanitzsch 2018). The journalists they studied also overlooked their role in shaping the image of reality. The researchers confronted journalists with producing news materials thanks to the retrospective reconstruction method.

Transferring these experiences to Polish soil would convince media creators how strongly they influence the construction of the world around us, including the political world.

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Katarzyna Vanevska

## The language of minority media and marginalised groups – a handful of reflections from own research

### Abstract

The work is an attempt to develop a compendium of knowledge about the media of national and ethnic minorities and the media of marginalized groups in the Polish media space, however, not in the form of an enumerative list of available media of individual groups, but in the form of an analysis of selected, most interesting examples and mechanisms typical for them. The analysis refers to the dominant phenomena, most interesting solutions and noticeable trends in the indicated examples, based on which conclusions of a general nature can be drawn. Their analysis aims to identify in detail selected linguistic and content mechanisms, also through the prism of content selection, the selection of interlocutors, the way information is processed, or even its graphic presentation. The knowledge gathered in this way can constitute a lasting foundation for cooperation with the indicated media spaces and, thus also with the communities they represent, which can be an effective tool for reducing both the processes of social polarization, e.g., based on nationality or worldview (LGBT+) and eliminating flashpoints that inspire polarization processes.

**Keywords:** marginalised groups media, minority media, seniors, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities

### 1. Introduction

Minority and marginalised media are key determinants of the pluralistic media landscape in each country. Their level of development, vitality, and the extent to which they respond to their audiences' needs largely indicate the democratic, mature nature of the media market and its quality in general. This aspect of the analysis of media sectors in the 27 EU Member States was among the subjects of research conducted for the project "Uncovering news deserts in Europe. Risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU" by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, the results of which were published in

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2024. (CMPF, 2024) The author of this publication was responsible for preparing conclusions regarding the Polish media market in a specific context based on independent research and analysis of existing materials. Among the wealth of information, it was possible to gather a broad compendium of knowledge about the media of national and ethnic minorities and the media of marginalised groups. The collected data in an expanded and updated form are the subject of this study. It should be noted, however, that it does not constitute an enumerative list of available media of specific groups but, in its considerations, refers to the most clearly emerging issues, dominant phenomena and selected media entities. Their analysis is aimed at an in-depth recognition of selected media, also through the prism of style and specificity of statements, selection of topics and optics adopted in the description of information, as well as social characteristics of the communication process, allowing for the subjection of these specific media and their messages to a research diagnosis. This is extremely important, considering that minority language media are essential for intra-minority communication in non-territorial autonomy. Minority media transmit patterns of behaviour, promote values, and provide the possibility of unifying the understanding of the world (Mieczkowski, 2012). The media of national minorities focus primarily on the empowerment of their own reading group (Wasilewski, 2019); therefore, their main role is to fight against internal and external marginalization (Wasilewski, 2013, pp. 283–298) and thus move away from alienation and extreme beliefs, which helps to eliminate the processes of social polarisation. The media of marginalised groups play a special role as an integrating factor and, at the same time, a catalyst for the specific reception needs of their users.

Cooperation with this media sector based on knowledge, and therefore on understanding, can be an effective tool for reducing both the processes of social polarisation, e.g., based on nationality or worldview (LGBT+) and eliminating flashpoints that inspire polarisation processes. By learning about these specific media spaces and their language, we gain another important *modus operandi* in the clash with social stratification.

## 2. National minorities and marginalised groups in Poland

The situation of national and ethnic minorities in Poland is regulated by the provisions of international law, in particular, the acts of the Council of Europe, the UN and the Act of January 6 2005 (Sejm, 2005) on national and ethnic minorities and on regional language. It regulates issues related to the preservation and development of the cultural identity of national and ethnic minorities and the regional language. Its important role also consisted in, among other

things, the empowerment of minorities, as well as the recognition of their representatives as equal citizens of the state.

Poland is inhabited by representatives of 13 national and ethnic minorities and a group using the regional language – Kashubians. (Gov.pl, 2022) Pursuant to the Act on national and ethnic minorities, the following minorities are legally recognized and considered as national minorities: Belarusian, Czech, Lithuanian, German, Armenian, Russian, Slovak, Ukrainian, and Jewish, while as ethnic minorities are recognized: Karaite, Lemko; Roma; Tatar. (MSWiA, 2022)

A specific minority whose rights are not satisfied are the Silesians. This minority is not legally recognized, despite the fact that in the last census of 2021, almost 600,000 people declared Silesian nationality, and 467 thousand speaking Silesian. (GUS, 2023) It is worth emphasising that in January 2024, an initiative was taken to grant the Silesian dialect the status of a regional language (similarly to the Kashubian language). The vote on the amendment took place on April 26; 236 MPs voted in favor, 186 were against, and 5 abstained. Thus, the upper house of the Polish parliament passed a law recognizing the Silesian language as a regional language. (PAP, 2024) Ultimately, however, the President vetoed the project in June 2024, pointing out that protecting the Silesian language could result in similar expectations among representatives of other regional groups. (rp.pl, 2024)

Statistical data on the numbers and territorial dispersion of minority representatives are based to the greatest extent on the results of the 2021 Census in Poland, and according to its results, national and ethnic minorities in Poland constituted less than 2% of the total population. (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2024) However, it should be taken into account that the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 was of key importance for the transformation of Poland's ethnic structure. According to UNHCR, since February 24 2022, 9,036,773 Ukrainian refugees have crossed the Polish border, and 1,563,386 have registered for Temporary Protection or a similar national protection scheme (UNHCR, 2023). According to data from the Ministry of Interior and Administration presented in December 2024 at a meeting of the Sejm subcommittee, the current number of immigrants from Ukraine who have been assigned a PESEL number is 988,000, and this value is constantly growing. (PAP.biznes, 2024)

### Marginalised groups

“Marginalization means rejection” and “the apparent lack of participation of individuals or social groups in the basic institutions of a given social order” (Radziewicz-Winnicki & Radziewicz-Winnicki, 2005, pp. 11–13). When it comes to marginalization, we most often refer to groups of people who face discrimination perceived in various contexts. The concept of social exclusion is a cog-

nitive category that allows us to analyze and explain the situation of disadvantaged groups that are present in all societies of the world, and inequalities and social divisions are inherent elements of social reality. (Nowak, 2012, p. 18) Several categories of such groups can be distinguished in Polish conditions, but the analysis focuses on three in which the problem seems to be most pronounced in Polish society. The study focused on people with disabilities, older people and representatives of the LGBTQ+ community.

It is worth emphasising that indicated communities, despite experiencing marginalisation, are relatively numerous. In the case of seniors, official data from 2021 indicate that the population of older people amounted to 9,730.1 thousand and increased by 0.2% compared to the previous year. (GUS, 2022) The upward trend has been clear for years in this category. In the case of people with disabilities, the Central Statistical Office informs that in December 2023, there were 4,006.4 thousand people in Poland who had a valid disability certificate. (GUS, 2024) In relation to representatives of the LGBTQ+ community, the results of analyses by the world leader in opinion research, IPSOS, estimate that there are almost 4 million people in Poland who declare themselves to be members of sexual minorities, and their number is growing (IPSOS, 2024).

## 2.1 Media of minority groups

### Public Media

Access to airtime on PSM to national and ethnic minorities is guaranteed by the 1992 Broadcasting Act (Sejm, 1992) and the 2005 Act on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional languages (Sejm, 2005), which includes several provisions that refer to access to information or communication or media providing content in minority languages. Article 18 of the Act states that public authorities are obliged to take appropriate measures to support activities aimed at protecting, maintaining and developing the cultural identity of minorities, and this obligation results from the public mission and rests with Polish Radio SA, Polish Television SA and regional radio stations. However, not all regional radio stations and local branches of TVP offer programs for national and ethnic minorities.

TVP broadcasts programs for national minorities both in the nationwide program, i. e., in the shared band TVP3 Regionalna and in 8 regional programs created by local branches (KRRiT, 2024). These regional centres are TVP3 Białystok (Belarusian, Lithuanian, Russian, Roma, Tatar, Ukrainian minorities), TVP3 Gdańsk (Kashubian community), TVP3 Katowice (German, Ukrainian minority), TVP3 Olsztyn (Ukrainian minority), TVP3 Opole (German minority),

TVP3 Szczecin (for the Lemko, Roma, Russian, Ukrainian minorities). In the shared band TVP3 Regionalna, an offer for the Ukrainian minority was planned. In most programs, the plan was implemented. In total, 213 hours of programming for minorities were broadcast in the programs of local branches and the shared band of the TVP3 Regionalna program, which is 28 hours more than planned (185 hours). (KRRiT, 2023)

In 2022, the richest offer in terms of the number of hours of programming aimed at minorities was broadcast by 5 companies: Radio Gdańsk, Radio Białystok, Radio Olsztyn (regional program and split from Miłki, Radio Rzeszów and Radio Koszalin. The planned total annual broadcast time of programming for minorities in the programs of regional radio stations was 1,778 hours. A total of 1,904 hours were implemented, which is 126 hours more than planned. (KRRiT, 2024)

Unfortunately, both the form and content of this type of media coverage proposed in PSM still require refinement. The Council of Europe pointed out that television programmes designed for minorities seemed to be often very short or appeared at inconvenient times, either late at night or early in the morning. The Advisory Committee recalled that “care should be taken to produce quality minority language programmes that are attractive to a wide audience and to ensure that they are broadcast at convenient times” (CoE, 2020).

Because of the current political situation in the region, a minority that has become particularly present in the public media is the Ukrainian minority. In 2022, TVP introduced programming in the Ukrainian language. The platform [tvstream.vod.tvp.pl](http://tvstream.vod.tvp.pl) included in its offer the first channel of Ukrainian public broadcaster UA Perszyj (UA the first). Also, programmes for children in the Ukrainian language were included in the schedule of TVP ABC2 (they were broadcast in slots at 6.00, 12.00 and 18.00) available on the platform TVP VOD. TVP has introduced several other services for Ukrainian refugees, for example, a large variety of Polish films and popular TV series translated into the Ukrainian language ([wirtualnemedial.pl](http://wirtualnemedial.pl), 2022). Polish Radio not only runs an information website in Ukrainian but also, from the first day of the war, has broadcast services in this language prepared by the Ukrainian Section of Polish Radio for Foreigners.

What's more, the offer of regional TVP branches includes programs such as the TVP3 Rzeszów series “Ukraine Pulse of War”, about the Ukrainians who stayed in their country despite the war, fought there, volunteered and tried to deal with the trauma of war. The author also describes the situation of refugees who are looking for jobs in Poland and want to learn and support Ukrainian soldiers. (TVP3 Rzeszów, 2023) Another example is the TVP3 Lublin series “UKRAINE – WAR, REFUGEES, AID”, which also presents and explains various issues related to the Ukrainian minority in Poland (TVP3 Lublin, 2023).

As for the situation of other minorities, their representatives themselves indicate that they do not feel that they are sufficiently represented in the public media. Beata Paczkowska<sup>1</sup>, representing the Polish Roma Union, informs in an interview that the Roma community and information about it are not properly represented in the public media in Poland. There is often no information about important events for the Roma, such as International Roma Day (April 8), but she also adds that, slowly, the situation is changing. Especially when it comes to the websites of these media, where such information appears, or, for example, interviews with Roma activists. Also Agáta Jendžejková<sup>2</sup>, representing the Association of Slovaks in Poland, states that as a minority, Slovaks are not adequately represented in the information of public media in Poland.

It can be concluded that such an approach to the construction of media messages does not support inclusiveness or social integration and may deepen polarisation. Both due to the feeling of alienation and harm done to members of a given minority and due to the lack of support for cognitive processes in representatives of the social majority.

Joanna Hassa<sup>3</sup>, representing the Union of German Social and Cultural Associations in Poland, points out that thanks to the activity of members of the German minority, especially in the Opolskie Voivodeship, they feel that their topics are visible and appear in the media. However, this is also largely due to the fact that the Opolskie Voivodeship has the largest number of members of this minority, and it has its representatives in the local government. The reason is also that the Union or Social and Cultural Society of Germans in Opole Silesia employs people responsible for media activity. Outside the Opolskie Voivodeship, there is much less information on the German minority. Hassa also adds that the German minority feels that public media could do more, of course, in accordance with the National Broadcasting Council Act, but their topics are not interesting; they even have the impression that “non-Polish” topics are not welcome. This statement seems crucial from the point of view of considerations on the language of minority media. It turns out that topics that are important and attractive to minorities are pushed to the periphery of the dominant message due to the lack of interest of the majority of society. There is, therefore, a conflict of interest, which affects the deepening of polarisation in this dimension. Hassa adds that new proposals for topics or programs are not accepted, and the hours of broadcasting programs are often changed to later ones, when the listenership is lower. They have also not had their representatives in the programming councils

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1 Information collected based on interview with the the secretary of the association in May 2023.

2 Information collected based on interviews with the editor-in-chief conducted in May 2023 and January 2025.

3 Information collected based on interviews with the director conducted in May 2023.

of public media for several years, even though they submitted their candidates at each recruitment.

The Armenian minority in Poland is represented by several institutions. The President of the Foundation for the Culture and Heritage of the Polish Armenians, Maria Ohanowicz-Tarasiuk<sup>4</sup>, informs in an interview that she does not feel at all that her minority is present in the public media, where information about the Armenians appears sporadically, basically only in connection with major events, and getting media attention requires much effort on the part of the representatives of the group. The President informs that in December 2022, her Foundation opened a large exhibition and, therefore, for a long time, sought media patronage, or at least attention from local and national media; no major results. Only when it turned out that the exhibition would be opened by Minister Jarosław Sellin (from the ruling party) did TVP Info appear at the ceremony. The Polish Radio and TV Polonia (PSM for diaspora) also mentioned the event. However, this is an exceptional situation when it comes to presenting Armenian topics in the media.

When analysing the archival broadcasts of TVP and Polish Radio, it is easy to see that the topic of national, ethnic and religious minorities appears mainly in the dimension of the most important political events (important historical anniversaries, meetings of politicians from minority countries), curiosities (e.g., the subject of matura exams in minority languages) or violations of the law (illegal migration, criminality of representatives of minorities). The situation seems particularly sensitive in the latter context (crime, robberies). Already on November 20, 2020, the Media Ethics Council clearly stated – in a public statement – that journalists should not indicate the nationality or ethnic origin of the perpetrators of crimes, so as not to reproduce negative stereotypes, it reinforces the erroneous and harmful belief that Polish citizens of a different ethnic origin, or foreigners residing in Poland are collective carriers of negative traits. (REM, 2020)

The public service media relatively rarely broadcast programs covering some aspects of the lives of non-recognised minorities, and more often, they are broadcast by radio (mostly regional branches) rather than television. Also, a majority of such programming deals with culture rather than everyday life or politics.

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4 Information collected based on interviews with the President of the association conducted in June 2023.

## Minorities in the commercial / community media market

Minorities have their own media, some supported by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration and other state authorities. They operate in the commercial media sector, but due to their unusual nature, many of them bear the characteristics of community rather than commercial media. Unfortunately, their financial situation is mostly extremely bad and significantly determines the work of the editorial teams. Joanna Hassa<sup>5</sup>, the Union of German Social and Cultural Associations in Poland, confirms direct government subsidies but adds that they are insufficient, and the German minority must apply for additional funds from foundations or foreign organizations (especially German in their case). A representative of the Polish Roma Union, Beata Paczkowska<sup>6</sup>, emphasises that when it comes to public support for the media in the Romani language, the situation is worse now than it was a few years ago. She stated that their magazine “Romano atmo” could previously translate every article into Romani. Unfortunately, this funding has not been available for the last few years. In 2023, they published only one text in Romani, a summary of all the articles in the issue. It is, therefore, difficult to accept that a Roma bimonthly could meet the needs of this minority with its content, especially since the budget allows for a circulation of only 500 copies.

According to Agáta Jendžejková<sup>7</sup>, from the monthly Slovak “Zivot”, the state aid accounts for more than half of the editorial office’s budget, and the monthly is an interesting and important example of responding to the media needs of the minority. The editorial office tries to ensure that only the literary Slovak language appears in the newspaper without unnecessary colloquial references. Sometimes, they appear in articles related to traditions – short phrases in the Spiš or Orava dialect, e.g., when describing Christmas carolling customs. The editor-in-chief emphasises that the task of the magazine is to support the message in the literary Slovak language, which is related to the possibility of familiarising Slovak readers with new vocabulary and understanding written texts. This translates into the selection of topics related to the environment of the Slovak minority, its specificity, and social and cultural life. It is worth noting that at the request of readers, a slightly larger font was used in the magazine due to the older age of many recipients. When reporting on various events, the team tries to include more photos presenting participants of meetings and outdoor events, which results from the fact that readers like to see themselves on the pages of the magazine, and it also builds a bond between Slovak readers and the magazine.

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5 Information collected based on interviews with the director conducted in May 2023.

6 Information collected based on interview with the secretary of the association in May 2023.

7 Information collected based on interviews with the editor-in-chief conducted in May 2023 and January 2025.

Five private radio broadcasters used the possibility of broadcasting radio programs addressed to national and ethnic minorities and the community using the regional language in the period 2019–2020: Belorussian Radio *Racja* – financed from the state budget, Radio “Kaszëbë” – transmitting around 40–60% of its programming in Kashubian language and supported from the governmental sources, other radio stations with minority programming supported from public sources include: Radio *Orthodoxia* from Białystok, Radio “Vanessa” from Raciborz) and Radio *Doxa* from Opole.

In addition, the Polish-German editorial office “Mittendrin” has been operating at the Social and Cultural Association of Germans of the Silesian Voivodeship since 1997. Initially, the editorial office produced only the radio broadcast, the first German-language radio broadcast of the German minority in Poland. Now, what seems very interesting, it implements various media products concerning the German minority and Polish-German cooperation, including, among others, a magazine with a wishlist concert broadcast on Radio *Vanessa* and the journalistic magazine “Präsent” broadcast on Radio *Katowice*, an information and cultural bulletin, a Polish-German internet radio (since 2019, the internet radio has operated as a radio station for the entire German minority in Poland and is created in cooperation with other editorial offices), the Polish-German cultural magazine “*SchauFenster*” on YouTube, and the monthly magazine for children “*Keks*” (published on behalf of the House of Polish-German Cooperation). (mittendrin.pl, 2024) Such a diverse activity of this media entity seems to be a good example of the full realization of the function of minority media, which is to maintain contact with the language and to perpetuate it, which is conducive to integration processes because the issue of identification is connected with the language function (Chutnik, 2023). Especially since the standard language allows for the comparison of the language norm used by a specific group with the general norm. In the case of minorities, it allows for the capture of codified norms used in the language of the home country with the idiolect of one’s own group (Boksański et al., 1977).

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has a fundamental impact on the development of Ukrainian-language media in Poland. Websites in Ukrainian began to appear in the first days of the war and were quickly expanded. Many news outlets started to offer various news services in the Ukrainian language prepared by the Ukrainian staff or translated. The two largest Polish Internet portals ran such websites – WP and Onet.pl, as well as the *Ukrayina* news portal by *Gazeta.pl*, Ukrainian service by PAP and many others. Programs designed for this minority include tips for people fleeing war and information on Russian aggression. Radio *RMF FM*, unlike the public broadcaster, did not have such an editorial office before the war, but less than a week after the Russian attack, it launched *Radio RMF Ukraine*. From the point of view of analysing their content, these services

create not only information spaces responding practically to the communication needs of refugees but also have an important symbolic role – bringing recognition and support to the Ukrainian community in Poland. Private media in Poland (both in the audiovisual sector and the press) have been actively informing about military operations and the situation of Ukrainians in Poland.

The Silesian minority, which is not legally recognised, uses several broadcasting initiatives to promote Silesian culture or focus on the region inhabited by Silesians. Some offer programming and largely music in Silesian, others in a mixture of Polish or Silesian or predominantly in Polish. The radio outlets include Silesian Radio, Radio Hajer, and others. Regarding television, Silesians have internet TV and news portal TVS. An interesting project responding to the challenges of modernity is the internet series “Synek ze Śląska” (Son of Silesia), realised by Dawid Koczur.<sup>8</sup> The young man, recognised in the media due to his activity with the commercial station Polsat, cultivates his Silesian roots in the form of Instagram videos. Often full of humour but also a deeper message. He admits that his Silesian identity influences the topics he discusses (such as traditions in education and customs related to birthdays, weddings, and holidays typical only for Silesia). He emphasises that the Silesian dialect was long denied, and there was a ban on using it at his school. Therefore, now, when he records in Silesia, he is met with enthusiasm that the young man is not ashamed of his identity.

The situation in the minority media sector in Poland is very unstable. Even trying to define them is difficult because, due to their uncommercial nature, some of them have the characteristics of community media. Financial difficulties and uncertainty of state support lead to numerous and frequent changes, unfortunately, most often related to the bankruptcy of editorial offices.

## 2.2 Media of marginalised groups

### LGBTQ+ group

One of the marginalized yet largest groups in Poland is the LGBTQ+ community. The most important media pillar of this group is the lgbt socio-cultural bi-monthly “Replika”, the magazine promotes itself as the only LGBTIA magazine in Poland. It is worth remembering, however, that other press titles of this type appear on the market, but irregularly, at very long intervals and usually only a few issues. The newspaper supports the fight for the introduction of marriage equality in Poland, publishes stories of Polish women and men LGBTQIA and

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<sup>8</sup> Information collected based on an interview with the author conducted in January 2025.

brings closer the profiles of queer culture icons. It publishes reviews of books, films and theatre news.

Tomasz Piotrowski, Operations Director of the Replika Foundation<sup>9</sup> points out that the language of the magazine's messages is definitely different from the rest of the media market, both in the paper version and in social media publications. He admits that for him, as a graduate of journalism, joining the "Replika" team was actually a new school of journalism. He explains that the art of writing remains unchanged (he wouldn't look for differences in using more or less colloquial language), but mindfulness when writing inclusive texts must be much greater. The journalist notes that education in Poland does not provide any basis for the automatic use of inclusive language. Therefore, new volunteers in editorial teams work on developing the habit of, for example, using feminine, appropriate pronouns or neutrals for the first few months. Of course, this is met with a different reception. There is no shortage of discussion, especially in the magazine's social media, which was particularly visible when the editorial team recently introduced "x" to verbs instead of selected letters so that these words became gender neutral. In Polish, however, they also took on the form of neologisms, which upset some readers. Another very important aspect of the language is the so-called "personalities", which can be understood as terms in asexual form. In this topic, as the editor points out, the editorial team is at odds with the two sides of the war – if they wrote about a non-binary person in a chosen gender form, they would undoubtedly be criticized in the comments. When, on the other hand, they use non-binary forms – there will always be criticism on the lexical grounds.

However, the editorial team stands on the side of the need for changes in the language and its gradual transformation to society's current needs and requirements. Thus, the team focuses on inclusive communication. The editorial team pays special attention to the style of communication for two reasons. Firstly – language is of great importance – by introducing, for example, feminatives, journalists give appropriate visibility to excluded groups in communication and give them an equal social position. Secondly – language hurts – LGBT + people encounter hate every day. "Replika" is supposed to be a medium in which they feel like themselves, they are supposed to read about themselves and do not have to explain anything to anyone. The magazine's content is aimed at LGBTQIA+ people in Poland, which is why it is the primary criterion for selecting topics and people the editorial team talks to in each issue. This is to show the diversity of this community, and the team also makes sure that, to the extent possible, each group of LGBT+ people finds a representative of their closest community in each issue (lesbians, gays, non-binary people, transgender people,

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9 Information was collected based on an interview with the director in January 2025.

drag culture...). The editorial team also tries to ensure that the heroes and heroines on the cover correspond to equal representation. In a business context, this is, of course, difficult – there have often been topics that would bring more publicity and translate into sales of the magazine if they were on the cover – explains Piotrowski. In addition to topics that are of interest to its readers (such as cinema or literature), the editorial team also addresses social issues that are important to a given community, such as sexual health, but also controversial issues, such as sex work. Emotions are very important in “Replika’s” messages, which is why a huge emphasis is still placed on interviews with LGBT+ people. People’s stories are of great importance in building a sense of security and belonging. A great deal of emphasis is also placed on coming out. The magazine’s journalists believe that nothing changes society’s approach to LGBT+ people as much as getting to know such people. Coming outs therefore do “double work” because, on the one hand, they increase the number of allies to “familiarize the subject”, but they also support LGBT+ people who may believe that being gay/lesbian/trans – you can achieve a lot in life (hence the many texts about coming outs of public figures). When it comes to the graphic side of the magazine, the practice of illustrating relationships and love through the tenderness of people of the same sex becomes key. It is not just supposed to be a message “Yes, this is a portal for LGBT+ people”, but also simply “familiarising” recipients with such images, giving them an equal place in the discourse and media space.

Among other media initiatives of the LGBTQ community, the weekly radio show on TOK FM radio, “Better Late than Never”, should be mentioned. A broadcast about non-heteronormative relationships, i. e., about the everyday life of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenderists, transsexual women/men, and people, is not defined by gender/sexuality. The hosts and their guests talk about social, cultural and political issues related to the world that break with everyday heteronorm, i. e., partnerships, literature with lesbian and gay themes, coming out of the closet, not hiding your partners, and eliminating homophobia (znajdz.lgbt, 2024).

Another initiative in this sector is the social and activist quarterly “Ne\_Ni”, published by the Ne\_Ni Foundation, founded in 2021. The magazine was published in 5 issues (two in 2021 and three in 2022). From December 1, 2022, the quarterly publication was suspended for a year due to the lack of financial possibilities to continue the project. Mariusz Godlejewski<sup>10</sup> (editor-in-chief of “Ne\_Ni” Magazyn) informs that the quarterly was distributed in digital form at [www.neni.org.pl](http://www.neni.org.pl) and in a paper version (100% recycled), free of charge, in a circulation of 2,000 copies, in over 70 partner locations in the country and through direct and individual orders from our side. The editors did not count on

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10 Information collected based on an interview with the editor conducted in June 2023.

state aid but expected it to help the LGBTQ+ community and organizations, with no major results.

The LGBT community also has the magazine “Pride” at its disposal, which was created during the pandemic to celebrate the month of pride (June), as its creators emphasise. When publishing the first issue, the team did not assume a continuation, but it turned out that the magazine met with great interest thanks to the support of the organization Campaign against Homophobia. The magazine has been published several times so far, but an interesting fact is that a single issue is published in several cover versions.

### Media for seniors

Another often marginalised group in Poland are seniors. Noteworthy here is the nationwide press title “Głos Seniora” (Senior’s voice) published by the MANKO Association, which specializes in social, media and educational campaigns. Its goal is activation and education in health, law, economy and security. Defending the rights and improving the social and media image of the elderly. So far, more than 60 newspaper editions have been published, reaching most Universities of the Third Age, Senior Councils and Senior Clubs throughout Poland. The target group of the magazine are mainly people aged 60+. In addition to them, the message is also addressed to their families and people of all ages interested in their own health, family and environment, social activity, volunteering or education at the Universities of the Third Age, Senior Clubs and Senior Councils. The magazine is created by seniors (correspondents, ambassadors and partner senior organizations in Poland and abroad). Most of them are graduates of trainings in citizen journalism, which MANKO has been conducting for 7 years throughout Poland and abroad. The Association also offers the Voice of Senior Internet TV. The project consists in the production, promotion and broadcasting of special film materials dedicated to seniors. These are advice, interviews with specialists and experts, and entertainment programs (including advice from a geriatrician, cardiologist, psychologist or Patient Rights Ombudsman). Only in 2020, over 60 pro-senior programs (educational, activation and counseling) were produced, which have already reached over 500,000 seniors through the association’s social media. (glosseniora.pl, 2023) The editorial representative, editor Justyna Śmiertka<sup>11</sup>, emphasises that they reach readers with different education levels and living in different environments as a medium. Hence, the emphasis is on writing articles in both the national magazine and on the website simply and concisely. All texts must be as useful as possible. Considering the attention span of the recipient, the editorial team places the most important information at the

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11 Information collected based on an interview with the editor conducted in January 2025.

beginning of the articles, in the lead. Another distinguishing feature of this medium is the fact that the editorial team does not construct misleading and shocking headlines, which in most modern media serve the clickbait policy and can be misleading. In announcements, the editorial team always provides the exact place and time of the event at the beginning, and on the website, it does not use so-called anchors; only the full link is pasted because not every senior user knows how it works. The editorial team does not use scientific language, and if such specialised vocabulary appears in the texts from our experts, it is simplified. Foreign words are translated, and the way of pronunciation is also provided. This is the procedure used, among others, in the 74th issue of the magazine, which was entirely devoted to the safety of the elderly. It mainly concerned cybersecurity and, consequently, frauds, which very often take their name from the English language, e.g., spoofing or phishing. (glosseniora.pl a, 2024) The team's journalists also actively work to simplify the official and legal language in order to build the accessibility of messages for seniors. The editor emphasizes that in selecting specialists and topics, they are guided by the needs typical of old age. The magazine even has an expert Program Council, which includes gerontologists, geriatricians, cardiologists, economists, pedagogues and physiotherapists. They take up topics related to senior policy (senior voucher, widow's pension, long-term care or silver economy), senior health (heart attacks in hot weather, urinary incontinence, dementia or depression) and activation (interviews in the issue, in which celebrities describe their ways of maintaining good mental and physical condition, volunteering or classes at universities of the third age). In the context of activation, the competitions of the magazine are very important: Stylish Seniors, Animal as a cure for loneliness, Love after 60, Senior Moto-Retro, Pass us your recipe. The selection of content also results from research conducted among seniors – the publisher of the magazine conducted the “Research on the Social Needs of Seniors 2024” (MANKO, 2024) study for this purpose.

As for the graphic form of the magazine in the context of its adaptation to the recipients, in the case of the paper edition, the team ensures that the photos are not too small and that the headlines and leads are visible (highlighted in bold). The text is divided into paragraphs, subheadings are used. On the website, on the other hand, larger spaces between lines are used (line spacing 1.5), and, in accordance with the principle of simple language, the text is aligned to the left, words are not divided, and they also remember the sans-serif font. If a photo gallery is inserted, not all the photos are placed at the end but interwoven with the text.

“Głos seniora” in its various versions seems to be the most attractive and most adapted to the needs of seniors media offer. However, it is not the only offer on the market. Public television also offers a program for older audiences – “Seriously Season”. The several-minute magazine, premiere episode once a month,

offers its viewers curiosities related to health, beauty, interesting cultural initiatives of seniors and issues related to passion and free time.

In electronic and paper versions, another proposal is “Gazeta Senior” (Senior Newspaper) and *GazetaSenior.pl*. Linda Matus<sup>12</sup>, the editor-in-chief informs that the first issue was published in 2015; through 2016 and 2017, the newspaper was quarterly; from 2018, it is monthly. The circulation of the printed edition today is 15,000, while it started with 10,000 copies. The e-edition is sold from Wednesday, May 31, 2023. The reach of the *gazetasesenior.pl* website has been 2 million UU since the beginning of the year, an average of over 400,000 UU per month, according to Google Analytics. The sources of funding are mainly advertising revenue and subscription fees (group or individual). The journal is available by subscription only. The content in the newspaper is different from the content on the website, concludes Matus.

### People with disabilities media

In the case of people with disabilities, the media offer is rudimentary. The absolute market leader is the free magazine “Integracja” published for 31 years and created by the Integracja team (consisting of public benefit organizations). During this time, over 180 issues of the magazine were published. Initially published as an 8-page newsletter, today it has the form of a 68-page bimonthly. The magazine has a circulation of 20,000 copies and is distributed by over 600 volunteers. The editorial office also runs the *Niepełnosprawni.pl* portal. It is the largest and most popular information website in Poland dealing with the subject of disability. The portal has existed since 2003. It is visited by 300,000 people a month. Internet users, and every week, over 16.5 thousand. People receive information newsletters. (Integracja, 2023) The website is also adapted for mobile devices. Editor Mateusz Różański<sup>13</sup> draws attention to an extremely interesting phenomenon when it comes to the broadly understood language in his editorial office. It turns out that completely different messages, based on different linguistic characteristics, reach the recipients of the portal than the recipients of the magazine in the paper version. In the case of the portal, as he himself points out, the content must fit into the mechanisms of large platforms to stand out in browsers. Here, the recipients are looking for a very professional, specific message that will indicate data on benefits, social assistance, and available forms of subsidies in official – official language. These messages must be refined in formal and legal terms because, very often, the portal users print out

12 Information collected based on an interview with the editor conducted in June 2023.

13 Information collected based on interviews with the editor conducted in January and February 2025.

specific publications and go to specific offices with them as instructions. The users of the portal are not looking for lifestyle content (e.g., success stories of people with disabilities), they satisfy such needs, for example, based on the Internet (YouTube, Google). The situation of a paper magazine is completely different, while it is distributed for free (and this is crucial for the target group) in places such as the Social Insurance Institution or the Disabled Persons Rehabilitation Fund. In this way, as one of the few media sources, an attractive, colourful newspaper reaches people excluded on many levels – due to disability, economic reasons and low cultural capital. For this type of reader, the magazine must meet many different needs related to building knowledge, expanding culture, and building social competencies (e.g., through a report, an interview with a politician, or a report from an exhibition). This distinction is, therefore, reflected in both the content and the language – of the portal and the magazine. The first is very technical, official, and dry; the second is easily accessible but rich in topics. Of course, in the case of each of these media, the inclusive dimension of the language is key to building knowledge about inclusive, non-judgmental language.

The editorial office's publications referring to people in mental crisis have even been noticed and appreciated by experts from the medical community. It is worth emphasising the importance of the portal and magazine for the integrative role of the disabled community, also as a forum for debate, a space that gives them a voice. An excellent example is the 2021 competition (the jury included an outstanding Polish writer, Michał Rusinek), in which readers were asked to propose a name for a special space for disabled adults adapted to hygiene procedures, e.g., changing diapers. The need to indicate the Polish version of this term – long common in the world in the English version “changing places”, came from the readers themselves, and the Polish version was chosen from 1,501 proposals – “komfortka” has permanently entered the language and jargon both in the community itself and beyond. In technical terms, the editorial office applies the standards of the Digital Accessibility Act WCAG 2.0. (Sejm, 2019) Where possible, sign language is introduced on the portal, otherwise subtitles.

An interesting proposition for this social group is the broadcast of the public broadcaster TVP. The magazine “Pełnosprawni” brings closer the sports rivalry of people with disabilities. It is broadcast once a week on TVP Sport; the broadcast lasts about 20 minutes. In May 2023, the editorial office celebrated the release of the 500th episode of the broadcast. (sport.tvp.pl, 2023) It seems that, especially in the case of this editorial team, the method of communication is particularly important. It emphasises the inclusive dimension of sports competition, emphasising the significance of the successes of its heroes through an affirmative, appreciative tone. It also builds an image of a person with disabilities as active and successful, which is of exceptional importance for improving the

social perception of such people and reducing the polarisation resulting from the depreciation of the potential and independence of these members of society.

It should be emphasised that at the local level, there are Internet portals targeted at people with disabilities, such as *invisible-leszno.pl*, *niepełnospraw lublin.pl* (disabled people's information bulletin).

The main problem of the media of marginalised groups remains the small financial resources and lack of financial support. They operate mainly thanks to donors' help and small advertising revenues. Often editorial offices operate on the basis of journalists' volunteering. This translates into irregular editions, low frequency and delays. The circulation of printed magazines is small.

### 3. Research aims

Recognising and analysing the offer of the minority media sector and media of marginalised groups is a laborious and time-consuming task due to the extensive nature of the media market in Poland and the numerous editorial problems of the specified media. Team shortages, voluntary work of journalists, being dependent on the help of various external entities (state, local government, NGOs) combined with fears resulting from social ostracism (homophobia, ageism), lack of tolerance (rejection due to disabilities) and national stereotypes (nationalism, national prejudice) discourage editorial teams from sharing their experiences and making various data available.

The aim of the presented analyses was to attempt to develop a characterisation of the media spaces of the indicated groups and then to demonstrate trends and phenomena representative of individual categories within the language they use, in terms of the selection of topics most frequently discussed issues, the way of presenting content and non-standard solutions proposed by the editorial offices. The scope and quality of information offered by minority media and those created for minorities and media of marginalised groups were also assessed, both in the dimension of PSM and commercial media.

As a foundation for the conducted research, the following research questions were developed:

- RQ1:** What is the scope of media offered to national minorities and marginalised groups?
- RQ2:** Do these media meet the critical information needs of the communities they serve?
- RQ3:** What is the market and social condition of these media and how does it affect their functioning?
- RQ4:** What is the specificity of the messages offered by these media, and how does it stand out from the content of other media?

## 4. Data and methods

The framework established by the above research questions indicated the further direction of information collection and analysis. In this process, both existing and created sources were used. In the first case, data was collected by analysing legal and regulatory documents, press reports, appropriate quantitative data, official reports and normative acts. The created sources were based on interviews conducted with representatives of individual editorial offices of selected media, obtaining valuable qualitative data.

The interviews were conducted by phone and email and in the form of internet chats by the study's author from May 2023 to February 2025. The question form, partially standardised, was subject to modification depending on the type of medium and its characteristics. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and expressed consent to use their statements in this context.

According to the scheme, the research was carried out based on a general methodology: from theory to practice. The system analysis method was used, which allowed us to determine the specificity of contemporary media in the context of selected groups and the specificity of their message, while the analytical method used determined the main problems and tendencies of this media sector also through the prism of the language characteristics of selected editorial offices. The comparative method and critical analysis created the basis for formulating opinions and drawing conclusions.

## 5. Conclusions

The data obtained from the extensive analysis allowed us to effectively meet the study's objectives and outline a descriptive scheme of the media sectors of minority and marginalised groups in Poland, both in terms of content and characteristics. It also indicated the dominant tendencies and atypical elements in this space. It should be noted, however, that the study does not constitute an exhaustive list of available media of individual groups but focuses on examples of media that are particularly important for the market space described. These examples constitute the basis for drawing generalised conclusions.

In relation to the research questions posed, it should be assumed that the range of media offered to its recipients was estimated, along with the determination of the degree to which individual entities meet the critical information needs of the communities they serve. The collected research material also allowed for drawing conclusions regarding the condition and vitality of the discussed media and the impact of these realities on their functioning.

Unfortunately, in both cases, this assessment turned out to be quite pessimistic due to the growing financial problems of these specific media, while at the same time, their content is being devalued by mainstream media. This deepens the polarisation processes, which, what is worse, occur within groups that are particularly sensitive to social stratification, such as ethnic groups or sexual minorities.

Finally, based on selected examples, the specificity of the content of these media was also demonstrated, understood as the language of their message, with emphasis on the determinants that distinguish this content from other media. In this case, the analysis confirmed that both in terms of the selection of topics, invited guests, problems raised, and in some cases even the graphic and emotional context – a specific language distinguishes the media of the groups discussed and uses it as a conscious tool in relations with representatives of their target group, as well as other groups in society.

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## A little homeland or a breeding ground for problems? District narratives in the local Krakow 2024 presidential campaign

### Abstract

The demand for the decentralisation of the state is one element of the multidimensional political polarisation in Poland (Kisilowski & Wojciuk, 2023; Dudek, 2023). Decentralisation is understood here in two ways: as measures to broaden the competencies of local authorities in state governance processes and as measures to increase citizen participation in political decision-making processes (Hess, 2013; Wojtasik, 2013). The Civic Dialogue Observatory team's research (ODO, short for Obserwatorium Dialogu Obywatelskiego) is conducted within the framework of urban studies, in which the contemporary city (Krakow) is treated as a lens for observation of the ongoing changes and problems in society within the context of Polish democracy (Hess, Grzechnik & Zdunek, 2022). The aim of the research presented in this chapter, which represents a fragment of ODO's analysis, was to identify and characterise political narratives about districts and district councils in the local government election campaign of 2024 for Mayor of Krakow, to define the axes of political divisions among the candidates and the areas of competition. The main goal was to identify the factors that polarise the local electoral competition. The research material was collected from the perspective of a voter seeking information from online sources. A netographic approach was applied. Elements polarising the electoral competition and fundamentally differentiating the candidates' political narratives on Krakow's districts have been identified, but no explicitly confrontational elements were found. The analysis made it possible to identify the divisions of contexts and dimensions of the presentation of districts, as well as the proposals for changes regarding the functioning and competencies of the district councils.

**Keywords:** decentralisation, urban studies, political polarisation, local government election campaign, netnography, districts of Krakow

## 1. Introduction – Krakow as a subject of observation in the processes of metropolitan decentralisation in Poland

Political polarisation is not a consistent process, as it is subject to evolution and continuous changes. It is the result of the actions of the political elite (primarily party elites), voters and interest groups. The former adopts a confrontational rivalry strategy by introducing topics into public discourse that form the axis of political dispute or by sustaining existing divisions (Palonen, 2009; Wielgosz, 2020). Political parties and the voters' political preferences can be arranged along the axis of those divisions (Downs, 1957; Satori, 2005). While the polarisation mechanism itself can be considered regular and repetitive, polarisation issues change over time or emerge as a result of specific events or situations<sup>1</sup>. Joanna Sanecka-Tyczyńska (2015) identifies three basic periods of political polarisation in Poland after the political transformation in 1989: the post-communist period (the axis of conflict revolved around the division into two camps that represented two sides of the conflict in the fight for democracy in the times of the Polish People's Republic), the post-solidarity period (built around the rivalry between the Civic Platform (PO, short for Platforma Obywatelska) and Law and Justice (PiS, short for Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) – two still dominant political parties) and the post-smoleńsk period (that is defined by the controversy about the interpretation of causes and accounting for the plane crash of 2010<sup>2</sup>). The determinant of the political polarisation in Poland is still the conflict (that results in part from ideological distance) between the two dominating subjects of the party system (PO and PiS) and the division of society that is based on this dispute, into social groups representing a different perception of reality.

During the post-communist polarisation period, the decentralisation of the state, understood in two ways, was a central topic of the political debate, in which various visions for modernising the political system were developed, which later became a key focus on the agenda for reforming Polish democracy<sup>3</sup>. For one thing, the expansion of the competencies of local governments at the expense of

1 For more information, see the chapter by Agnieszka Walecka-Rynduch.

2 On the 10th of April 2010, a plane crash occurred in which 96 people died, including many high-ranking Polish state representatives. The Tu-154M aircraft, with President Lech Kaczyński at the helm, crashed in unexplained circumstances on its approach to landing near Smolensk Severnyy Airport. On board was a delegation which was to take part in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre (Museum of Polish History in Warsaw, (n.d.). Smolensk crash. <https://muzhp.pl/kalendarium/katastrofa-w-smolensku>).

3 Decentralisation processes are characteristic of Central and Eastern European countries, which underwent the process of democratisation at a similar time to Poland. However, their scope and pace are derived from different expectations of the goals brought about by the systemic transformation and traditions in defining the role and competencies assigned to lower-level units of state administration.

the competencies of the central government was a subject of dispute. Secondly, demands became a point of political discussion, including those made by NGOs to increase the participation of citizens in the state's decision-making processes. Nowadays, the topic of metropolitan decentralisation increasingly comes up in the public debate about the shortcomings of Polish democracy, as it could be an antidote to political polarisation. This is important because Poland is a country where national political parties are rather weakly involved in local government activities (Bukowski, Flis, Hess & Szymańska, 2016).

The Civic Dialogue Observatory team (Obserwatorium Dialogu Obywatelskiego; ODO<sup>4</sup>) has been conducting multifaceted, systematic and comprehensive analyses of communication processes and relations between the participants of the public discourse in Krakow since 2015. In these studies, the modern city is perceived as a lens of social transformation, including changes occurring in the democratic system (Hess, Grzechnik & Zdunek, 2022). Krakow is a good object for observing social processes and phenomena, including political polarisation and decentralisation in Polish metropolitan areas. It is the second biggest city in Poland – in terms of population, size and contribution to the national GDP (PwC, 2019; Krakow City Council, 2021). Krakow also has a diverse population structure reflecting the social groups that make up the communities of Poland's largest cities.

The functioning and competencies of district councils (municipal auxiliary units) are the subject of a discussion on intramunicipal decentralisation in Poland. Meanwhile, the voter turnout in the district council elections held on the 10th of December 2023 in Polish cities was barely 8.17%. It is hard to compare this result (due to the different nature of elections, the campaign and electoral competition, etc.) to the voter participation in the national parliamentary elections held less than two months earlier (15th October 2023), where the turnout in Krakow was 81.95%. Nevertheless, this difference illustrates a certain paradox.

The demand for metropolitan decentralisation includes a voluntary and active increase in citizen participation in urban governance. However, the low turnout in the neighbourhood council elections indicates a limited interest and somewhat indifferent attitude of Krakow's residents to politics at their closest level of government. On the one hand – the importance of the municipality's auxiliary units (district councils, neighbourhood councils, ward councils) as the institutions of power functioning closest to the daily affairs of the residents is underlined, as they could foster integration and real solutions to their problems. On the

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4 The authors present the results of research carried out as part of ODO, an implementation research and teaching project carried out by the Institute of Journalism, Media and Social Communication and the Institute of Public Affairs at the Jagiellonian University in agreement with the Municipality of Krakow.

other hand, there are numerous factors that limit this potential (alongside the low voter turnout – poor efficiency, outdated statutes, lack of knowledge of district council competencies among citizens) but also “wrongdoings” of the district councils and councillors (e. g., their partisanship, multiple candidacies, poor commitment) (Hess, Gloc, Cheba & Nowak, 2024). The findings of the ODO team so far (2015–2022)<sup>5</sup> indicate that the topic of districts is an important element of the discussion on the future of the city and its residents and that it is controversial among participants in local debates, among others in social media (Grzechnik, Hess, Gloc & Najbor, 2023).

In local government elections in Poland, five different types of bodies are appointed: municipal councils, county councils, voivodship assemblies, district councils and single-member executive bodies of municipalities (village mayors, city mayors or city presidents). This chapter presents the conclusions from the analysis of the research material collected during the election campaign for Mayor of Krakow in 2024<sup>6</sup>. What stands out as innovative here is that the research material was collected from the perspective of a voter seeking answers to questions about the role and importance of districts in the life of the city and its residents in the last period of local government competition. By using the netnographic approach, the internet became an unrestricted field of exploration for researchers.

An important component of polarisation is political narratives, which contain an evaluation of the past, a diagnosis of reality and criticism of the actions of political competitors (Sanecka-Tyczyńska, 2015). The aim of this research was to identify and characterise the narratives concerning districts and/or district councils in Krakow’s local government presidential campaign and to identify the fields of political rivalry and the elements that polarise the campaign. The first part of the chapter describes the nature of the elections for the Mayor of Krakow,

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5 The ODO team has so far dealt with the determinants and quality of civic dialogue in Krakow, which takes place between different actors participating in the life of the city. Every year, important topics for the development of the city are addressed. From the perspective of the present study, it is worth highlighting that the 2021 study focused on multicultural dialogue in city council and media discourse. The topic was particularly relevant given the change in the social fabric of the city, including the construction of residential areas, which was linked to the influx of people from Ukraine after the Russian invasion. The theme of districts – as key components of the urban fabric – resonated most in ODO’s 2022–2023 research, when neighbourhood relations and practices were made the subject of interest.

6 The research, the results of which are presented in this chapter, is part of a broader ODO project to be carried out between 2024 and 2027. It assumes a multifaceted analysis of Krakow’s districts and district councils as actors in civic dialogue based on the developed ODO research scheme for analysing communication processes and relations between participants in civic dialogue. Hence, research in this period will be conducted from the perspective of three types of participants in the public discourse (authority – media – citizens) at three levels of analysis (micro – meso – macro).

including the divides among candidates, the voter turnout and the results of the election. This analysis is a starting point for understanding the political background of the campaign and the communication strategies of individual participants of the electoral race and indicates possible areas of political polarisation. The second part of the chapter focuses on the content analysis of district narratives during the electoral campaign in Krakow, with particular attention to differences and polarisation elements in the political competition between candidates. The contexts in which presidential candidates referred to districts and/or district councils were discussed in detail, together with the different perspectives on this issue.

## 2. The Presidential Campaign in Kraków 2024: turnout, results and candidates

The intention behind introducing the principle of direct elections to the elections of single-member executive authorities at the level of local government (village mayors, city mayors, city presidents) in 2002 was a wider empowerment of local communities to elect their representatives. Previously, their election was mainly decided by negotiations between political forces (usually reflecting national party divisions), sitting on the relevant city and municipal councils. A factor for increased political polarisation is currently the running of candidates who want to distinguish themselves from the mainstream parties. In their electoral activities, they often focus on political and ideological radicalism or on exposing the problems and positions lying beyond the interest of traditional political groups (Wojtasik, 2013). Moreover, the personalisation of local elections fosters the formation of so-called presidential committees or committees of leaders, whose support depends primarily on the position of existing local authorities (Gendźwiłł & Swianiewicz, 2017).

In the election for Mayor of Krakow in 2024, nine candidates were registered: Konrad Berkowicz (Konfederacja i Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy; eng. *Confederation and Nonpartisan Local Government Representatives*), Łukasz Gibała (independent candidate; Electoral Committee of Łukasz Gibała's Voters – Kraków for the Residents), Adam Hareńczyk (independent candidate; KWW Zjednoczeni dla Krakowa), Łukasz Kmita (PiS; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, eng. *Law and Justice*), Rafał Komarewicz (Polska 2050, eng. *Poland 2050*); Andrzej Kulig (independent candidate; Electoral Committee of Andrzej Kulig's Voters – "Towards the Future"); Stanisław Mazur (independent candidate); Aleksander Miszański (Koalicja Obywatelska, eng. *Civic Coalition*) and Jerzy Muzyk (independent candidate). During the competition, Stanisław Mazur, who handed over his

support to Aleksander Miszałski, and Jerzy Muzyk, who supported Andrzej Kulig, resigned from the candidacy.

Given the experience and proclaimed views of those registered in the 2024 election for Mayor of Kraków, the candidates can be classified along four key axes of division: 1) party affiliation axis: candidate representing a political party vs. candidate running as an independent candidate; 2) axis of nationwide party polarisation: the Civic Coalition candidate (KO)<sup>7</sup> vs. The candidate of the Law and Justice party (PiS); 3) axis of (pre)dominant activity: “identity” of a politician vs. “identity” of an urban activist; 4) in relation to the previous Mayor of Kraków: supporter of the old authorities vs. an opponent of the old authorities.

Incidentally, in discussions of polarisation, it is worth noting that gender was not a differentiating factor among the candidates in the Krakow presidential election, reflecting a nationwide trend. Women very rarely compete in elections for city mayor<sup>8</sup>.

The first differentiating factor was party affiliation. On the one hand, there were representatives of Polish political parties, and on the other, non-partisan, independent candidates. Nonpartisanship is manifested in Polish local government campaigns as independence from party influence, an advantage for the candidate, and an alternative to the mainstream polarising political opinion (Bukowski, Flis, Hess & Szymańska, 2016). However, the classification along this axis cannot be perceived in black-and-white terms: for example – although Łukasz Gibała did not represent any political party in the elections of 2024, in the past, he was involved with the Civic Platform (PO), and then with the Palikot Movement (Ruch Palikota) and Your Movement (Twój Ruch).

In presidential races at the city level, there is a clear dividing line that reflects the polarisation of the leading national parties: PO and PiS. The KO and PiS candidates were supported by the parties’ central authorities and their leaders (both Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński referred to Kraków’s race for mayor in their statements). In the first stage of the campaign, the issue of the so-called “Polish-Polish war”<sup>9</sup> and calls for central polarisation not to be transferred to the local government ground came up directly. The PiS candidate Łukasz Kmita (gaining just under 20% of the supporting votes) has not made it to the second round of elections, so the matter was settled. The first round of elections, which took place on 7th April 2024, did not decide the outcome of the race. Voter turnout was 52,63%. None of the candidates obtained more than 50% of the votes

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7 In the local elections the Civic Coalition (KO) was identified with the coalition’s dominant party, Civic Platform (PO).

8 National Electoral Commission. (2024). Results in the elections for the Mayor of the City of Krakow, <https://samorzad2024.pkw.gov.pl/samorzad2024/pl/wbp/okregi/126100>.

9 A phrase used in the campaign by Konrad Berkowicz, who appealed not to move the “Polish-Polish war” to Krakow.

(National Electoral Commission, 2024). In the second round, Aleksander Miszalski (110,556 votes) and Łukasz Gibała (79,580 votes) competed. Both candidates are native-born Krakovians, almost peers, both with a doctoral degree. The first one was identified by Krakovians as a national politician, party member of the Civic Platform (PO), and member of Parliament of the ninth and tenth term, representing the Civic Coalition (KO) in the elections for Mayor of Krakow. Previously, he was a district councillor and Kraków City councillor. Łukasz Gibała, however, acted as a non-partisan candidate, an active city activist who had already run for Mayor of Krakow in previous elections. He has been the city councillor of Krakow since 2018 and was previously also a councillor of the Malopolskie Voivodeship Assembly. He was also a member of the Civic Platform party in the 6th and 7th Sejm. From the perspective of the axis of party affiliation and nationwide political polarisation, it is interesting to note that in the second round of the elections, politicians identified at different levels of political activity (national vs. local) competed. Their rivalry, however, did not reflect the nationwide party polarisation between PO and PiS, as in this election, current and former members of the Civic Platform (PO) were competing against each other. The candidates rather agreed ideologically and shared important demands for investment and development directions for Kraków (e.g., they portrayed themselves as supporters of the construction of an underground subway and as opponents of the shady real estate development)<sup>10</sup>. The second round of elections (21st April 2024) resulted in victory for Aleksander Miszalski, who defeated Łukasz Gibała by a narrow margin (51,04% – 48,96%). The turnout was lower than in the first round, namely 45,55% (National Electoral Commission, 2024). Aleksander Miszalski replaced the previous mayor, Jacek Majchrowski, who had held this position for the last 21 years.

The third axis of division is determined by the indicator of the candidates' dominant activity. The competitors in the election for Mayor of Kraków in 2024 both showed significant political and/or social achievements – some have previously held office in the Kraków City Council, others were members of Parliament, and still others are city activists.

The candidates with a political “identity” were previously engaged in work for the city and region at various levels – from district councillor (e.g., Aleksander Miszalski) to city councilman of Kraków (e.g., Łukasz Gibała), to Deputy Mayor of the City of Kraków (Andrzej Kulig, Jerzy Muzyk) or governor of Małopolskie Province (e.g., Łukasz Kmita). Some candidates combine their political careers with social activism. The presidential campaign featured direct references to the

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10 The views of the candidates competing in the second round of elections in Krakow could be seen during pre-election debates, e.g., in Onet's (2024, 15 April) special program “Bitwa o Kraków” (“Battle for Kraków”) which is available on YouTube.

functions exercised, achievements of the candidates and current urban issues they have dealt with throughout their political activity so far. For example, Adam Hareńczyk, who is the leader of the social movement “Nie Oddamy Miasta” (“We Won’t Give Up the City”), ran his election campaign under the slogan of “ecorevolution” and opposed the idea of “clean transport zones”, that are the key demand of the movement<sup>11</sup>.

The fourth dividing factor by which candidates could be defined was the attitude to the previous authorities. On one side was Andrzej Kulig, deputy mayor of Kraków, who is perceived as the continuator of the policy of long-standing Mayor of Kraków Jacek Majchrowski and is also supported by him. On the other side was Łukasz Gibała, who, during the tenure of the previous mayor, systematically criticised the way the city was managed and adopted an accountability narrative in the campaign, positioning himself as the main opponent to the deputy mayor. At the beginning of the campaign, it was expected that this polarising factor would be crucial in the Krakow elections and that the second round would see a candidate presenting himself as a continuation of the previous government face-off against a candidate who unequivocally disassociates himself from the policies of Jacek Majchrowski<sup>12</sup>.

### 3. Methodology

The methodological strategy was based on netnography, also referred to as “connective ethnography” (Dirksen et al., 2010) or “internet ethnography” (Sade-Beck, 2008). The use of the netnographic approach in the research has enabled a holistic and descriptive analysis of the narratives relating to Kraków’s districts in the local government campaign in Kraków in 2024. It is important to note here that the empirical material collected by the ODO research team – a group of media scholars specialising in urban studies and political communication – took the perspective of a voter searching the internet for information on how candidates relate to the role and importance of districts in the life of the city and its residents.

11 The information comes from the candidate’s official website ([www.adamharenczyk.pl](http://www.adamharenczyk.pl)), which was already inactive in July 2024.

12 In the local media during the campaign, Jacek Majchrowski presented Andrzej Kulig as his natural successor, emphasising that Łukasz Gibała as the mayor of Kraków “would be a disaster for the city” (Bańka, 2024). Moreover, after the first round, surprise was expressed that the potential successor of the outgoing president’s policy obtained just over 8% and did not enter the second round of the elections (ŁGa, 2024). Łukasz Gibała himself has repeatedly criticised the city’s government in the local media, and his relations with Jacek Majchrowski were presented in the context of conflict (see e.g., Olszewski, 2024).

The aim of this analysis was to identify and characterise the narratives about districts and/or district councils in the local government presidential campaign in Krakow and to define the areas of competition and elements that polarise the campaign. The research problem was expressed in the main research question: What elements differentiated and/or polarised the political narratives about districts in the local presidential campaign in Krakow in 2024? For the purposes of the research, detailed research questions were posed:

**RQ1:** What were the contexts for referring to districts in the local presidential campaign in Kraków in 2024?

**RQ2:** What were the contexts of referring to the districts in the local presidential campaign in Kraków in 2024?

The data for the study was gathered in the last period of the local government competition. The poor visibility of some of the content proved to be a challenge in the design of the research. This may potentially have been due to the logic of social media algorithms or online search engines, which, depending on the search history, displayed content profiled for a given user seeking electoral information. The extracted source material was collated and then subjected to comparative analysis.

The study focused on official communication channels in the social media profiles of nine candidates (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube) and source materials, such as the candidates' official websites, where election programmes were made available; election committee channels; media coverage and materials made available on the website of the State Electoral Commission (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza) (Figure 1).

After an initial selection of the research material, it was found that the content provided by the candidates was redistributed simultaneously on many platforms. The candidates adapted them to the respective social media. All candidates had a profile on Facebook, X (former: Twitter), and TikTok; eight of them additionally had a profile on Instagram, and only two on YouTube. The majority of the candidates published their election program on their official webpage, which included information about proposed changes and the role of Krakow's districts.

It was found that Andrzej Kulig's internet page was only active during the local government campaign, and Łukasz Kmita (the PiS candidate) did not have one at all. Although Konrad Berkowicz's webpage remained active<sup>13</sup>, it lacked information about his electoral programme for 2024. An important source of references to districts was the official channels of the candidate's electoral committees. A wide variety of forms of media reports informing or commenting on candidates' statements on the districts were identified (including i.e., articles

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13 Status as of October 31, 2024.

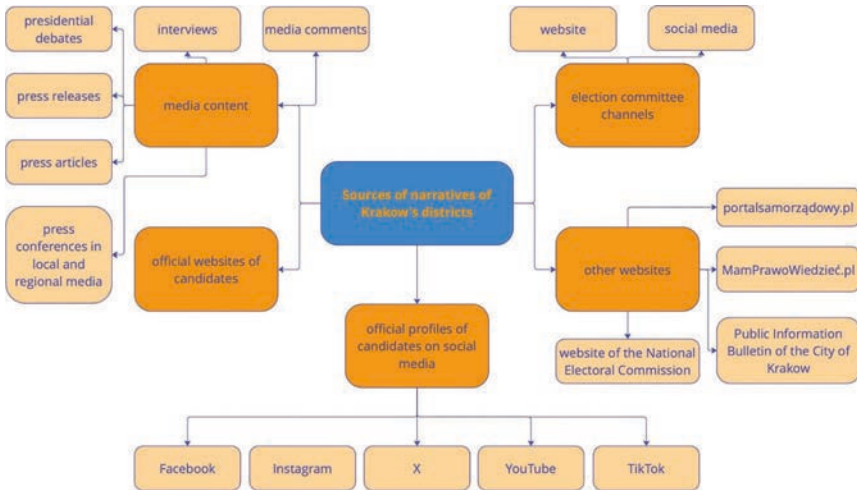


Figure 1. Sources of narratives – districts in the Kraków’s Local Government Elections. Source: own elaboration.

and press releases, descriptive and video coverage of events, online media information and live broadcasts).

The most frequently identified sources included information placed in traditional local media (Radio Kraków, Gazeta Krakowska, TVP Kraków) as well as in Kraków’s web portals (KRK News <https://krknews.pl/>, Love Kraków <https://lovekrakow.pl/>), run by the initiative of residents. The research material also included content published in official news channels, i.e., the Local Government Portal (<https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/>), the Public Information Bulletin of Kraków ([www.bip.krakow.pl](http://www.bip.krakow.pl/)), the webpage of the National Electoral Commission (<https://www.pkw.gov.pl/>) or the portal MamPrawoWiedziec.pl (eng. “I have the right to know”) (<https://mamprawowiedziec.pl/>).

#### 4. Type of perception and contexts of presentation of a district in Krakow

The element that clearly differentiated the candidates’ messages about districts was the type of narrative. Two main types of narrative were distinguished: the realistic ones and the idyllic ones. The first type featured communicating the need for institutional changes in the relationship between the authorities and Kraków’s citizens. District councils were presented as local government bodies operating in the immediate surroundings of residents-electors. The candidates emphasised that an appropriate distribution of budgetary resources and in-

creasing the competencies of the district councils so that they can provide real development and assistance to the local community is an important element of the proper functioning of district councils. These narratives referred to systemic solutions for different areas of city management. The direct importance of district councils in the urban space was mentioned by Konrad Berkowicz, Adam Hareńczyk, Łukasz Kmita and Aleksander Miszałski. These candidates stressed the significance of districts as key institutions that allow for civic dialogue – i. e., a formal inclusion of citizens in an active debate on city management. In idyllic narratives, candidates presented utopian visions that referred to the idea of deliberative democracy (Dahl, 1989). The districts were socially perceived as “little homelands” – places where the citizens should be independent of the City Council and the Mayor in terms of managing and administering public funds. Candidates who spoke in the idyllic tone took the perspective of perceiving the functions of districts through the lens of residents’ needs, placing them at the centre of urban processes and attributing capacities and powers to them. The need to listen to citizens was the element connecting the narratives of the “realists” and the “idealists”.

An important element distinguishing the campaigns of the candidates addressing the topic of districts was either an articulation of financial demands in their campaign messages or the lack of that topic. Konrad Berkowicz, Aleksander Miszałski and Łukasz Kmita unequivocally expressed the need for increased budgetary means provided by the city, so that the members of the district councils could carry out their tasks independently. Aleksander Miszałski noted that “The amounts transferred to the district councils should be increased to ensure that they are able to carry out the tasks commissioned by the Kraków City Council” (Rąpalski, 2024). In an interview for the Polish Press Agency, Konrad Berkowicz stated that “districts should not be dependent on the favour or dis-favour of the Mayor and the City Council” (Polish Press Agency, 2024).

In his programme assumptions, Łukasz Kmita singled out the aspect of improving the city’s cooperation with district councils and increasing their budgets (Kmita, 2024, 20 March). The other candidates neglected to comment on the issues of financing districts.

The candidates’ campaigns for Mayor of Kraków were also differentiated by the perspective of the call for strengthening districts as a general form of urban organisation and management. On the one hand, it was presented from the perspective of the city, where there is a need to develop districts as important centres of power for the residents, while on the other hand, a “district-centric” perspective was used, in which the need for a change in the organisation of the city life was highlighted. For example, Łukasz Gibała called for a policy of equal development of all districts and residential neighbourhoods, including those on the periphery (Gibała, 2024, 18 March), and Jerzy Muzyk stressed the importance

of the idea of creating district service centres and implementing a 15-minute city in each of them (Tymczak, 2024). Stanisław Mazur built a similar political narrative in his statements. He highlighted the importance of building well-organised districts where all essential services are within easy reach of the residents (Mazur, 2024). Lukasz Kmita, on the other hand, spoke about the development of suburban neighbourhoods without, however, giving more precise information about their location (Ziaja, 2024). Consequently, a potential voter may have encountered difficulty in verifying such a statement.

In their campaigns, the candidates used either a general rhetoric – referred to districts as administrative parts of the city, or a detailed rhetoric – i. e., focusing attention on specific districts and the problems of their inhabitants. The first type of rhetoric was mainly used in the context of the previously described visions of budget allocation, city organisation and equality of districts in terms of their development. Using detailed rhetoric, the candidates referred to specific districts, proposing solutions to the electorate regarding the daily life of the residents, such as transport, economy, education and work, environment and ecology, organisation of activities for specific social groups, urban space or health. In the media coverage and the electoral programs, the candidates mentioned the names of districts, juxtaposing them with specific problems of the local community.

The candidates for Mayor of Kraków acted as advisors or defenders of particular districts. Each candidate identified at least once a potential solution to a problem in their chosen district. The focus was on areas that were portrayed as underinvested, on environmental, educational, activation issues, transport and communication, cultural and social, industrial and entertainment issues (Salomon, 2024). The candidates declared themselves to be defenders of districts, primarily pointing out the excessive density of development, and calling for changes to the regulations on the declassifying of land as agricultural so that residents could invest in residential development (Bańka, 2024).

Of particular interest to potential candidates for Mayor of Krakow was Nowa Huta, the largest and most specific – due to its history and social divisions – district of Krakow. It is a peculiar symbol of the urban planning policy pursued by the communist Polish authorities, subordinated to the USSR. The development and settlement of this part of the city began after the Second World War (1949). The original intention was for Nowa Huta to become a separate city, concentrating the working community around the steelworks complex and opposition to the old, historic city of Krakow (Gądecki, 2013). It was to outshine the former capital of Poland and become an example of an ideal modernist city (Zieliński, 2010). By a decision of the authorities, two years after construction began, it was annexed to Krakow as its youngest district (Kapusta, 2011). Despite this decision, it remained a separate part of the city in the minds of the residents

until the end of the communist era. The combined building still appears today as a relic of the past, where strikes and protests of a solidarity and freedom character took place in the 1980s. To this day, a peculiar distinction between “city residents (of Krakow)” and “Nowa Huta residents” persists in the public consciousness of Krakow’s population. In the analysed campaign, the majority of the candidates, seven in all, clearly indicated the need to invest in plans for the development of Nowa Huta with the aim of alleviating these archaic divisions. The topic clearly highlighted the axes of political polarisation described above, i. e., the axis of party-candidate vs. non-party-candidate and the axis of politician identity vs. activist identity. Łukasz Gibała, an independent candidate running for mayor for the third time, advocated the city’s investment in Nowa Huta, the strongest of all the candidates in his election programme, presenting many proposals for different groups of residents. Łukasz Kmita, a candidate of Law and Justice (PiS), advocated an overall strengthening of funding for the district, focusing primarily on criticising the actions of the current authorities, whom he accused of passivity and inconsistency. In turn, Aleksander Miszański and Stanisław Mazur (who supported the former after his resignation) portrayed Łukasz Gibała as a populist playing the role of a municipal activist, ostensibly acting for the benefit of residents but in reality focused only on his political career, and Łukasz Kmita as a Law and Justice (PiS) candidate “controlled from the back seat by Jarosław Kaczyński” (Przybył, 2024).

## 5. Conclusions: Axes of political division in Krakow’s 2024 presidential campaign

The analysis of local government election campaigns at the level of large metropolitan areas makes it possible to observe and draw conclusions about the progress and direction of the decentralisation process, both in the state context and at the city level.

Based on the research results presented in this chapter, it can be concluded that in the election campaign for the Mayor of Krakow, nationwide political divisions, which are elements of polarisation in Poland, clearly emerged. Four basic axes of division were identified, which mark the following poles: 1) party affiliation vs. nonpartisanship; 2) support given to the candidate by the Civic Platform party (PO) vs. support given to the candidate by the Law and Justice party (PiS); 3) “identity” of a politician vs. “identity” of an urban activist; 4) unequivocally positive assessment of the policies and achievements of the previous mayor vs. unequivocally negative assessment of the policies and achievements of the previous mayor.

An analysis of the political narratives of the candidates for Mayor of Krakow about districts and district councils, i. e., about the municipal support units that function closest to the residents, did not reveal any clearly polarising features. None of the candidates has made this topic a subject of political confrontation. This may be due to the fact that districts were more of a peripheral than a dominant theme in the candidates' electoral narratives. Moreover, the general demand of most of them was to increase the participation of districts and their inhabitants in the urban governance process. Nevertheless, differentiating elements in the candidates' electoral narratives on districts were found, which are important from the perspective of long-term analyses of metropolitan decentralisation in Poland. Four axes differentiating these narratives were distinguished. On the opposite sides of these axes are: 1) demands referring to systemic solutions (realist narratives) vs. demands based on utopian visions of participatory democratic development (idyllic narratives); 2) proposals for changes in the way districts are funded vs. the absence of such proposals; 3) top-down (institutional) vs. bottom-up (civic) perspectives on the calls for strengthening the districts; 4) general rhetoric vs. detailed rhetoric.

In Krakow's presidential campaign, districts were presented in the context of: 1) funding (e.g., distribution of the city budget); 2) infrastructure (e.g., construction of car parks, daycare, sports facilities); 3) building civil society and citizen engagement; 4) cooperation with the city (through district councils); 5) the role, tasks and functioning of district councils; 6) security (e.g., of residential areas); 7) district investments (e.g., Ruczaj Cultural Centre); 8) transport (e.g., decongestion of the city, metro); 9) planned local projects and district projects (see Figure 2). In this way, the challenges faced by the residents of Krakow were discussed on one hand, and the prospects for future development of the districts and the whole city on the other.

In the candidates' electoral narratives, districts had a multidimensional character (see Figure 3). Firstly, they were seen as the units closest to the citizen, referred to as small homelands (laboratories of civic activity, self-governance and grassroots activity of residents). Secondly, they were understood as a form of organisation and one of the essential links in city management. In this context, the role of the district councils and their relationship with the city's decision-making bodies resonated particularly. Thirdly, the campaign referred to the problems of specific districts, most often Nowa Huta (the largest and most problematic district of Krakow in terms of history and population structure).

The process of metropolitan decentralisation in Krakow can be understood as a systemic (institutional) division of competencies between the city authorities and the district councils (with the assumption of strengthening the latter) and as bottom-up initiatives of residents coming together in the districts in order to act for the improvement of life in the city. Turning to district councils, which



Figure 2. Contexts for the presentation of districts in Krakow's presidential elections. Source: own elaboration.

function closest to the residents, on one hand (i. e. to municipal auxiliary units) and on the other hand, to the districts as places for the everyday life of Krakow's residents, is the expression of an effort to increase the participation of citizens in co-deciding in the governance of their city.

Extending the competencies of the municipalities' auxiliary units and thus increasing the efficiency of the district councils can be seen as a potential remedy to the everyday problems of Krakow's citizens. Supporting initiatives and activating residents, on the other hand, is an important element of building civic relations in large metropolises whose spatial structure is not conducive to the establishment of social ties. The research presented showed that districts were a marginalised topic in the 2024 local government campaign, which, on the one hand, may reflect insufficient recognition of their potential by the candidates running for mayor and, on the other hand, rather weak progress of metropolitan decentralisation in Poland.



Figure 3. Dominant dimensions of district perception in the Krakow election campaign. Source: own elaboration.

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## Political polarisation in Poland – Over a year after the parliamentary elections, public sentiment remains divided

### Abstract

The aim of this study research is to examine the opinions of Polish citizens over one year after the parliamentary elections of 2023. The material analysed here contains videos in the form of vox pops (a sequence of short informal interviews conducted in a public place with passers-by) uploaded on YouTube by several news channels (namely “naTemat”, “Super Express” and “Wirtualna Polska”). The combination of qualitative analysis with MAXQDA and quantitative sentiment analysis, more specifically TextBlob (Python library using natural language processing), underscores not only the general sentiment towards the government (consisting of Civic Coalition – Koalicja Obywatelska; the Third Way 2050 – Trzecia Droga and New Left – Nowa Lewica) and the incumbent Prime Minister Donald Tusk but also a broad range of views on the current state of the political situation in Poland, revealing both positive and negative statements regarding issues such as Polish mass media (for example TVP1), the state of healthcare and economy. What is more, a significant number of assertions expressed criticism of the Coalition, frequently comparing it unfavourably to the previous ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS). The results provide valuable insights into the public’s opinion, highlighting the role of integrating qualitative methods with sentiment analysis tools in understanding political polarisation.

**Keywords:** political polarisation, sentiment analysis, MAXQDA, TextBlob

## 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, political tensions that have intensified across Western Europe and the United States since 2016 have also deeply affected Poland, and polarisation has increasingly shaped the social and political landscape thereof. Wojciechowski and Mirczewski (2021, p. 9) outline several issues which proved to be the factors of the intensification of political disputes, namely the crisis surrounding

the Constitutional Tribunal, the Black Protest<sup>1</sup>, the refugee debate as well as Poland's contentious relationship with the European Union. Consequently, profound divisions within society have engulfed not only streets and homes but also, notably, the media, with discussants frequently crossing the boundaries of civil discourse, in particular, while engaging with opposing political perspectives. This phenomenon, widely known as political polarisation, has recently evolved into a defining characteristic of Poland's public life. Nonetheless, Urzędowska and Soczyński (2024, p. 73) append that the issue of societal fragmentation seems to be global since a survey commissioned by the Pew Research Center in 2021 (which was conducted across 17 Western countries) disclose that profound discords affect almost the entire developed world and one of the main causes thereof is political sphere.

Framed as an escalating social rift, the phenomenon of political polarisation in Poland has been increasingly splitting the country into two opposing camps, which Kopeć-Ziemczyk (2020, p. 10) exemplifies by the following phrases: "Poland A" and "Poland B", "Western Poland" and "Eastern Poland", "Liberal Poland" and "Conservative Poland", "Pro-European Poland" and "Nationalist Poland", "Secular Poland" and "Catholic Poland", and eventually, "Poland of the Opposition" and "Poland of the Government", "Poland of Grzegorz Schetyna" and "Poland of Jarosław Kaczyński". What is more, the author aligns with the assertion that there is no longer "one" unified Poland; rather, "Polandis" – meaning multiple "Polands" – which refers to the divided fractions within the country. Indeed, the rift is evident not only in electoral preferences as well as voting results but also in large-scale public demonstrations, including the 2020 Women's Strike<sup>2</sup> – the largest peaceful protest since 1989 – after the Constitutional Tribunal ruling imposed a nearly absolute prohibition of abortion in Poland.

This research aims to explore the phenomenon of political polarisation in Poland by examining the opinions of Polish citizens regarding the currently

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1 The Black Protest – described by Pluta et al. (2018, pp. 48–49) as a mass social movement in Poland which began in October 2016 in response to a proposed complete prohibition of abortion. Caused by the rejection of a pro-choice bill and favouring the anti-abortion bill by the (then) ruling right-wing government, the protests mobilised a diverse as well as broad group of citizens across the whole country, demanding respect for women's rights.

2 Organised by the All-Poland Women's Strike, the Women's Strike of 2020 was a wave of mass protests across Poland triggered by a Constitutional Tribunal ruling which had banned abortions in cases of 'severe and irreversible birth defect', effectively ending the so-called 'abortion compromise' in place since 1993. In spite of COVID-19 restrictions, the movement gathered 'up to 400,000 people in around 400 locations at its peak', demanding the restoration of women's rights and opposing the near-total abortion ban (Szczepanska and Marchlewska 2023, pp. 55–56).

ruling government<sup>3</sup> by means of the selected vox pops uploaded by news channels on YouTube, along with the analysis of users' viewpoints posted in the comments section.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Political polarisation – definition

Wielgosz (2020, p. 32) posits that the concept of *political polarisation* proves to be surrounded by significant conceptual confusion since a wide array of societal phenomena, such as hate speech, a lack of communication between two voter groups, differing opinions on issues like foreign policy, emotional vulnerability to political diversity, political hostility, or the process of *dehumanising political opponents* seem to be explained to the public through the usage thereof. What is more, political polarisation is frequently associated with ongoing political conflict, the structure of the party system, or the marketing strategy of a given party. Interestingly, publicists might also utilise more elaborate turns of phrase (including *socio-political polarisation*) as well as distinguish between political polarisation and ideological polarisation. Consequently, *political polarisation* has become a prominent term with numerous interpretations and used in various contexts. Additionally, based on the differences in regional perspectives, the comprehension thereof varies across Western Europe, the United States and Central Europe, which results in three distinct approaches to the phenomenon: unidimensional, bidimensional, and multidimensional. The first one is largely derived from Giovanni Sartori's definition of *political polarisation*, which portrays it as the ideological distance between the extreme parties in a political system, emphasising the political poles and then visualising the positions of political parties along an ideological spectrum. Wielgosz (2020, p. 32) appends that this theory elaborates on Anthony Downs' economic theory of democracy, which claims that voters' preferences might be placed on a left-right scale, with voters opting for parties that align closest to their own inclinations. On the other hand, the bi-dimensional concept of *political polarisation* is described by scholars including Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal not just as an ideological divide but also as the gradual disappearance of the political centre. Thus, two distinct ideological camps – liberal and conservative – emerge and are further entrenched by the ideological extremity of each party. Moreover,

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3 The currently ruling government in Poland is a coalition of the following parties: centrist Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), centre-right Third Way (Trzecia Droga;) and the Left (Lewica) (Mikhalev 2023, p. 42).

this approach asserts that the phenomenon is also characterised by the escalating ideological homogeneity within parties, which causes a more polarised (in both ideological and institutional terms) political landscape. Finally, posited by researchers such as Palonen, the multidimensional view pertains to the political and social consequences of polarisation, which is to be a tool in deliberate political strategies magnifying societal divisions and generating an “us” vs. “them” mentality. Such an approach appears to be coherent with Wojciechowski and Mirczewski’s (2021, pp. 4–5), according to whom the term *polarisation* refers to the process through which society splits into opposing groups, frequently due to controversial issues. Carrying several implications, the polarisation is suggested to be a dynamic, ongoing phenomenon, which proves to be a contentious issue serving as the focal point for the division. Another requirement is the existence of two distinct groups, each with differing views on the given topic. Since membership in one group excludes participation in the other, the mutually contradictory nature of the alliances forms the foundation for potential conflict between them in the future. The phenomenon, thus, directly concerns the establishment of group interests, which are moulded by value-based as well as socioeconomic conflicts.

Interestingly, Schindler (2023, pp. 335–336) relates political polarisation to a broad spectrum of democratic harms and pathologies such as “performance failures due to radical policy swings; the entrenchment of policy positions; policy stalemates; problems of coalition formation; the erosion of citizen attitudes, like trust in government, trust in public institutions, and trust among citizens, democratic satisfaction, democratic support, the legitimacy of elections, and democratic legitimacy; and tolerance of and support for political violence [...]”. The author also appends that comparative studies underscore the extensive negative impacts thereof as a key driving force of the backsliding of modern democracy. Additionally, since political analysts widely perceive polarisation as an alarming phenomenon demanding urgent attention, the focus of comparative political science has been increased on the matter. Such a trend might be exemplified by the number of mentions of the term *polarisation* (210 times) within the 60 pages of the Varieties of Democracy Institute’s Democracy Report 2022, which deliberates on the transforming nature of autocratization. Undoubtedly, the volume of articles concerning political polarisation has surged, with over half of all publications thereon, namely 373 out of 704, published since 2018. Overall, the concept has developed into a focal point of contemporary political science, encompassing the fearful apprehension surrounding democracy in this day and age. Yet, though its factors, nature as well as consequences do not cease to be vigorously debated (Schindler, 2023, p. 336).

## 2.2. Political Polarisation in Poland

Łowicka-Franczak (2022, pp. 101–102), referring to Grabowska (2004), claims that until the late 2000s, Poland's primary political-ideological divide was the post-communist split. Deeply rooted in historical political structures, such disunity framed the opposition between post-Solidarity figures and former communist elites. Whereas the political landscape might have realigned with the rise of two political parties – Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Platform (PO) – the symbolic significance of this divide persisted, frequently fluffing the role of a rhetorical tool rather than a sociological category. What is more, the author highlights that by the 2010s, the prominence of the post-transformation divide was increasingly evident, capturing social as well as economic disparities in capitalist Poland. Prevailing political discourse reinforced the split into “winners” and “losers” of the transformation, particularly due to PiS's rhetoric, which distinguished two sides of the country: “The Poland of Solidarity” and “The Poland of Liberalism”, “Poland A” and “Poland B”, “Urban Poland” and “Rural Poland”. The controversy of the 2010 Smolensk plane crash in which, among other 96 passengers, then President Lech Kaczyński was killed deepened polarisation even further, intensifying identity-driven media as well as fostering ideological alignments. Eventually, the split between PiS and Anti-PiS (which has been noticeable since 2015) realigned from party antagonism to a civilisational and truth-based divide within Polish society – namely, a dispute over the narrative of the nation's condition and the desirable perception of the state. Additionally, Urzędowska and Soczyński (2024, p. 73) invoke a 2019 study by the Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw, which indicates the extent of political divisions among the Polish population. The findings reveal that, rather than neutral feelings, both supporters of the then-ruling party as well as opposition voters expressed predominant negativity and hostility toward the political opponents.

Interestingly, Kopec-Ziemczyk (2020, p. 9) argues that 2020 – marked on a global scale by COVID-19 – was a year in which the division was particularly visible due to the economic and health crises and measures of social isolation, to name but a few. The pandemic in 2020 also had a huge impact on the presidential election, which delay, although postponed because of public health concerns, proved to be controversial. The final electorate in June was highly engaged, however deeply divided. In consequence, the results further underscored polarisation in Poland, with Andrzej Duda – the incumbent president and a representative of the United Right – securing victory by a narrow margin of 2.06% over Rafał Trzaskowski – the Mayor of Warsaw and member of the Civic Coalition (who also is a presidential candidate for the upcoming election in May 2025).

Undoubtedly, the surge of political polarisation in Polish society has had a prominent influence on engagement, as evidenced by record-breaking voter turnout in elections after 2015. Kopeć-Ziemczyk (2020, p. 10) reiterates, nonetheless, that while such a phenomenon might be perceived as a silver lining of polarisation, it also illustrates the destructive nature of the intensifying societal divide.

### 3. Data and methods

The data which was utilised in this research was derived from YouTube (a social media and online video-sharing platform) and consists of an array of videos which were uploaded thereon in the form of vox pops<sup>4</sup> regarding Polish citizens' attitude towards the currently ruling government by several news channels (namely left-liberal "naTemat"<sup>5</sup>, right-wing "Super Express"<sup>6</sup> and major news portal "Wirtualna Polska"<sup>7</sup>). The aforementioned broadcast networks were chosen for the sake of maintaining diversity as well as due to the fact that they were ranked among the most frequently viewed sources of information by Poles (Wenzel 2018, p. 67). The publication dates of the videos occur within a span of just under a year and a half of the administration led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk since the "Democratic Opposition" (Civic Coalition – Koalicja Obywatelska; the Third Way 2050 – Trzecia Droga and New Left – Nowa Lewica) won the parliamentary election held on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

The process of coding the dataset was conducted by means of qualitative analysis software MAXQDA (24), which enabled the organisation as well as systematisation of the obtained results. Since most of the gathered data includes audiovisual content, one of the most essential functionalities of the application proved to be the automatic transcription of the media clips solely by providing the respective YouTube link as well as retrieving comments attached to each video. For the purpose of this research and due to the fact that this software does not yet offer such a function, the data was then exported and automatically translated into English by the use of Python Library Googletrans (which implemented Google Translate API) in the following steps: loading the dataset, iterative translation of the given text (using the abovementioned Googletrans library. However, because of the API limitations, a brief delay time.sleep(0.3) was

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4 Vox pop – 'a sequence of short informal television or radio interviews conducted in a public place with passers-by' (Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved April 8, 2025, from <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2259694225>).

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCXYL-A8X2A>.

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr1LmgdRtY>.

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCaEXXdNTU>.

applied in this approach after every request in order to diminish the risk of being blocked by Google's servers. The files processed in this manner were subsequently imported into the Document System window in the MAXQDA environment, with each document being organised in a hierarchical structure, facilitating more scope for analysing, searching, and identifying relevant content, along with assigning codes and subcodes. What is more, plenty of MAXQDA's features – for instance, marking segments of texts in various colours and ways, visualising connections and patterns as well as comparing files – simplify a broad spectrum of procedures frequently used for quantitative text analysis, especially with virtual research assistant – AI Assist – which not only allows for the automatic transcription of data but also supports generating additional suggestions for subcodes within the study (Chimeva 2022, pp. 9–10). In order to deepen the research, sentiment analysis by means of TextBlob, a Python programming language library using natural language processing, was conducted. Returning the polarity of the text (polarity > 0 – sentiment is positive; polarity = 0 – sentiment is neutral; polarity < 0 – sentiment is negative), TextBlob groups phrases into positive, neutral as well as negative (Yaqub et al. 2018, p. 4)

#### 4. Data analysis

The analysis in MAXQDA was conducted in order to uncover underlying themes in the dataset and discover whether Polish society's opinions regarding the ruling government are indeed polarised. Thus, gathered YouTube videos in the form of vox pops focus predominantly on one aspect – assessing public opinion concerning the Prime Minister – Donald Tusk – and the incumbent administration.

Undoubtedly, the obtained data evaluated the public sentiment towards the Polish government, with a breakdown of positive and negative mentions, which were respectively classified and linked in MAXQDA. The first group referred to general impressions and overall opinions as the respondents expressed a broad range of views on the current Prime Minister; while some praised his actions (1–3), the others criticised them (4–6) for various reasons, for instance:

- (1) “Positively” “Everything as planned?” “Yes”;
- (2) “I give them the benefit of the doubt. They managed to enter this path [of trust].”
- (3) “On a scale of 1 to 6 [...] what mark would you give Donald Tusk and his government? I think that I would give four because it is improving all the time”.
- (4) “I am very satisfied, everything is better, I even like the weather, the Prime Minister has made everything better”;
- (5) “I would be happy to get rid of him from Poland; he doesn't even recognise the Constitution”;
- (6) “He disgusts me”;

- (7) “The prime minister is a thief, talking nonsense. He deals with things in luxury, his own villa”;
- (8) “No promises were fulfilled, they lied. They’ve fulfilled a few out of the 100 promises”.

What is more, there were also negative statements associated with the economy (9–14) as a number of interviewees reflected on the state of the economy in Poland, underscoring sectors in which, according to them, improvements were needed, such as the increase in wages, whereas the others were (at least) optimistic (15–18) because of the promised plans:

- (9) “[The lower VAT rate for the beauty industry] one swallow does not make a spring”;
- (10) They steal from us now, and they will be held accountable later”;
- (11) “Poland is selling out, the Poles are selling Poland”;
- (12) “Mr. Tusk’s democracy will bring back this tax, and it won’t be so cheerful. If we add to that the VAT on food, transportation costs (because fuel will probably go up), and electricity, indeed, from mid-year, higher rates will return. This will be a problem even for the poorest”;
- (13) “I am absolutely dissatisfied. After so many years of working for the homeland, the same homeland is turning us into beggars, where a person either buys bread or medicine”;
- (14) “You know, I’m just worse. It’s too expensive. I am retired, and it is not a good year for me”;
- (15) “PiS ruled for 8 years, made a mess, and now they have to clean it up”;
- (16) “There were 100 specific promises for the first 100 days. We didn’t count them, we’re not that persistent. You know, for us, it’s enough that things are better”;
- (17) “After so many years, you know, after eight years of governing and nasting people, [...] let’s give some time, they also have to clean up”;
- (18) “It’s not bad. I hope it will be even better [...] There were promises, but you can’t get honey from a rock”;

Additionally, the government’s foreign policy proved to be a focal point in the discussion, especially in relation to the European Union and Poland’s neighbouring countries, for instance:

- (19) “Law and Justice promised to fight for Polish sovereignty, but this will be challenged by the EU. How long can we keep tolerating this interference?”;
- (20) “Under the EU’s pressure, we are losing control over our own laws, and we’re constantly being forced to adopt policies that go against our national interests; the EU has too much influence over our economy and politics; Poland should be more independent”.

Healthcare was also one of the other essential selected in MAXQDA topics among the respondents who expressed a desire for quick improvements, namely:

- (21) “Healthcare is getting worse. The government needs to focus on making health services accessible to all citizens, especially the elderly”;
- (22) “They promised to improve the healthcare system, but nothing has changed. It’s still difficult to get appointments, and the quality of service is poor”;
- (23) “Let’s finally make people feel that healthcare should actually start to deal with the health service and not to limit alcohol at gas stations. Because this is the most important thing”.

Furthermore, the respondents touched upon TVP – a public service broadcaster in Poland – both positively (24) and negatively (25) and the overall behaviour of parliamentary representatives (26–27):

- (24) “I am happy [...] Well, the vocabulary has changed in the means of communication and TVP”;
- (25) “[...] what’s happening in Poland is lawlessness – essentially, independent media are being shut out, with only government-controlled outlets like TVN, TVP1, and others being allowed”;
- (26) “It seems to me that they look a little different in the Sejm. I like Szymon Hołownia supervising in the government”;
- (27) “And this is great because nobody said it yet that there is more respect in this Polish parliament. It has changed, but I still think that we should talk more like adults and respect each other”.

Interestingly, a significant part of the responses solely invokes the ongoing political divide between PiS (Law and Justice) and PO (Civic Platform) since plenty of interviewees draw comparisons between the two political parties as well as their leaders (respectively – Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk), frequently even vulgar ones, for example:

- (28) “Spit on all of this. PiS, PiS, as long as Kaczyński is alive, there may be a Poland”;
- (29) “I understand how one can dislike Kaczyński, but I will never understand how one can like Tusk”;
- (30) “Tusk was in power, didn’t do anything. He only promised and delivered very little”;
- (31) “Only PiS – there is no other party”;
- (32) “They don’t like the prime minister; I suggest going back to Kaczyński... after 8 years of tormenting people... they have to clean up this mess”;
- (33) “[Donald Tusk] should go pick asparagus, Kaczyński – he is the leader of our Poland and should rule”.

The patterns and examples observed in MAXQDA (many negative citations towards the Polish government) were then verified using TextBlob in sentiment analysis, revealing a trend of dissatisfaction. The obtained results show that 60% of the analysed statements had a negative sentiment, indicating widespread criticism towards the beforementioned topics (for instance healthcare, relation

to the European Union, economy, media) and general discontent with governmental actions. Conversely, 27% of the gathered opinions were positive, reflecting approval of certain aspects of the leadership, and the remaining 13% of statements – neutral.

Although the majority of gathered statements that had been categorised in MAXQDA (and already presented in this analysis) as positive or negative were similarly classified by TextBlob, the Python library frequently misclassified clearly negative (34–36) or positive (37–38) opinions as neutral, namely:

- (34) “[...] they promised a lot, just like every election, and fulfilled nothing. From the start, I knew it was all lies, so I didn’t get my hopes up – like fuel for 5.20, for example. And now... well, for example, fuel was supposed to be cheaper”;
- (35) “15 zł for a bun? That’s the question. Not long ago, it was 7, right?”;
- (36) “Nothing has changed here either, sir. So, the job market? The job market is still limping”;
- (37) “They’re fighting for women’s rights – maybe something good will come out of it”;
- (38) “I’m still giving them the benefit of the doubt. [...] they managed to set out on the right path”.

Also, the same problem occurred while analysing statements containing both positive and negative phrases – they were labelled as neutral, for example:

- (39) “Right. So are there any positives in this government’s performance? There are positives, yes, but I’m telling you – he’d sell out our Poland to the Germans for a penny, so to speak”.

Remarkably, similar comments might be found in the comment section under each video – a discussion among the YouTube users seems to be divided as well as some criticise the current government (40–42), while others tend to do the exact opposite (43):

- (40) “So far, it’s still PiS money, we’ll see what happens under Tusk, it will be poverty and misery”;
- (41) “Teacher raises for what??? For less and less learning???; It will never be good in this poor Poland with stupid Poles”;
- (42) “I love PiS, only PiS, PiS, PiS, no other party”;
- (43) “The most important point... 100 days without PiS’; Stop nitpicking, they are moving forward, it’s not easy to fix what was ruined by PiS in 8 years”.

Importantly, the obtained comments prove that supporters of both parties criticise each other harshly, frequently resorting to insults in their statements, namely:

- (44) “PiS supporters, regardless of what the ruling team does, will still claim that nothing has been done and will mindlessly repeat the same thing”;

- (45) “I am too nervous to listen to these people”;
- (46) “These women have no sense or have fallen in love with the lying Tusk”;
- (47) “What a bunch of deluded women, they must have been on drugs”;
- (48) “Disinformation, ignorance, blindness, lack of vision – what will happen next – this is how half of the respondents should be evaluated!”;
- (49) “Fanatics... on both sides. No realism, no critical thinking. Pure fanaticism... shocking”.

## 5. Conclusions

While analysing the statements of the respondents along with the comments regarding the unloaded videos, a deeper look into the public opinion concerning the current government and the political landscape in Poland might be taken. The majority of the utterances underscore a deep rift among the Polish society in terms of politics, with some citizens harshly criticising Donald Tusk’s administration for unfulfilled promises or economic difficulties, to name but a few, whereas the others express support for the incumbent government, which was then proven with the sentiment analysis. By means of Textblob, it was revealed that the greater share of statements in the videos was labelled as negative, aligning closely with the results from MAXQDA’s mapping of public opinions. A similar outlook might be observed towards the previously ruling government since many respondents favour the Law and Justice along with its leader Jarosław Kaczyński in their statements, and conversely, there is a group of interviewees who exemplify the negative attitude towards this political party. Nonetheless, a noticeable sentiment of dissatisfaction with both aforementioned parties was undoubtedly present across plenty of responses, indicating a clear case of polarisation among Polish citizens.

Noteworthy, the polarised nature of public opinion was also observable during the brief analysis of the comment sections of the gathered material. The statements there revealed some extreme emotions indeed, such as disillusionment and frustration with the nation and their opinions on the Polish government. The YouTube users targeted the supporters of both the opposition as well as the ruling government, frequently using harsh language while accusing them of ignorance or blind loyalty. Dismissing and insulting the ones with opposing views might demonstrate a lack of constructive dialogue within Polish society and, moreover, a tendency for hostile “conversations”.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of political polarisation in Poland might not only have relevant implications for future elections but addressing diverse opinions of the Poles might, on the other hand, be key for the attempt to foster unity within the country. As of now, one might draw a bold conclusion based on the analysis

that both sides of the political spectrum are “trapped” in a cycle of blame and support, with plenty of respondents even questioning the true effectiveness of any political change or leadership in Poland.

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# The opinion of Poles about Ukrainian immigrants to Poland after three years of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: a study of YouTube user-generated comments<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the mass displacement of Ukrainian citizens, with Poland receiving the largest share of incoming refugees. While the initial public response was marked by widespread hospitality, attitudes towards Ukrainians in Poland have shifted considerably over time. This study investigates these changing perceptions by analysing YouTube comments posted in response to a controversial interview with Natalia Panczenko, a prominent figure in Poland's Ukrainian diaspora. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates Grounded Theory (Atlas.ti), corpus-assisted analysis (Sketch Engine), topic modelling (BERTopic), sentiment analysis (bert-polish-sentiment-politics model), and contextual word embeddings using BERT and UMAP. These complementary methods allow us to identify patterns of discursive themes, affective orientations, and semantic clustering in user-generated discourse. The findings reveal a deeply polarised communicative landscape in which national identity, entitlement, and exclusion narratives intersect with personalised hostility and collective grievance. The study demonstrates the value of combining qualitative, corpus-based, and computational techniques, still rarely used in linguistic research, for capturing the discursive structure of digital polarisation.

**Keywords:** YouTube, (public) opinion, immigrants, Ukrainians, polarisation, echo chamber, BERTopic, sentiment analysis

## 1. Introduction

This study aims to analyse comments posted mainly in February 2025 on Polish YouTube regarding the situation and status of Ukrainians in Poland and the perception of Ukrainians by Poles after the widely publicised controversial

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1 The initial version of this study was presented by the first author at the *Contacts and Contrasts* conference, 24–26 March 2025, organised by the University of Applied Sciences in Konin, Poland.

statements voiced by Natalia Panczenko, the leader of the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland living in Poland. The leader's provocative opinions on Poles and the status of Ukrainians in Poland sparked extensive commentary by Polish journalists, politicians, and social media users. Even though she later denied expressing these statements, attributing them to Russian manipulation and fake news in several interviews published on YouTube, her words nonetheless provoked a significant backlash, which manifested in an outpouring of grievances, expressing disapproval or even condemnation of some Ukrainians as well as a severe criticism of the immigration policy adopted by the Polish government.

In early 2025, public discourse in Poland became sharply polarised following controversial statements attributed to Natalia Panchenko, a prominent representative of the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland. In a televised interview for Ukraine's Channel 5, Panchenko reflected on the scale of Ukrainian presence in Poland and warned of the risks of escalating intergroup tensions. Although she later disavowed the inflammatory interpretation of her remarks, claiming they had been distorted by Russian disinformation, the comments circulated widely in Polish media, where they were framed as threatening or provocative. In February 2025, Natalia Panczenko, the Ukrainian diaspora leader in Poland, was interviewed on Ukrainian television Channel 5. The English translation of the key fragment is as follows:

“But there are also politicians who openly say that **Ukrainians are** a huge part of the Polish economy. And not only that. Moreover, it is **primarily a huge threat to Poles**. I understand that they understand this. Because today, **when every tenth resident of Poland is Ukrainian, stirring up animosity between Ukrainians and Poles is already very dangerous. Especially for Poland, because fights will start in Poland, because in Poland some shops, houses, etc. will start to be set on fire. And this primarily affects the internal security of Poland**”.<sup>2</sup>

Literally speaking, Panchenko did not say that Ukrainians would set fire to Polish shops and houses if Poles do not consider Ukrainians' opinions. However, this is the way her words were interpreted and repeated in the Polish media and even in the lower house of the Polish parliament (Sejm), wherein an MP, Krzysztof Szymański, representing a right-wing, nationalist Confederation party, called for the deportation of Panczenko for expressing such views. This stand strongly polarised public opinion, especially the right-wing politicians, who support anti-immigration policy and the central-left elite social actors, who in the public sphere articulate voices of support for immigrants, and the Ukraine war refugees in particular.

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2 The translation was retrieved from <https://wnet.fm/tag/kanal-5-i-wywiad-natalii-panczenko/> (accessed February 20 2025).

In what follows, we will present some theoretical background to the concept of (public) opinion and will consider the limitations our study has due to the size of the dataset (Section 2). The aim of the study, as well as the data and methodologies used (Section 3), will be followed by a detailed qualitative (Section 5) and quantitative (Section 6) analyses.

## 2. User-generated comments and public opinion

In the traditional view, public opinion is what the elite social actors express, i. e., politicians and journalists, on a socially or politically significant topic. It is the articulation of values, judgments, sentiment and attitudes towards a topic (Shiraev & Sobel, 2006, p. 22). In a more recent take (Baden, 2025), which factors in social media along with the traditional media, it is a combination of the elitist voice and *vox populi*, in this case, the opinions shared by social media users on YouTube (YT). Thus perceived, public opinion is a result of a constantly evolving, dynamic, negotiated, and discursive process, and it is subject to personalised and subjective content creation and an example of participatory engagement in public opinion formation. What becomes public opinion then is a result of contributions from both sides: the elite (politicians, researchers, journalists) and non-elite social media users. Understood in this way, the present study is illustrative of the discursive public opinion on Ukrainian immigrants to Poland.

Naturally, the opinions expressed on social media, such as YouTube, are not representative of the whole Polish society; instead, they mirror opinions of select communities and show how opinions evolve within a virtual community, what triggers topic development and incites most often pejorative snowball-like uncivil practices and impolite language. The participants share their knowledge and/or attitudes in a collaborative way. They manifest group dynamics and reflect the social climate related to an event and the reception of opinions publicly expressed by significant social actors (such as politicians and journalists).

As the YT commentators join other like-minded users in an online discussion, they reveal only a fragment of reality, that is, a select virtual community. The partisans encounter online and voice their opinions, showing preferences for similar attitudes and/or ideologies, clustering in cocoon-like spaces. Thus, online audiences create what is known as echo chambers, whereby critical, pejorative and socially unaccepted or unpopular views can find their outlet in the virtual space. This is reinforced by the fact that they afford anonymity to their users. Anonymity encourages incivility and strong opinions, which vent accumulated anger and animosity. Hence, the evaluations articulated in comments on social media exhibit the propensity towards incivility and heightened criticism, formation of affected, emotionally-driven comments, sometimes deprived of any

argumentation or reason. Such was the case of the data at hand, where antagonistic attitudes towards Ukrainian immigrants and emotional remarks prevail, with only single comments expressing neutral or positive judgments. This could be explained by the propensity of individuals to comply with the views and behaviours of other participants of the same social environment, as claimed by the Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1961), which can also be applied to the digital environment.

Furthermore, the participants of such opinion exchanges create a non-inclusive environment where only similar viewpoints are welcome, thus creating a polarised enclave. This effect is often reinforced by algorithmisation, which creates an information (filter) bubble. Participants of filter bubbles are exposed to similar content they have previously engaged in (selective exposure); thus, they encounter one-sided views that conform to the participants' perspective, which was pre-selected for them rather than self-selected. The polarised, usually negative opinions are, thus, to some extent, resultant of or dependent on platform algorithms.

While fully aware of these limitations, we still believe the data under scrutiny reveal important opinions and the social climate. Much as echo chambers and filter bubbles can affect the emergence of a polarised and narrow perspective and opinions on an issue or towards others, Bruns (2019) claims that this potential bias is exaggerated; these phenomena occur relatively rarely and do not have such a strong effect on social media users as is widely assumed (see also Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016).

Another possible problem with studies of digital environment discussions is user authenticity (understood as adhering to one's core identity) or lack thereof. This was an unverifiable factor in our study. The role of inauthenticity is to spawn more hostility, amplify fake news and proliferate disinformation. The inauthenticity of the messages posted in the video comment section was suspected in some cases, whether generated by bots or trolls, yet it is challenging to assess their involvement percentage in the whole discussion. While it could not be entirely ruled out that such negative practices or even deviant behaviour were deliberately spawned and occurred in the discussion under scrutiny as a result of unauthenticated participation, we assumed that such "dark participation" (Frischlich et al., 2018), aiming at providing purposeful disinformation carefully orchestrated, did not prevail and that the majority of participants were genuine rather than masked. Our conviction stems from the fact that the dataset is relatively small in size, and the probability of "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" (Gleicher, 2018) leveraging such manipulative tactics based on automated accounts is expected to be relatively low.

The other limitation related to data sampling used in this study is the fact that the journalist (Karolina Pajęczkowska from the Super Express YouTube channel

of the original tabloid newspaper) suggests in her interview with Panczenko how the audience should assess her interviewee by starting the interview with the following question: “Do you regret the words that were said in that interview on Ukrainian television?”. This question, built on presupposition, set the tone for the whole interview and hinted to Youtubers what to think of the interviewee and her opinion on the relationship between Poles and Ukrainians in Poland. Thus, the journalists guided and suggested the discussion topic, which was strongly marked by this suggestion. While YouTubers participating in this discussion could have had their negative opinions about Ukrainian immigrants before watching this interview, and only released their negative opinions triggered by this video, the journalist’s stand must have been a clear signal for YouTube users that a virtual space has been created where such opinions can be freely expressed, which attracted homophilic users, i. e., users who seek those whose viewpoints are consistent with theirs.

### 3. Study aim, data selection, and methodology

The study aimed to verify the opinions expressed by YT users related to the Ukrainian residents who fled the war after the Russians invaded Ukraine in February 2022. While it was widely acknowledged and highly appreciated in international news that Poles offered enormous help to Ukrainian immigrants immediately after the war broke out, it has also been often commented that with time, the attitude and social climate have gradually shifted from full of compassion to frustration, anger and hostility. This unfriendly tone was expected to be found in the user-generated comments in the study under scrutiny, given the journalist’s attitude signals at the beginning of the interview, yet we also wanted to reveal the predominant topics and arguments perpetuated by the virtual community.

This study attempts to answer two research questions:

- RQ1:** What is the attitude of Poles towards Ukrainian immigrants to Poland after three years of the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war?
- RQ2:** Have the opinions radicalised and polarised over time or mitigated and depolarised?

The study applied a mixed-method approach. The qualitative analysis followed the Grounded Theory, which was conducted with the use of Atlas.ti software (version 25.0.1.32924), while the quantitative one resorted to both the now widely-used corpus linguistics tools and computational methods. The corpus-

assisted study was conducted with the use of Voyant tools and the corpus management platform Sketch Engine<sup>3</sup>.

Advanced computational methods, while increasingly recognised in data science, remain relatively underutilised in linguistic research (but see, e.g., Bączkowska, 2024; Bączkowska et al., 2024a; Bączkowska et al., 2024b; Solska & Sawicki, 2024; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2023; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2021). Two primary computational techniques were used: topic modelling using BERTopic and sentiment analysis using a fine-tuned BERT<sup>4</sup> model for Polish political sentiment (Devlin et al., 2019; Grootendorst, 2022). To identify thematic patterns in the data, BERTopic was used for topic modelling. Before applying the model, comments were pre-processed by removing Polish stop words and standardising the text. BERTopic grouped similar comments into topics based on their semantic content, using a pre-trained language model to capture meaning. Each topic was represented by a set of keywords that best described the cluster. Comments that did not clearly belong to any group were marked as outliers (topic -1). The model output included topic labels, relevance scores, and representative terms for each comment, which were exported for further interpretation. Crucially, one limitation of the initial modelling procedure is the absence of a fixed random seed, which introduces a degree of non-determinism primarily due to the UMAP dimensionality reduction and clustering algorithms used in BERTopic. This can lead to slight variations in topic assignment, such as changes in topic numbering or the inclusion/exclusion of marginal documents. However, in multiple subsequent runs with different seeds, the core structure of the topics remained stable, and the same high-frequency keywords consistently emerged within the top-ranked terms for each thematic cluster. This indicates that while exact topic labels may shift, the underlying semantic content and discourse patterns identified by the model are robust and interpretable across runs. In parallel, sentiment analysis was conducted using the transformer-based model *bert-polish-sentiment-politics*<sup>5</sup>, developed by Ewelina Gajewska (2023) within the framework of the ComPathos project<sup>6</sup>, led by Barbara Konat. The overarching aim of this project is to develop a comprehensive, computationally tractable model of *pathos*, one of Aristotle's three classical rhetorical appeals, by investigating how emotional language functions within persuasive dialogues. The model constitutes a fine-tuned version of *bert-base-*

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3 sketchengine.eu.

4 Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers. BERT is a deep neural network model based on transformer architecture, which uses self-attention mechanisms to identify the relationships between words in a sentence; hence, it provides contextual analysis.

5 <https://huggingface.co/eevvgg/bert-polish-sentiment-politics>.

6 *Computational Pathos*, Reg. No: 2020/39/D/HS1/00488.

*polish-cased-v1*<sup>7</sup>, specifically adapted for the classification of political sentiment in Polish-language texts. It was trained on a manually annotated corpus of 1,000 political tweets to perform three-way sentiment classification: positive, neutral, and negative. When applied to the YouTube comment dataset, the model assigned each comment a sentiment label along with a confidence within the corpus.

Crucially, we employed contextual word embeddings to explore how selected loaded terms (e.g., *Polak*, *Polacy*, *Ukraińcy*, *Ukrainiec*, *podatki*, *won*, and *Pan-czenko*) are used in context. Each sentence containing one of these keywords was encoded using the BERT model *bert-base-polish-cased-v1*, and dimensionality reduction was performed using UMAP (Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection). This method enabled us to visualise semantic clusters and rhetorical functions in a two-dimensional space, revealing discursive alignments among different terms. This approach offered a spatialised, empirical lens through which to observe polarisation at the level of discourse structure.

Collectively, these methods enabled a multi-layered analysis of the data: identifying dominant themes, measuring affective orientation, and uncovering discursive patterns through contextual analysis. While such techniques are well-established in machine learning and computational social science, they remain relatively underexplored within linguistic research, particularly in studies concerned with discourse polarisation and ideologically charged language use. Their integration in this study illustrates the potential of computational embeddings and visualisation to enrich qualitative interpretation and to offer new methodological pathways in linguistically informed social and media discourse analysis.

The analysis followed a two-stage approach. Firstly, the immediate reaction to the interview was captured by studying comments posted over two days of the video's appearance on the YT channel of Super Express. The dataset comprises 3,732 comments expressed by 3,478 users, and 2007 of them are unique users (58%). This means that about 43% of users expressed their comments more than once. The sampling followed the rule of selecting 30 comments from every 100 comments, which yielded 930 comments coded manually. Secondly, the data were retrieved from the same site after a month to obtain more data necessary for quantitative analyses and to observe whether some predominant words shifted in distribution with time. This two-stage study design stems from the observation made by Yarchi et al. (2020) that homophilic interaction leads to the radicalisation of expression over time.

The overall number of comments added up to 6,939 (ca. 140,000 tokens). Of 3,207 users, there were 1,974 unique users, which means that ca. 28% of users

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7 HuggingFace, <https://huggingface.co/dkleczek/bert-base-polish-cased-v1>.

expressed their views more than once. Therefore, the participation pattern shows a drop in engagement from almost 50% in the first two days to ca. 30% over time.

The grounded theory was applied to the first batch of data, whereas the second batch was used in the two quantitative studies (corpus-based and machine-learning analysis). YouTube was selected as the source of data for our analysis as it is the second most popular social network worldwide in February 2025 (Statista, accessed February 3, 2025), and it hosts news portals/televisions and newspaper channels publishing the news and viewer comments.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Qualitative analysis

The grounded theory applied to our data was operationalised by Atlas.ti software, which enabled us to categorise the arguments identified in the data. The initial unrestricted coding allowed us to freely conceptualise the content and make some comparisons between the applied codes. Next, we worked on identifying the emerging patterns through axial coding. The original categories/codes were thus reduced by applying a hierarchical rearrangement of the original abundance codes, following inductive reasoning. As a result, the following main categories were established: threat, Poles as victims, and expulsion.

Threat refers to various aspects, such as the fear of setting houses and Polish businesses on fire (as suggested in the interview by Panczenko). In (1), a growing concern is expressed over the continuous arson attacks on Polish businesses and their increasing frequency. Poles feel threatened by further acts of sabotage, which pose a risk to economic development and the lives of ordinary people. In (2–4), Ukrainians are seen as occupiers.

- (1) For now, I don't know if you have noticed, but more and more companies and factories are burning, and strangely enough, these are only Polish businesses. In the past, such tragedies happened once every few years, but now we hear about them every month. It is not possible for everything to burn naturally<sup>8</sup>.
- (2) Ukrainians, who hate us so much, are taking over Poland.
- (3) Ms. Panczenko said that every tenth citizen in Poland is Ukrainian, and therefore... our safety threshold has been exceeded:-(-
- (4) I wonder when they will force us to speak Ukrainian?

The next citation illustrates the category of victimisation, whereby Poles feel like victims of the influx of Ukrainians. The negative feeling stems from the gradual

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<sup>8</sup> All original comments were translated by the authors.

displacement of Polish workers from the job market, thereby decreasing the employment prospects of the Polish citizens.

- (5) They are taking jobs from Poles. Go back to Ukraine and manage there!

Victimisation frequently refers to historical events, particularly to the Ukrainian nationalist paramilitary organisation led by Stepan Bandera (hence *banderowcy*, i. e., people who were members of his organisation), active during World War II, known for violent activities, such as massacres of civilians (Poles, Romanians).

- (6) We Poles have always been victims, and it's only a matter of time before they form Banderite militias. Poles, wake up—they are slowly taking control (example: in the workplace—they are already demanding very high salaries)].

The Poles seen as victims category often flows from the current dissatisfaction of Poles with the government's policy towards Ukrainian refugees in Poland. The predominant feeling is socioeconomic inequality, wherein Poles, the natives, claim to be treated in a less favourable way than “the other”, who is perceived as an invader. The natives become the victims of the situation, even though they constitute the majority in their own country.

- (7) We prefer to work on our own rather than be displaced by Ukrainians, who are better funded than native Poles.  
 (8) First to the UN, free medications, no waiting at the doctor's, free transportation, housing, social benefits—what else for them? In the store, we have to be quiet because a Ukrainian woman is shopping. Paranoia. For what?

Expulsion occurs very frequently in the dataset, and it refers to wishes expressed by Poles for Ukrainians to leave Poland. The tone of these wishes is radical, i. e., it is often reinforced by exclamation marks and encoded by offensive language (e. g., *won*; “get lost”).

- (9) Nobody is forcing them to live here; if they don't like it, they can get lost.  
 (10) Poland has taken in the most war refugees in all of Europe. You are guests in our home, so behave like guests, not like deceitful intruders. If you are unhappy in Poland, leave and don't come back  
 (11) She is lying, *von* [out] to Ukraine, they are already taking too many liberties

The overarching categories that span all initial codes are related to two types of positioning: self-positioning and other. Positioning refers to a discursive process “whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (Davis & Harré, 1990, p. 48). Self-positioning relates to a situation where the speaker signals his or her social role or identity to the addressee, and other-positioning requires that the speaker construct a social role or identity of other participants.

The majority of the initial codes in our data reflected self-positioning, which describes how the speaker (or Poles in general represented by a speaker) feels and what the speaker does, e. g., feels offended, victimised, threatened, and calls for actions against “the other”, such as sending Ukrainians back to Ukraine, stop giving them social benefits. Other-positioning involved descriptions of “the other” (i. e., Ukrainians), their competencies (or lack of them), such as not knowing the Polish language, features, for example, being rich, not being Polish citizens, being demanding, disgruntled and ungrateful; as well as their behaviour, such as inciting to arson, doing business, setting up companies, lying.

## 4.2. Quantitative analysis

The coarse-grained quantitative analysis of the corpus clearly indicates that the sentiment is rather negative, as the most frequently used word is *nie* (“not” or “no”). Analysing the contexts (concordances below) more closely proves the initial suspicion right.

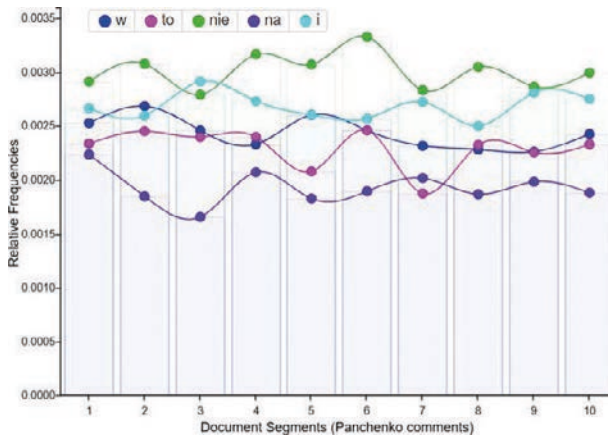


Figure 1. Top five most frequent words (relative frequency). Source: own elaboration.

The concordances below evidence the first impressions; here are some glimpses of the *nie* contexts: *don't lie; Panczenko is not welcome here; I don't support the war, but her behaviour was horribly primitive; a convicted person should not receive citizenship; because she has the Polish citizenship she cannot be arrested and deported; they steal from each other, and you expect that they will not steal from you; you are a guest who threatens the hosts, if you don't understand, then get lost; Ukrainians were never our brothers; they are not refugees* [pol. uchodźcami] *but invaders* [na-chodźcami; neologism]. The *nie* contexts refer to Natalia



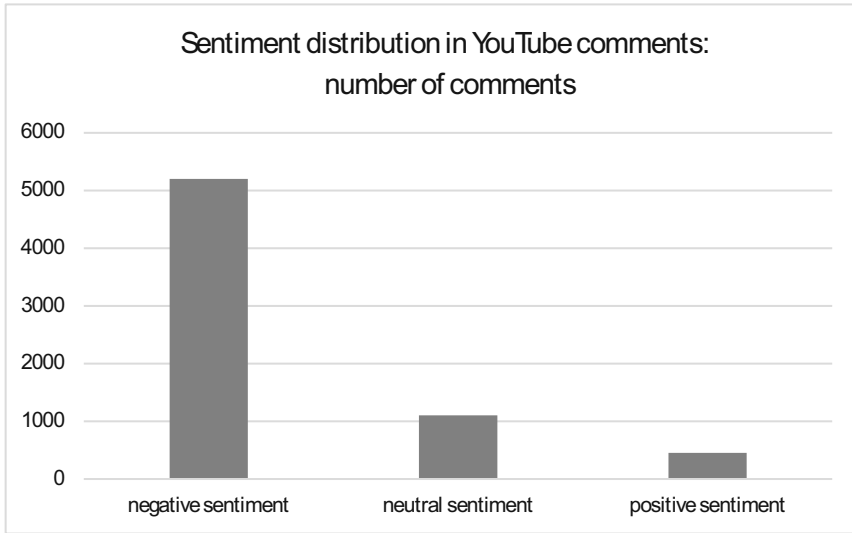


Figure 3. Sentiment distribution in YouTube comments related to Natalia Panczenko. Source: own elaboration.

example, the unfavourable for Poles immigration policy imposed by the government, which provided financial support to Ukrainians for buying a flat in Poland, for public transport, and offered social benefits that Poles were deprived of.

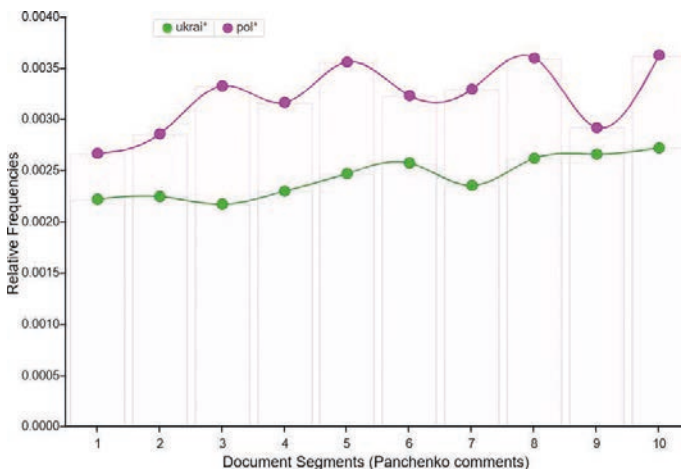


Figure 4. The relative frequency of *Polish/Pole(s)/Poland* vs *Ukrainian(s)/Ukraine*. Source: own elaboration.

The three-word n-grams (trigrams) provide further insight into the level of aggression, hostility and the general negative attitude towards Ukrainians (Figure 5). The explicit expulsion imperative is expressed by *won z Polski* (“get out of Poland”), and the phrase *do siebie* (go “to your own country and”) and *do swojego kraju* (“to your own country”) if you (Ukrainians) do not like it here (*się nie podoba*), the reason being that *nie ma wojny* (“there is no war”) in all Ukraine but only the eastern territory of the country. The strong polarisation is seen in the radical, nationalistic statement *Polska dla Polaków* (“Poland for Poles”). The expulsion category occurs in the n-grams below seven times. Within the first 30 trigrams presented here, there are 10 instantiations with the word Polish/Poland/Poles and only 2 containing the word Ukraine/Ukrainians, which supports the diagram in Figure 4 and provides some contexts for their usage.

| N-gram                   | Frequency | N-gram                       | Frequency | N-gram                     | Frequency |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|-----------|
| 1 <i>won z Polski</i>    | 46        | 11 <i>to nie jest</i>        | 23        | 21 <i>na Ukrainie i</i>    | 18        |
| 2 <i>nie ma wojny</i>    | 41        | 12 <i>na terenie Polski</i>  | 23        | 22 <i>na pełną skalę</i>   | 18        |
| 3 <i>won z Polski</i>    | 40        | 13 <i>do swojego kraju</i>   | 20        | 23 <i>że to nie</i>        | 17        |
| 4 <i>w Polsce i</i>      | 34        | 14 <i>się nie podoba</i>     | 20        | 24 <i>wracać do siebie</i> | 17        |
| 5 <i>w swoim kraju</i>   | 33        | 15 <i>Polska dla Polaków</i> | 19        | 25 <i>do Polski i</i>      | 17        |
| 6 <i>w Polsce nie</i>    | 30        | 16 <i>Ukraińców w Polsce</i> | 19        | 26 <i>won do siebie</i>    | 17        |
| 7 <i>do siebie i</i>     | 26        | 17 <i>nie da się</i>         | 19        | 27 <i>nie jest w</i>       | 16        |
| 8 <i>To nie jest</i>     | 26        | 18 <i>w innych krajach</i>   | 18        | 28 <i>co się dzieje</i>    | 16        |
| 9 <i>w Polsce to</i>     | 26        | 19 <i>w żywe oczy</i>        | 18        | 29 <i>Nie da się</i>       | 15        |
| 10 <i>w naszym kraju</i> | 24        | 20 <i>wraca do siebie</i>    | 18        | 30 <i>na to że</i>         | 14        |

Figure 5. Top trigrams. Source: own elaboration.

The word *won* deserves further elaboration (see Figure 6) as it occurs with high frequency in our corpus. In fact, it is not originally a Polish word, but Russian, and it usually patterns with the verb “go away/get lost” (*пошёл вон*), carrying a pejorative and offensive meaning. As Russian was taught as an obligatory subject in the past in Polish primary and secondary schools (until the early nineties), some Russian words infiltrated the Polish language, and *won*, or *poszół won*, are occasionally used by Poles and are generally understood. Naturally, along with offensiveness, *won* also has strong associations with the malevolently disposed Russians.

Interestingly, *won* started to appear more often (with a relative frequency equal to 1.4 words per million tokens) in 2023, and its popularity is relatively high still in 2025<sup>9</sup> (1.7 words per million tokens). The negative perception of the Ukrainians in Poland seems to have arisen already one year after the war out-

9 The corpus used for his analysis is Polish Trends, available on the Sketch Engine corpus management platform. It is a monitor corpus based on news articles updated twice a week from RSS feeds as of 2021.

break; it is symptomatic that the peak of its frequency is in 2025. The occurrence of the lexeme *won* adds up to 0.26% of the whole corpus.

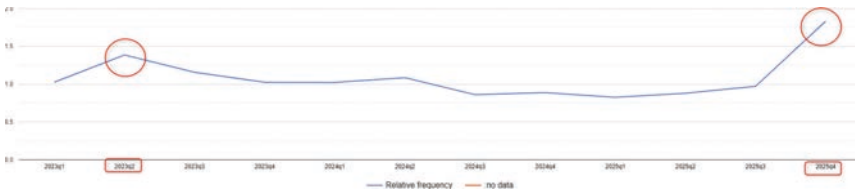


Figure 6. The trend in the usage of *won* in general Polish newsfeed corpus. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Another pejorative word whose usage started after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war is *ukry* (spelt with small or, less frequently, capital letters). The word is a neologism, an augmentative deriving from *Ukraińcy* (“Ukrainians”) and has a pejorative meaning. The trend shows that it became popular around 2023 in general Polish, and then its popularity dropped, yet it is still in use today (Figure 7).

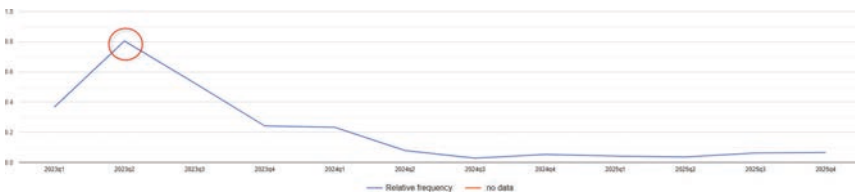


Figure 7. The trend in the usage of *ukry* in general Polish newsfeed corpus. Source: own elaboration.

Collocations related to Ukrainians and Poles elucidate additional facets of the primary issues discussed by online participants (Figure 8 and Figure 9). The collocates signal accusations of being demanding and disgruntled (*roszczeniowi*) despite the financial and social aid Ukrainians received from Poles and the Polish government. Ukrainians display reluctance to pay taxes (*podatki*), and they are perceived as wealthy individuals mocking Poles (*bogacze; śmieją*); consequently, Poles call for deportation (*wracać*). Ukrainians are claimed to get more financial support from the Polish government than the Polish flood victims (referring to the flood in September 2024). The slaughtering (*wyrżneli*) of the Polish population during World War II, a brutal ethnic cleansing event carried out by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in the Volhynia region and Eastern Galicia, is an often raised argument in the ongoing exchange. Ukrainians are perceived as a minority that was invited to Poland while seeking shelter from the war, but now they commit crimes (*popętniają*).

- (12) Police reports from last year state that 7 out of 10 crimes committed in Poland are by Ukrainians.

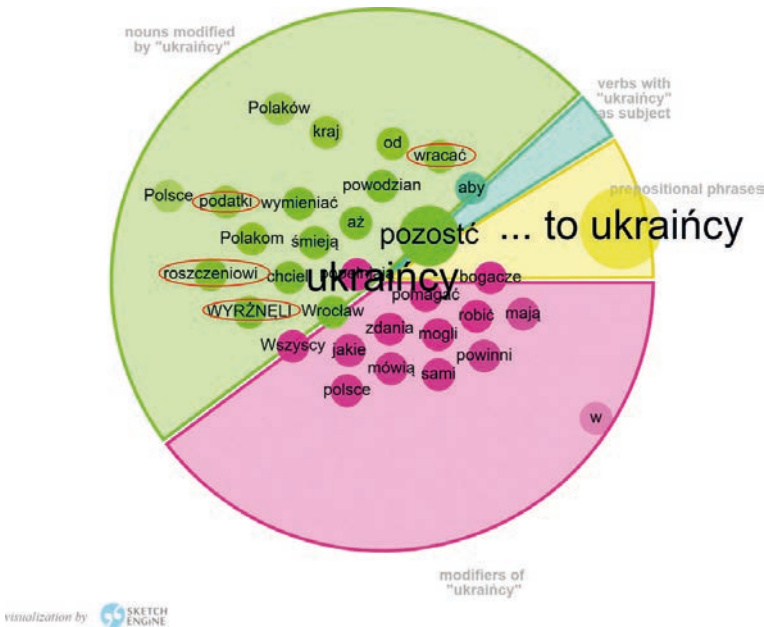


Figure 8. Collocates of *Ukrainians*. Source: own elaboration.

The word *Polacy* (“Poles”) patterns, *inter alia*, with the following words: taxes (*podatki*), pay (*płacić*), must (*muszą*), enough (*dość*), natives (*rodowici*), be glad (*cieszyć*), angry (*źli*), outraged (*oburzeni*). Even a cursory glance at these words allows noticing a story-like sequence they create: Poles must pay taxes (so Ukrainians should also pay taxes), and they have grown weary of providing help to immigrants, who lead better lives than the native population. Despite that, they express anger and outrage, asserting that Poles should be grateful to Ukrainians for their prosperity, as they set up firms in Poland and offer employment opportunities for Poles.

The word taxes (*podatki*) appears in collocations with both words; thus, to explore the contexts, some concordances are provided below (Figure 10).

From the concordances, it is evident that only those Ukrainians who pay taxes should be permitted to remain in Poland when the war ends; all the others (swindlers, those who drink and drive, belong in gangs, assault Poles) should return to Ukraine. Apparently, some Ukrainians pay taxes in Ukraine, not Poland, which exacerbates the situation, as they should pay taxes in the host country. The taxes they remit to Ukraine should be allocated for the war. Poles

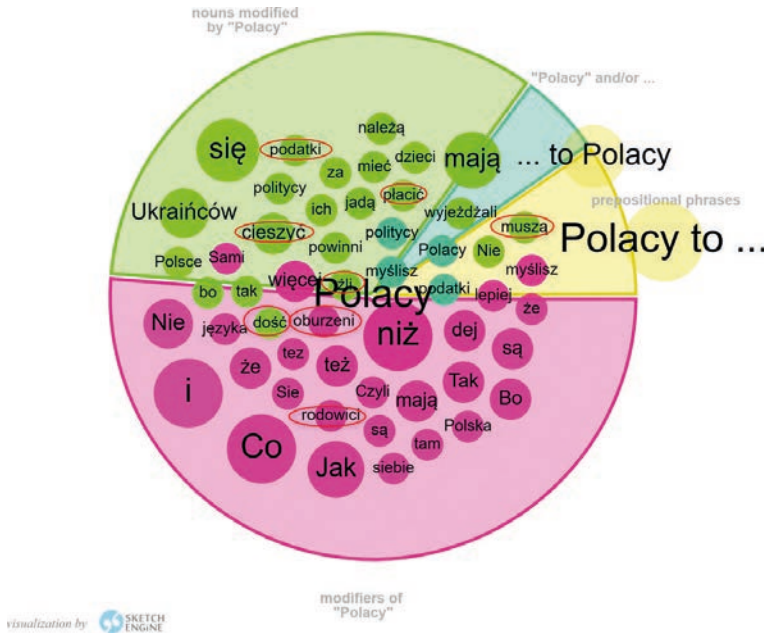


Figure 9. Collocates of *Poles*. Source: own elaboration.

| Details | Left context   | KWIC             | Right context   |
|---------|--|------------------|---|
| 1       | doc#0 koniec wojny , do domu, ci co pracują legalnie placac  | , <u>podatki</u> | ok , ale cwaniacy , jezdzacy po pijanemu , gangi , naj  |
| 2       | doc#0 ie wyjeżdżali.</s><s>Pracują dla Ukrainy i tam placą   | , <u>podatki</u> | ./</s><s>Dlaczego jedni wyjeżdżają, a inni nie i dobrz  |
| 3       | doc#0 :ażdy kto przyjadę do Polski musi pracować i spłacać   | , <u>podatki</u> | !! to muszę być w każdym kraju nie tylko w Polsce, F    |
| 4       | doc#0 a więcej wydajemy na Ukraińców niż wpływy ich jako     | , <u>podatki</u> | proszę to przedstawić te dane Przykre. ----- Jedr       |
| 5       | doc#0 k pewna siebie i uważa, że im wolno, jeżeli ktoś placi | , <u>podatki</u> | , to ma 800 plus nie placi nie ma i tyle jaka dyskrymir |
| 6       | doc#0 ącic.lody Kolejna ofiara...</s><s>Zabieracie te swoje  | , <u>podatki</u> | i wracacie do siebie.</s><s>Już dość nam zabraliści     |
| 7       | doc#0 już lepiej wracajcie do siebie.</s><s>Placcie u siebie | , <u>podatki</u> | bedziecie mieli kasę na wojnę.</s><s>Nikt To jest "dy   |
| 8       | doc#0 nie.</s><s>Dlaczego Ukraińcy którzy pracują i placą    | , <u>podatki</u> | mieliby być traktowani inaczej niż cała reszta obywat   |
| 9       | doc#0 talnego ? a to że Ukraińcy tu pracują i tu placa ZUS i | , <u>podatki</u> | to żadna łaska bo stąd będą w przyszłości pobierać e    |
| 10      | doc#0 o prawa i warunków życia.</s><s>Pracujcie i placcie    | , <u>podatki</u> | oraz składki zdrowotne.</s><s>Skonczcie z postawą       |
| 11      | doc#0 ne oczu nie raz ) !!! Zero socialu.</s><s>To są nasze  | , <u>podatki</u> | , nasza ciężka praca !!!! Nasz sprzęt wojskowy.</s><s>  |
| 12      | doc#0 skończy i wróć się do domu.</s><s>Firma w polsce a     | , <u>podatki</u> | placone na ukrainie darmowe leki dodatek 800+ co to     |

Figure 10. Concordances for *podatki* (“taxes”). Source: own elaboration.

question why some Ukrainians manage well in Ukraine while others leave Ukraine and sponge other nations. More money is spent on Ukrainians from the state budget than is received from their contributions. Poles do not accept the

preferential treatment of foreigners; they demand that the government cease paying social benefits to Ukrainians. The occurrence of *podatki* (“taxes”) is lower than of taxes and *nie* (“no(t)”) analysed above; it constitutes 0.07% of the whole corpus.

In sum, the main problems referred to in the nearly 7,000 comments dataset collected in the second stage of the study mirror the categories identified in the first stage of data collection analysed in Atlas.ti. This indicates resorting to a limited and similar array of issues and arguments throughout the month. However, the repetition of the same or similar topics does not preclude changes in their frequency and distribution, which were observed and reported below.

Some of the most frequent words occurring in the dataset revolve around the expulsion and deportation of Ukrainian immigrants, which was verified across time in our YT comments dataset. Interestingly, even though the time span analysed in this study adds up to only one month, some variation in distribution is already visible, e.g., in the case of *won* (*pej.* “get out”, “get lost”, “beat it”; Figure 11). Moreover, the first two days constitute nearly half of all the comments (the first two days yielded over 3,700 comments and the whole month about 7,000 comments); thus, the strong and often offensive language accumulates in the second half of the corpus as even though there are fewer comments, they show a greater saturation with radical language, i. e., radicalisation of discourse.

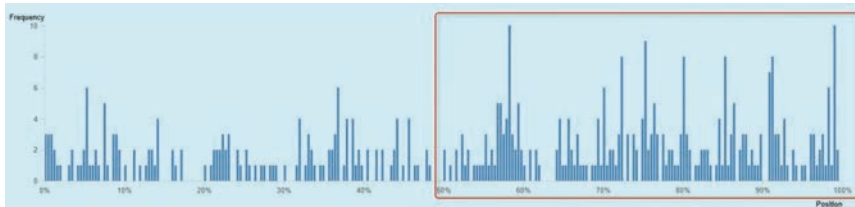


Figure 11. Distribution pattern for *won*. Source: own elaboration.

As Figure 11 demonstrates, the frequency of the word *won* clearly increases over time, especially after about two weeks (higher spikes show top frequency, and the vertical axis shows the time span measured in percentage moving every several days). The distribution is asymmetrical, capturing aggravating polarisation with time, which can signal the radicalisation of opinions present in a homophilic virtual community (the in-group) that aggregates polarised opinions (echo chamber). Notably, the negative, right-wing polarisation of most negative words in the YT dataset does not show a tendency to de-polarise (e.g., though lower frequency or “thinner” distribution), thus reinforcing the emerging “us” vs “them” social divide, wherein the Ukrainians are perceived as the out-group.

Likewise, although generally used with lower frequency, the lemma *wracać* (“go back”) also has a higher frequency and density towards the end of the

observed period, particularly the last week of the timespan under scrutiny here (Figure 12).

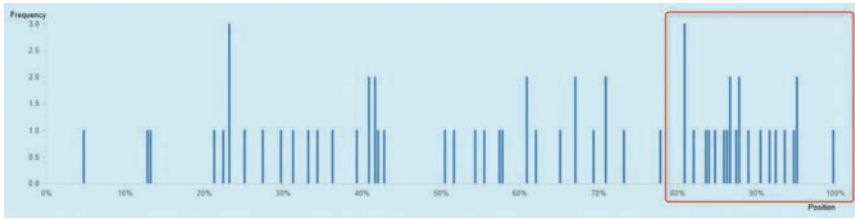


Figure 12. Distribution pattern for *wracać*. Source: own elaboration.

To give yet another illustration of distribution asymmetry (Figure 13), *dość* (in the sense of “enough”) shows a similar trend. It becomes increasingly frequent after about ten days, culminating in the fourth week of online interaction. The words analysed above (*won*, *wracać*, *dość*; “get out”, “go back”, “enough”) show strong antagonistic sentiment towards Ukrainian residents in Poland.

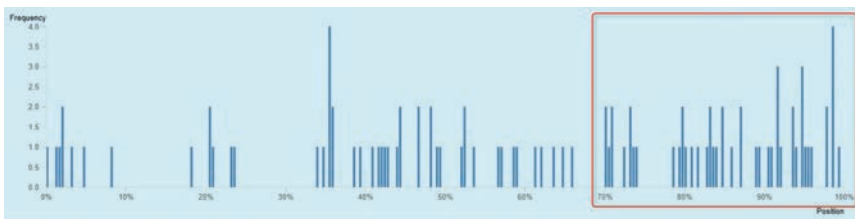


Figure 13. Distribution pattern for *dość*. Source: own elaboration.

Finally, the word taxes (*podatki*), which was discussed above as one patterning with both Poles and Ukrainians, also shows an increase in distribution (yet not necessarily in frequency). Put differently, the word appears (Figure 14) more often (almost every day) with the frequency ranging from one to five, whereas, during the first week, it appeared once every several days, apart from one case when it reached seven instantiations. This speaks for the topic of taxes gaining momentum with time as the discussion pans out, becoming one of the key issues and contributing to discourse radicalisation and social polarisation.

The next analysis reveals the most prevalent topics in our ca. 7,000 dataset (Figure 15). Thematic modelling with BERTopic revealed several dominant clusters in the comment discourse surrounding Natalia Panczenko. The topic modelling was conducted using BERTopic with UMAP dimensionality reduction. As stated in *Section 3*, the initial experiment was performed without fixing the random seed, which may result in minor variations in topic assignment upon replication. However, the interpretive validity of the key topics remains consis-

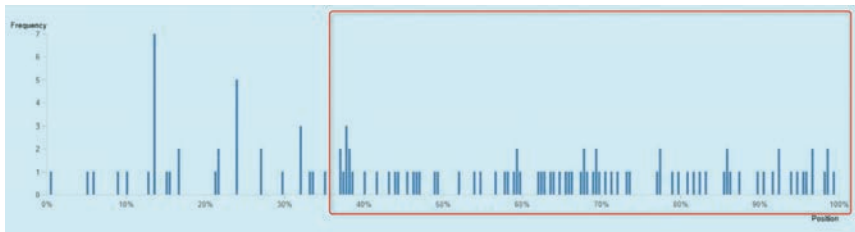


Figure 14. Distribution pattern for *podatki* (“taxes”). Source: own elaboration.

tent across multiple runs. Figure 13 visualises the ten most prominent thematic clusters, labelled by their most frequent lexical items. These include personal references to Panczenko (*Topic 0—panczenko\_pani\_panią\_pan*), nationalist discourse on Ukrainians in Poland (*Topic 1—ukraińców\_ukraińcy\_polsce\_ukrainy*), historical grievances (*Topic 2—wołyń\_piszesz\_wołyniu\_chahły*), and critiques of welfare allocation (*Topic 3—800\_plus\_500\_dostają*). Other topics include accusations of dishonesty (*Topic 4*), exclusionary imperatives (*Topic 5*), economic anxieties (*Topic 6*), framings of propaganda (*Topic 7*), pension justice claims (*Topic 8*), and rejection (*Topic 9*). Below, a qualitative interpretation of the ten most prominent topics based on representative comments and characteristic vocabulary is provided.

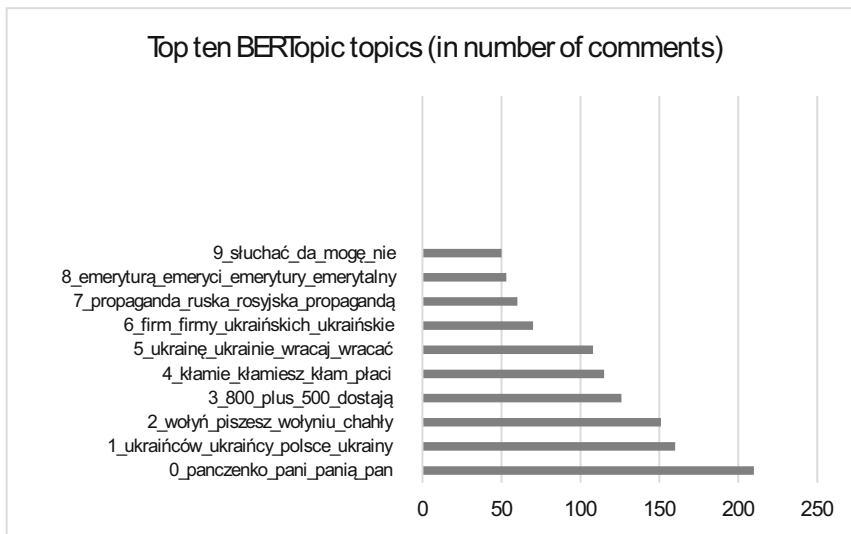


Figure 15. Top 10 topics with descriptive labels identified by BERTopic. Source: own elaboration.

The most prominent topic is centred explicitly on Natalia Panczenko herself, as reflected in the cluster labelled *panczenko\_pani\_panią\_pan*. This topic is

marked by highly personalised language and direct address, often accusatory in tone. Comments in this category regularly invoke Panczenko by name and question her credibility, using expressions such as *klamie na każdym kroku* (“she lies at every step”). The repetition of honorifics (*pani, pan*) in ironic or sarcastic contexts amplifies the performative rejection of her public role. This discourse exemplifies a personalisation strategy in which political critique is concentrated on a singular figure, often through delegitimising language.

A key thematic cluster revolves around the status and treatment of Ukrainians in Poland, as captured in the topic labelled *ukraińców\_ukraińcy\_polsce\_ukrainy*. Comments in this cluster articulate a strong in-group versus out-group dynamic, often framing Ukrainians as outsiders who are afforded privileges unavailable to Polish citizens. The discourse is marked by a sense of perceived imbalance, not only in terms of cultural presence but also in material and institutional access. A particularly illustrative comment directly challenges claims that Ukrainians do not receive support:

(13) ‘They don’t get anything’? REALLY? Then what about this...?

Quote: “As a citizen of Ukraine, do I have the right to free medical services in Poland? Yes. Thanks to the special law on assistance to Ukrainian citizens, in effect since March 2022, Ukrainian men and women who arrived in Poland after February 24 can access free medical care at facilities contracted by the National Health Fund (NFZ).” Meanwhile, a Pole waits in increasingly long queues. Alternatively, if uninsured, has no access to primary care under the NFZ, and if they end up in a hospital, they receive a hefty bill. For f\*\*\*’s sake!

This comment exemplifies a discourse of welfare nationalism, in which access to public services is treated as a zero-sum framework and where the legal inclusion of non-citizens is perceived as a betrayal of the national in-group.

Another thematically charged cluster is found in the topic labelled *wołyń\_piszesz\_wołyniu\_chahty*, which revolves around references to the Volhynia massacre (*rzeź wołyńska*) and broader historical grievances between Poles and Ukrainians. At its core, this discourse mobilises collective memory as a rhetorical weapon, using the legacy of historical violence to justify present-day resentment, moral distancing, or exclusion. Some comments evoke this history in explicit or moralising ways, while others adopt more emotionally condensed expressions—for instance, the phrase *Karma za Wołyń*. *PLPLPL* functions as a nationalist slogan, implying that current suffering, implicitly that of Ukrainians, is a form of historical payback. The combination of the term karma, emotive punctuation, and the national flag suggests a vindictive logic cloaked as patriotism.

Another central topic centres on social benefits and state support programmes, captured in the cluster labelled *800\_plus\_500\_dostajq*. This discourse reflects

widespread economic anxiety and perceived inequities in the distribution of public resources. While the nominal focus is on Poland's family welfare programmes (notably the 500+ and 800+ "family" programmes), the comments often reframe these schemes within a nationalist and exclusionary logic. The underlying narrative suggests that Polish citizens are being economically neglected while non-citizens, especially Ukrainian refugees, are unfairly advantaged:

- (14) Since when do refugees receive welfare like the citizens of this country? You are even collecting social benefits in multiple cities... You are exhausting us... And 400,000 of military age—where's this war then?.

This comment interweaves economic grievance, moral judgment, and geopolitical suspicion, questioning both the legitimacy of welfare recipients and the authenticity of their refugee status.

A closely related but more generalised topic is found in the cluster labelled *klamie\_klamiesz\_klam\_placi*, where the discourse is shaped by accusatory and emotionally charged language. The verbs *klamać* ("to lie") and *placić* ("to pay") function as lexical anchors in a rhetoric of pervasive distrust. While Panczenko is often the target, the accusations extend beyond the individual, encompassing broader institutions such as the media, political foundations, and the state. This is evident in formulations like *klamstwo kłastwem pogania* ("one lie chases another") and more inflammatory statements such as

- (15) Let's hope her Stand with Ukraine foundation is not sponsoring terrorism on Polish territory.

Such utterances reflect not only a breakdown of institutional trust but also the intensification of suspicion into overt hostility. The tone in this cluster is further radicalised by explicitly dehumanising or xenophobic expressions, including slurs like *Chachła paszła* ("Ukrainian, get lost"), which amplify the exclusionary and aggressive stance of the discourse. Altogether, this topic illustrates how distrust merges with ethnic hostility.

The topic labelled *ukrainę\_ukraine\_wracaj\_wracac* is among the most overtly exclusionary. Comments in this cluster frequently include imperatives instructing Ukrainians to "go back" (*wracaj*) to their country. These expressions combine spatial metaphors with moral judgments, positioning Ukrainians as not only foreign but overreaching or intrusive. The rhetorical structure of these statements relies on the assumption of naturalised national borders:

- (16) If you don't know Polish, don't speak... Poles say [go back] to Ukraine!

A similar logic underlies the topic *firm\_firmy\_ukrainskich\_ukraińskie*, where the economic presence of Ukrainians in Poland is viewed with suspicion. This

topic is related to economic suspicion with a critique of perceived geopolitical hypocrisy, using rhetorical questions to cast doubt on the authenticity of Ukrainian refugee status. Such comments tend to invoke an economic nationalism that sees foreign economic success as inherently threatening and suspicious in nature:

- (17) Where do these “poor” Ukrainians get the money to set up thousands of companies? Besides, why are healthy young Ukrainians starting businesses in the EU while others are supposed to fight oligarchs and foreign corporations—the owners of EU companies?

A distinct cluster, *propaganda\_ruska\_rosyjska\_propaganda*, introduces a metadiscursive element. Here, the focus shifts from evaluating specific claims to questioning the motives and origins behind those claims. Commenters in this topic frequently accuse others of spreading Russian propaganda or acting under Kremlin influence. These attributions serve to invalidate dissenting views and function as a rhetorical defence mechanism. The discourse reveals a geopolitical layering within the debate, where conflicting opinions are not simply disagreed with but are framed as foreign disinformation:

- (18) “It’s all Russian propaganda; Ukrainians are portrayed as virtuous maidens... Nonsense... This lady represents Ukrainian propaganda... Who knows, maybe she’s some Russian agent...”

The topic *emeryturę\_emeryci\_emerytury\_emerytalny* taps into socioeconomic grievances, particularly around pension security and welfare. Crucially, however, these grievances are frequently reframed through a nationalist lens. Several comments object to the alleged use of Polish tax revenues to support non-citizens, particularly Ukrainians. One such example states:

- (19) I don’t want my taxes to support Ukrainians, from preschoolers to pensioners.

This merging of economic injustice with ethnic boundaries reflects a rhetoric of welfare nativism, where entitlement to state support is limited to the national in-group.

Finally, the topic *stuchać\_da\_mogę\_nie* reflects affective disengagement. These comments are less ideological and more emotive, expressing irritation, fatigue, or aversion toward Panczenko’s speech, voice, or mannerisms. Common expressions include “*nie mogę słuchać*” (“I can’t listen”) and “*wyłączam*” (“I turn it off”), indicating a refusal to engage. Rather than articulating a reasonable critique, this topic exemplifies the affective saturation of public discourse, where emotional overwhelm leads to withdrawal or outright rejection:

- (20) Damn it, I can’t listen to this—you need to take responsibility for your words.

Taken together, these thematic clusters offer a multi-dimensional view of the online discourse surrounding Natalia Panczenko. They reveal not only specific grievances, whether economic, historical, or cultural, but also broader rhetorical patterns of exclusion, deep-seated polarisation, and perceived injustice.

Expressing support for opinions nonverbally can also manifest significant arguments appealing to a specific community. On YT, “likes” are indicators of silent support. To complement the analysis presented so far, the top seven comments that received the highest “likes” are revealed below, with the number of “likes” they received stated in the parenthesis. From the comments, it transpires that Poles accuse Ukrainians of not taking care of their country, which is involved in a full-scale war, being more interested in pursuing their personal (business) goals abroad instead of fighting for the country. Poles are also disgusted by the immigration policy of paying a pension to Ukrainian retirees. A strong argument against Ukrainians also revolves around their lack of gratitude for the help Poles offered.

- (21) Why should Poles support Ukrainian retirees? This is sick!
- (22) Full-scale war and Ukrainians are traveling back and forth
- (23) Twenty per cent of Ukraine is occupied by war. As for the remaining part free from military actions, go back to your country and schools, and there will be no problem]
- (24) We want to have Poland, not Ukraine, in Poland. Poland for Poles.
- (25) If Ukrainians are unhappy in Poland, they have their homeland, which needs their help and the building of businesses in their own country.
- (26) Let Ukrainians start businesses in their own country.
- (27) Lack of gratitude and humility, but it was to be expected; they have it in their genes.

#### 4.3. Contextual word embedding visualisation

To deepen the analysis of thematic and affective polarisation, we applied contextual word embeddings (a neural network computational technique) to examine the rhetorical environments in which selected ideologically salient terms occur within the YouTube comment corpus. We used contextualised BERT embeddings, which rely on a transformer-based architecture.

Contextual word embeddings are vector representations of words and sentences that encode semantic meaning based on linguistic context (Devlin et al., 2019; Bączkowska, 2024), in line with the assumptions of distributional semantics (Lenci, 2008). Unlike static embeddings (e.g., word2vec or GloVe), which assign a single vector to each word regardless of usage, contextual embeddings dynamically adjust word meaning depending on the surrounding text. This al-

lows for a nuanced capture of rhetorical strategies, co-textual variation, and discursive patterning. To visualise the high-dimensional semantic representations, dimensionality reduction was performed using UMAP with fixed parameters and a defined random seed (`random_state=42`). This configuration ensured reproducibility in the projection space, stabilising the spatial arrangement of semantically similar documents across model runs. While the initial experiment did not involve full global seed control, the fixed seed in UMAP significantly reduced variability in clustering outcomes. Furthermore, repeated executions with different seeds confirmed that the core thematic structures remained consistent, with the same high-salience keywords recurrently characterising each topic cluster.

Using the Polish BERT model (*bert-base-polish-cased-v1*), we generated sentence-level embeddings for user comments containing seven target keywords: *Polak*, *Polacy*, *Ukraińcy*, *Ukrainiec*, *podatki*, *won*, and *Panczenko* (the latter merging both “Panchenko” and “Panczenko” spellings). The choice of these words was dictated by their frequency of occurrence. These embeddings were then reduced to two dimensions using UMAP (Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection), enabling the visual inspection of semantic proximity and discursive clustering (Figure 16). The input data for this visualisation was structured in a CSV file format with two columns: one containing the full YouTube *comment* and the other indicating the associated *keyword*. This format ensured that embeddings could be systematically computed for each comment while retaining the semantic label used for categorisation and visual differentiation. For added clarity, a selection of comments that explicitly contain their corresponding keyword has been included in the Appendix. This provides concrete examples of the textual material from which the embeddings were derived and offers readers a more transparent view of how the linguistic data connects to the visual representation.

The projection (Figure 16) reveals several patterns in the discursive construction of identity, exclusion, and grievance. One notable feature is the formation of clusters around identity markers, particularly *Ukraińcy*, *Polak*, and *Polacy*. These tokens occupy overlapping regions in the semantic space, reflecting a rhetorical tendency to frame national identity in collective and contrastive terms. In our data, *Ukraińcy* is frequently invoked in generalising statements assigning collective blame or privilege, as in *Ukraińcy wszystko mają za darmo* (“Ukrainians get everything for free”). This usage effaces individual agency and constructs a homogenous out-group, typically contrasted with *Polak* or *Polacy* as rightful contributors.

The singular term *Ukrainiec* also appears within this cluster, yet its rhetorical function diverges subtly. Rather than individualising or humanising, it typically exemplifies collective attributes, often through accusations of hypocrisy or ex-

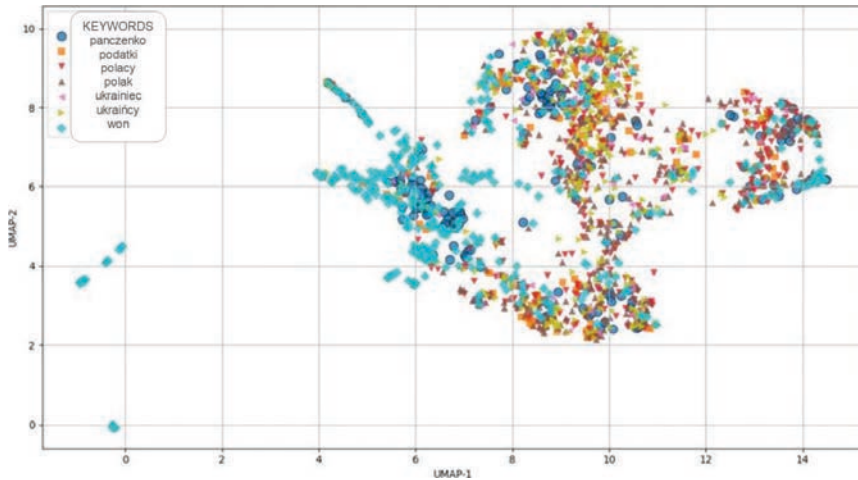


Figure 16. Contextual BERT embeddings from selected terms in YouTube comments. Source: own elaboration.

ceptionalism. An illustrative example is *Ukrainiec zakłada firmę, a nie walczy* (“A Ukrainian opens a business instead of fighting [in the war]”). Here, the singular form enacts *genericisation* (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 45), as it represents the individual as a symbolic instance of the group. In this way, *Ukrainiec* does not interrupt collectivisation but reinforces it through personalised instantiations of broader grievances.

The economic term *podatki* (“taxes”) serves as a semantic bridge between identity and policy discourses. Its proximity to *Polak* and *Polacy* (UMAP: x-axis = 13, y-axis = 6–8; UMAP: x = 8.5, y = 2.5) is clearly displayed. When consulted with concordances, the comments with both *podatki* and *Polak/Polacy* suggest a discursive framework where tax contribution becomes a marker of legitimate belonging and moral worth. Some aggregation around the keyword *ukraińcy* (“Ukrainians”; UMAP: x = 9, y = 7–9) is also noticeable, and it appears in the neighbourhood of *Polak/Polacy* (“Pole(s)”). This co-occurrence represents the recurring contrastive narrative in comments such as *My płacimy podatki, oni wszystko mają za darmo* (“We pay taxes, they get everything for free”), where taxation is rhetorically weaponised to delineate entitlement.

The imperative *won* (“out”) forms a separate and spatially distinct cluster, indicating its function as a performative expression of expulsion. Unlike *podatki* (“taxes”), *won* (“get lost”) is rarely associated with economic or policy-oriented discourse and does not overlap with identity clusters. Its semantic isolation (UMAP: x = 0, y = 0–4) underscores its alignment with affective rejection rather than rational argumentation. Expressions such as *Won do siebie!* (“Out of here!”) exemplify this usage, positioning *won* as an index of hostility.

Interestingly, *Panczenko* is also embedded near the *won* cluster (UMAP:  $x = 4-7$ ,  $y = 4-7$ ), which shows that there is a pronounced call for the personal expulsion of the Ukrainian diaspora leader. The vicinity of a cluster of *ukraińcy* (“Ukrainians”; symbolised with a right olive arrow; UMAP:  $x = 9-10$ ,  $y = 8-10$ ) is also interspersed with *won* (“get lost”). This interspersion is less prominent compared to the *Panczenko* cluster in the central region, yet both areas distinctly illustrate the evidently negative sentiment directed towards the Ukrainian diaspora, and specifically towards their leader, *Panczenko*.

Together, these spatial patterns suggest that ideological polarisation is not only affective or thematic but also semantically structured. The embedding projection reveals a discursively encoded polarisation in which national, economic, and affective registers are spatially aligned to reproduce opposition. As such, contextual embeddings offer a methodologically grounded way to visualise how digital discourse encodes and enacts ideological binaries through language (Kozłowski et al., 2019).

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate the opinions Poles express about Ukrainian immigrants and refugees who came to Poland after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022. The qualitative and quantitative analyses provided detailed information, which allowed us to find answers to our research questions. The topic modelling and sentiment analysis provided a comprehensive view of the dominant discursive themes and their associated emotional valence, offering insight into how Natalia *Panczenko* is framed and evaluated within Polish digital political discourse. The qualitative analysis showed the predominant categories identified in the sample of comments retrieved from the first two days after publishing the interview with Natalia *Panczenko* by Super Express, which were next reinforced and detailed by the corpus-assisted analysis based on nearly 7,000 comments garnered over a month after the Super Express video publication on YouTube, as well as by the comments with the highest number of likes (RQ1). The nearly 7,000 comment dataset proved sufficient to explore changes in time regarding the frequency of usage of some negative and/or radical attitude words (RQ2).

The opinions expressed in comments on YouTube exemplify a radical polarisation and extremely negative opinions voiced by Poles on the Ukrainian residents in Poland. Poles perceive themselves as victims of the welcoming policy towards Ukrainian immigrants to Poland; they emphasise socioeconomic inequality in the treatment of Poles (“us”) versus Ukrainians (“the other”), they undermine the refugee status of Ukrainians and question the legitimacy of

Ukrainians being welfare recipients. Poles express fatigue and irritation due to the ongoing help they offer, with no gratitude expressed by Ukrainians. To justify their current resentment and hostility, they also invoke tragic historical events which divided both nations, particularly the massacre of Poles in former Polish territories, now present-day Ukraine. The radicalisation of rhetoric can be observed over the month when the comments were gathered, which is visible in the lexical trends of select words. This observation is supportive of other studies (e. g., Yarchi et al., 2020) into homophilic virtual communities that create echo chambers, according to which radicalisation aggravates with time.

Beyond topic and sentiment analysis, the incorporation of contextual word embeddings using BERT and UMAP revealed the underlying semantic structure of digital discourse. Terms such as *Polak*, *Ukraińcy*, *podatki*, *won*, and *Panczenko* were shown to cluster in distinctive rhetorical zones, exposing the mechanisms of collectivisation, blame attribution, and symbolic exclusion. This spatialised representation demonstrated that polarisation is not merely thematic or affective but is embedded in the semantic and rhetorical architecture of language itself.

Despite the limitations outlined earlier, this study demonstrates the analytical potential of combining qualitative discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and transformer-based computational modelling. While advanced neural network approaches such as BERT are widely used in computer science, they remain relatively unfamiliar and underutilised within linguistics, media studies, and political discourse analysis. The findings presented here suggest that the integration of such tools can substantially enhance the precision and interpretive depth of linguistic inquiry, particularly when investigating complex phenomena such as digital polarisation, populist discourse, and the construction of collective identity.

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## Appendix: Sample Comments with Keyword Mentions

| Comment   | Keyword   |
|---|-----------|
| Rachunki krzywd źle wpływają na bieżące stosunki, ale dzisiaj gorsze są niedomówienia. Pani Panchenko w tej rozmowie wyjaśnia słowa o podpalaniu, które wcześniej wyrwane z kontekstu poszły w świat. Człowieka należy oceniać po ludzku, a nie pod wpływem manewrów politycznych, czy nawet wojennych.   | panchenko |
| Panchenko, nie podoba sie w Polsce to jazda do siebie. Nikt cie zatrzymywal nie bedzie.   | panchenko |
| Panczenko do natychmiastowego przesłuchania przez ABW, powinna zostać aresztowana i wydalona z Polski. Nawet nie ma odwagi przyznać się do swoich słów, kłamie, manipuluje. Hańba!  | panczenko |
| Powiem tak ,pani Panczenko—jest Pani jak „koń trojański ,,  | panczenko |
| Miliony Ukraińców mieszka na Ukrainie i nigdzie nie wyjeżdżali. Pracują dla Ukrainy i tam płacą podatki. Dlaczego jedni wyjeżdżają, a inni nie i dobrze radzą sobie na Ukrainie?  | podatki   |
| Kto pracuje i płaci podatki może zostać i mieć 800 + i inne świadczenia. Za darmo nic nie ma. Skąd mamy brać dla was pieniądze.   | podatki   |
| Polacy są okradani  | polacy    |
| Prowadzaca super dziennikarka bardzo delikatnie przeprowadzala wywiad bo ktos inny powiedzial Pani Ukraince duzo wiecej tego co czuja Polacy jak zrobili sobie Majdan w Warszawie zapytalaby dlaczego nie zostali u siebie bo tylko 20 pr jest objetych wojna dlaczego przyjezdza doPolski z falszywymi dyplomami kupionymi u siebie Jada na Ukraine dokupic lata pracy zeby u nas brac emeryture i wiele innych zachowan czy chca zrobic kraj przezarty korupcja itd Prywatnie uslyszala by o wdziecznosc i swoich rodakow wzglednie tych ktorzy ich przyjeleli do swych domow | polacy    |
| Dla czego polaki popieraja nienawisc do ukraincow? A razem z tym atakowane na podstawie narodowosci na Polsce sa ukraincy polakami a nie na odwrót. A jak ktokolwiek ma info ktora mozna sprawdzic ze chociaz jeden sa przypadek zeby ukrainiec zaatakowal polaka za to ze ten jest polakiem, to poprosze pokazac. A najpierw stosuje to nacystow z Sejmu. Dzieki   | polak     |

(Continued)

| Comment  | Keyword   |
|--|-----------|
| Co ta baba gada. Moja córka mieszka w Anglii i tam jej dziecko nie uczy języka polskiego. Uczy sie ono w domu lub chodzi do prywatnej szkółki niedzielnej. Są też polskie katolickie szkoły ale niestety prywatne. W powszechnej państwowej szkole czyli Primary school jest tylko język angielski i historia tegoż kraju. Jeśli Ukraińcy w Polsce chcą uczyć swoje dzieci ich języka to niech zrobią tak jak jest to w Anglii. Prywatnie tak ale nie w publicznej szkole z podatków Polaków.  | polak     |
| Słyszałam co mówiłaś! Jak możesz tak kłamać bezczelnie?! Sama, osobiście powiedziałaś że będą podpalenia! Nawoływałaś do puczu! w żadnym państwie nie uczy języka ukraińskiego Tak naprawdę ludzie na zachodniej ukrainie nie dostają żadnej pomocy. Wasza władza stwierdziła ,że na zachodniej ukrainie niema wojny, niema dla tego dla nich pomocy Chciecie przejąć Polskę, widać to z tych wypowiedzi, co 10 obywatel w Polsce, to jest ukrainiec, co to znaczy? Jak może być euromajdan w Warszawie, przecież euromajdan to organizacja walcząca , ustawiona do walki, tak jak było to na Ukrainie , nawoływająca do przewrotu. Pomarańczowa rewolucja. Czekają Polskę ciężkie chwile Ten wywiad bije w naszą godność, kłamie, jak z nut | ukrainiec |
| Przykład.Mój szef chciał dostać się do ortopedy.Termin pół roku.Ukrainiec ,którego zatrudnia również się starał o wizytę u tego samego lekarza.Tydzień i załatwiony.Pytania?Błąd kłamie pod każdym względem.   | ukrainiec |
| 500+/800+ miało pomóc polskim rodzinom i poprawić DZIETNOŚĆ POLSKI. Co mają do tego Ukraińcy i inne nacje?!  | ukraińcy  |
| Nikt tu im nie każe żyć, nie podoba się im to won. Nic nie ma wspólnego z rosyjską propagandą. Ani Putin, ani Żeleński i inni ukraińcy nie są mi ani bratem ani śwatem.  | ukraińcy  |
| Won śmieciu na usrainu won!!!!!!   | won       |
| polski emeryt..rencista...DOKŁADA DO UKURWIENCÓW W POLSZY PONAD 1.000 CO MIESIĄC...Z JAKIEGO TYTUŁU?Wg chrześcijańskiego porządku MAŻ,ZONA ,DZIECI...dalsza rodzina...sąsiedzi...przyjaciele..NARÓD..spakować to UKURWIENSTWO...I WIO!! na kaftubek Ukrainy,który im zostanie...WON!!!   | won       |

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