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## **“Bunglers and Haters of Women” – Delegitimization Strategies of Political Opponents in Selected Video Ads of Poland’s Civic Platform. A Multimodal Analysis**

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### *Summary*

This study investigates the delegitimization strategies employed by Civic Platform, Poland’s largest liberal party, in its portrayal of political opponents during the 2023 parliamentary campaign. By analyzing nine election ads, the paper explores how the formation constructs its political opponents, employing specific semiotic and multimodal strategies to delegitimize the then ruling Law and Justice. The study integrates Bar-Tal’s model of delegitimization to assess the party’s strategic messaging and examines the role of disparaging humor in shaping political legitimacy. The findings reveal that Civic Platform’s campaign frames Law and Justice politicians as incompetent caricatures or lawbreakers harmful to Polish citizens. In particular, Jarosław Kaczyński, the party’s leader, is depicted as inherently malevolent and driven by personal vendettas. The analysis highlights a diverse range of semiotic choices used to construct political adversaries and uncovers striking parallels between Polish liberal discourse and far-right rhetoric, particularly in the use of racial stereotypes against immigrants and in reliance on emotional arguments. These insights emphasize the need for a broader approach to politically-oriented discourse analysis that accounts for ideological overlaps and the strategic use of humor in political communication.

*Keywords:* Delegitimization, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Disparaging Humor, Civic Platform, Political Marketing

### **Introduction**

The 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland saw a record turnout after the political transition in 1989, with 74.38%, far exceeding the previous record for parliamentary elections (62.70% in 1989). The discussed elections concluded with the Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*; PiS), which ruled Poland from 2015 to

2023, losing power. Although PiS formally won the election (receiving 35.38% of the vote), the formation failed to win a majority of the seats needed to form a government. Subsequently, November 27, 2023, saw the formation of the third government of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, which failed to win the vote of confidence in the Sejm on December 11, 2023. On the same day, a coalition of several parties (Civic Coalition, The Third Way, The New Left) nominated Donald Tusk (chairman of Civic Platform – *Platforma Obywatelska*; PO – the main party in the Civic Coalition) as head of government, and the Sejm elected him to the office. Tusk's third government (he previously led the government from 2007 to 2011 and from 2011 to 2014) was sworn in by President Andrzej Duda on December 13, 2023.

When it comes to Polish political discourse, by far the most attention has been paid to PiS. The party has been described as populist, particularly with regard to migration policy (Žuk and Žuk, 2024), sexual minorities policy (Yermakova, 2021), or portraying the European Commission as an enemy (Cymer, 2022). In the literature, PiS has often been compared to Hungarian Fidesz; in particular, researchers have pointed out similarities between the formations with regard to their approach to liberalism (Kim, 2021), historical politics (Radonić, 2020), or attempts to influence state institutions (Pożarlik, 2022). At the same time, it is worth noting that many texts critical of PiS were written by researchers who subsequently became members of the PO government (Bodnar, 2020; Szeptycki, 2022) or who explicitly voiced their support for the latter party (Markowski, 2022; Sadurski, 2019). This fact means that, at least in some cases, the presentation of the party's actions and/or its discourse may not have been impartial. With that in mind, it seems that, overall, the characteristics of PiS's discourse are fairly well researched. Therefore, another analysis of the formation's discourse – even if it involved material from a campaign that has not been investigated so far in detail – would probably not be very illuminating, especially in light of the fact that for many years there have been no significant changes in the party's leadership.

Compared to PiS, PO has received relatively little attention in the literature. Although there have been analyses of the formation's election programs from various years (Herudzinski and Swacha, 2022; Gabryszak, 2019), there are relatively few studies in the literature analyzing the discourse of PO or its individual politicians. The few studies that did conduct this type of research (Paczeński and Winławska, 2024; Klepański *et al.*, 2023) were comparative analysis (in addition to PO, other Polish mainstream political parties were analyzed). The discussed gap in the literature may come as a surprise, since Donald Tusk's party is a formation whose support has been hovering around 25-35% for the past twenty years. Tusk himself has headed the government three times, and PO was the largest opposition party during the PiS government.

Moreover, when it comes to recent research on contemporary election videos of European formations, it has focused on (far) right-wing formations (e.g. Salojärvi *et al.*, 2023; Núñez Puente and Fernández Romero, 2020; Mackay, 2015; McSwiney and Sengul, 2024). In short, such videos usually rely on fear-based messaging and highlighting a stark “us vs. them” dichotomy. Many right-wing movements emphasize strict immigration policies, and their videos include imagery of border walls or law enforcement at the borders. This is often framed as a measure to protect the country’s security. On the other hand, opposing groups are presented in a negative light, as a danger to the state’s security or economy (e.g. immigrants), or their lack of legitimacy to exercise power (e.g., political opponents) is emphasized. Thus, while these studies have shed light on the imagery of right-wing movements, relatively little attention has been paid to formations with a left-wing or liberal profile. Given that social media is now an important channel of communication for every major political party, irrespective of its ideological affiliation, the discussed disproportion is surprising.

The present text attempts to bridge these gaps by focusing on multimodal delegitimization strategies in the campaign discourse of PO used in its election videos. It is worth noting that when analyzing political discourse, one should take into account not only classic genres such as election programs or speeches, but also newer ones, which, through the Internet and social media, have considerable viral potential, as they can quickly reach large audiences, including those who oppose or are indifferent to a particular party, not just its supporters. Moreover, since Mazzoleni and Schulz’s seminal article (1999), discourse and media scholars have drawn particular attention to the mediatization of politics, i.e. the process by which media – including digital platforms – shape and influence political processes, institutions, and communication (Schulz, 2014, p. 67). Overall, the overarching goal of this paper is to examine the delegitimization strategies employed by PO in its 2023 parliamentary campaign, focusing on how the party constructs its political opponents through multimodal discourse. Moreover, by combining multimodality, classic delegitimization models, and the category of disparaging humor, the study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which political legitimacy is contested and shaped in contemporary political communication; in particular, liberal discourse will be investigated.

The reminder of the article is organized into five sections. Firstly, the concept of discursive (de)legitimization is discussed. Secondly, the framework which combines selected elements from Bar-Tal’s (1990) and Lazar and Lazar’s (2004) delegitimization models, and disparaging humor is presented. Subsequently, the materials for the present analysis (nine election spots) are discussed. The fourth, empirical section investigates the videos, taking into account both discursive and socio-politi-

cal levels. In the last section, the findings are summarized and brought together for a broader discussion, allowing to draw conclusions on the mechanisms of multimodal (de)legitimization.

### **Legitimacy and Delegitimization Strategies**

Legitimacy is considered the main goal that political actors seek (Cap, 2008, p. 39). It is a heterogeneous phenomenon, which has been thoroughly studied from the angles of different disciplines: law, sociology, political science, or security studies. This study adopts a constructivist approach (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Weiler, 1999), suggesting that legitimacy is not a fixed concept. Instead, it must be continuously justified, motivated, and supported through discursive argumentation. In this framework, discursive processes not only describe reality but also help establish a specific social order. As Berger and Luckmann (1966, pp. 40–53) emphasize, this occurs through language, which plays a crucial role in the social construction of reality. Therefore, legitimization – the process through which legitimacy is socially constructed – is not perceived herein as giving an objective account of reality, but as an attempt at sustaining or contesting a particular socio-political order (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). As the present article investigates the portrayal of the rival party in election videos, rather than analyzing legitimization strategies, the paper focuses on delegitimization mechanisms. Chilton (2004, p. 46) states that legitimization and delegitimization are essential counterparts and that the strategies of the latter include emphasizing differences between “us” and “them” as well as speech acts of insulting, blaming or accusing. Screti (2013, p. 212) points out that delegitimization involves “discursively creating and transmitting a negative image of the Other”. In addition, Van Dijk (1998, pp. 258–259) observes that delegitimization is used with regard to one’s actions, goals, norms and values, social positions, or group membership.

Explaining the nature of delegitimization by referring to social psychology, Bar-Tal (1989) calls it “the extreme case of stereotyping and prejudice”. He exhaustively discusses the psychological mechanisms behind delegitimization, showing the factors that differentiate it from the aforementioned stereotypes and prejudice. Namely, Bar-Tal (1989, p. 171) points out that the basis for delegitimization is extremely negative and the categories used to portray the delegitimized group suggest that its members should be excluded from society. Further, delegitimization suggests that the delegitimized group engages in negative actions or has the potential to do so. It not only signifies that the group’s traits, values, goals, or ideologies are seen as highly undesirable and completely rejected by the prevailing norms of the delegitimizing society, but it also indicates that this group might act in ways that could be harmful.

Bar-Tal's (1989; 1990) model has been successfully applied to analyses of media and political discourse, which include a discursive construal of protesters against COVID-related law by the police (Rak, 2022), depictions of LGBTQ people (Mendelsohn *et al.*, 2020), portrayal of Jews and Blacks by Fascist propaganda (Volpato *et al.*, 2010), or representation of the Other in Israeli and Palestinian schoolbooks (Adwan *et al.*, 2016). Bar-Tal's (1990, pp. 65–66) original model distinguishes five means of delegitimization:

- a) dehumanization – classifying the members of the delegitimized group as possessing inhuman characteristics;
- b) trait characterization – assigning personality traits that are viewed as highly negative and intolerable within a specific society;
- c) outcasting – classifying individuals into groups regarded as offenders against the law and fundamental social standards;
- d) use of political labels – referring to a group as a political organization that poses a threat to the values of the given society or its whole system; the labels are derived from a range of political goals, principles, or ideologies (e.g., socialists, far-right wingers, fascists);
- e) group comparison – designating the most disdained group as the label for those who have been delegitimized. This group represents notions of malice, evil, and wrongdoing within a particular society.

Given the fact that PO is one of Poland's mainstream parties, it is unlikely that dehumanization would play a significant part in its discourse. Such strategies tend to be observed in discourses of extreme formations or semi-formal organizations which appeal to radical voters with specific views that are difficult to accept in the broadly understood mainstream (Wahlström *et al.*, 2021; Volk and Weisskircher, 2023). Therefore, the modified delegitimization model will not involve dehumanization as one of its strategies. Instead, the author of the present article suggests replacing it with disparaging humor.

With the rise of social media, humor is increasingly a characteristic of modern political campaigns. Archakis and Tsakona (2011, p. 62) state that politicians freely mix formal and colloquial styles in an attempt to step out of their official role and present themselves as being close to the people. On the other hand, humor can serve as an effective tool for polarization and creating political tensions; Koivukoski and colleagues (2024, p. 1) state that humor is critical in digital campaigning for both capturing interest and eliciting amusement, but also for delineating group boundaries. For the latter, more aggressive humor styles are often used.

According to Ford and Ferguson (2004, p. 79), disparaging humor is centered around denigrating and belittling its target. As Hodson and MacInnis (2016) point

out, delegitimization takes place not only through extreme categorizations or labels but also in more mundane ways such as humor. Disparaging humor can also be applied to assume superiority over out-group members through comic manifestations, so that such actions are perceived as more socially acceptable (Saucier *et al.*, 2016, p. 78). Overall, disparaging humor has been interpreted within the framework of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), which assumes that individuals shape their social identity by comparing the groups they are part of (in-groups) with other groups (out-groups). As the literature on (de)legitimization discussed in the previous section has assumptions similar to social identity theory (the "us vs. them" dichotomy, and creating in-groups and out-groups), it seems reasonable to include disparaging humor in the model.

In addition, the category of outcasting has been significantly expanded by conceptualizing it in accordance with Lazar and Lazar's (2004) four-layered model. The first category, enemy creation, involves identifying an enemy who goes against the beliefs of a specific group. Identifying the enemy is crucial for defining and upholding social norms and order (Lazar and Lazar, 2004, pp. 227–228). As PiS and PO have been the two dominant parties and rivals on the Polish political scene for over twenty years, it can be safely assumed that the former will be presented as the enemy of the latter. More emphasis will thus be placed on the other three categories: criminalization, orientalism, and evilification.

Criminalization involves portraying the enemy's political activities as being against the law. While enemy creation focuses on political dynamics with the out-group, criminalization deals with legal aspects (Lazar and Lazar, 2007, p. 46). It is important to note that actions of breaking the law are discursively constructed as intentional. To further stress the criminal character of the enemy, political actors often juxtapose his or her actions against their victims – they are usually framed as innocent. In addition, criminal actions attributed to the enemy may encompass different timeframes: past, present, and future (Lazar and Lazar, 2004, pp. 230–232). The second category, orientalism, refers to the manner in which Western societies have historically depicted and defined the "East" or "Orient" as exotic, mysterious, inferior, and backward. This orientalist discourse often encompasses stereotypes, oversimplifications, and distortions of Eastern cultures, religions, and practices. Such discourse increasingly portrays "people from the East" as Islamic extremists and terrorists, while also emphasizing their supposed civilizational inferiority (see Kerboua, 2016, pp. 21–26). As Lazar and Lazar (2004, pp. 234–236) point out, such discourse involves portraying Arabs as bellicose, morally degenerate, deceitful, and uncivilized. Finally, evilification is rooted in a clear dichotomy between good and evil. It involves categorizing the enemy as being outside of the morally righteous order (*ibid.*, pp. 236–238).

## Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Election spots are complex genres that not only convey information, but are also embedded in broader cultural, political and social contexts. Analyzing only one aspect, for example the verbal rhetoric, can lead to simplifications. It is therefore worth considering different approaches to understand how different elements work together to create meaning. The utilization of various communication channels by politicians<sup>1</sup> necessitated the adoption of methods beyond traditional rhetorical and linguistic analysis for studying this type of material. As a result, several toolkits have been created, enhancing the systematic and academic rigor of the analyses (e.g., Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2008; Machin and Mayr, 2012). Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that examines how meaning is constructed and communicated through multiple modes or channels of communication, rather than relying solely on language. This perspective recognizes that meaning can be conveyed through a variety of means, including visual elements (such as images, colors, and layout), auditory elements (like sound and music), spatial arrangements (such as the organization of space), and gestural or embodied communications (like body language). MDA incorporates insights from linguistics, communication studies, visual studies, and cultural studies, making it a versatile framework for analyzing a wide range of texts and communication practices. Subsequently, in recent years there have been multiple studies that implemented MDA in investigation of election materials that employ more than just the verbal communication mode: election videos (Adler and Kohn, 2023; Salojärvi *et al.*, 2023), photographs (Moffitt, 2024; Uluçay and Melek, 2024), or leaflets and posters (Martínez Lirola, 2023; Kores, 2020). This fact demonstrates that MDA is a valid approach for a study of political discourse. In addition, various leading discourse scholars have focused their attention on the question of multimodal legitimation (Mackay, 2021; Van Leeuwen, 2017), as they are interested in how different modes contribute to achieving and maintaining legitimacy, and how they can be used to delegitimize certain political actors.

In order to reconstruct and interpret the strategies of multimodal delegitimization, the framework suggested by Machin and Mayr (2012) to investigate salience was employed. Salience is a key term in MDA-related research; it is defined as a type of composition that “can create a hierarchy of importance among the elements, selecting some as more important, more worthy of attention than others” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 201). In practical terms, salience can manifest in

<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the proliferation of multimodal communication can by no means be restricted only to the field of politics. Still, as the present paper offers a political discourse analysis, this section focuses on research tools and methods connected to the discussed area.



various forms across different modes of communication, including visual imagery, written text, and spoken language. For instance, in a visual composition such as an advertisement, salience might be achieved through the use of size, color, or placement. A larger, brightly colored object placed at the center of an image may draw the viewer's attention more effectively than smaller, muted elements located at the periphery. Similarly, in written texts, certain words or phrases may be highlighted through bolding, italicizing, or different font sizes to signal their importance to the reader. The concept of salience is fundamental in understanding how audiences engage with multimodal texts. By strategically manipulating salience, communicators can guide the interpretation and emotional response of their audience, ensuring that certain messages or themes resonate more strongly (Van Leeuwen, 2005, pp. 198–199). This hierarchical organization not only affects immediate comprehension but also shapes the overall narrative or argument presented within the discourse.

Machin and Mayr's above-mentioned framework (2012, pp. 54–56) is comprised of seven elements. In this version of the model, foregrounding and overlapping have been combined, resulting with the category of perspective which is in line with Van Leeuwen's (2005, p. 198) remarks. Overall, the revised model for investigating salience in multimodal texts consists of the following elements:

- (1) potent cultural symbols (the incorporation of culturally significant symbols can evoke various associations, both positive and negative, that influence the viewer's perception);
- (2) size (utilized to demonstrate the hierarchy of significance of the elements shown);
- (3) color (salience is conveyed through vibrant and intense colors, while more muted or subdued colors signify its absence; also, the contrast between highly saturated and soft colors is investigated);
- (4) tone (it concerns the level of brightness; the brighter an element is, the more salient it seems);
- (5) focus (it differentiates between elements that are included in a text primarily to highlight the presence of others, and those that occupy the focal point of the composition);
- (6) perspective (foreground objects are more salient than those in the background, and elements that overlap with others stand out more than the elements they cover).

Overall, the present model consists of five means of delegitimization: disparaging humor, trait characterization, use of political labels, group comparison, and outcasting. The final category, outcasting, was expanded to include subtypes such as criminalization, orientalism, and evilification, reflecting the nuanced forms of



symbolic exclusion and marginalization used in political discourse. In turn, the integration of the six salience categories with the five delegitimization strategies allowed for a micro-level analysis of how meaning is constructed not just through what is said but also through how it is visually organized. This analytical synthesis underscores the power of multimodal communication in shaping political perception, revealing how visual, textual, and symbolic cues interact to subtly (but effectively) delegitimize opponents while reinforcing a preferred ideological position.

## Materials

The election campaign officially lasted from August 8, 2023 (the official start of the campaign) to October 13, 2023 (in Poland, there is an election silence on election day and the day before). This amounts to 66 days of election campaigning. During this time, PO published 58 spots that attack PiS or its individual politicians. This means that the liberal formation published almost every day an election spot whose main theme was criticism of the ruling party. This number alone shows that the delegitimization of PiS was an important part of the discourse of Donald Tusk's formation.

Given the aforementioned large number of spots, a thorough analysis of all the materials was not possible due to the space limitations of a single paper. Thus, the study used a quantitative criterion, and only the most popular spots that were viewed more than 200,000 times (including two that have been watched approx. 196,000 times) were taken into account. The spots were published on PO's official social media channels (X, Facebook, YouTube). It was noted that the materials in question were most often viewed on X (interestingly, in the case of YouTube, some videos that have been viewed more than 150,000 times on X have been watched less than 10,000 times on YouTube<sup>2</sup>). Moreover, in the case of X, the spots were reposted by prominent PO politicians, increasing post engagement. Although the most popular social medium in Poland is still YouTube, numerous studies show that X (and earlier Twitter) is the platform of greatest importance for political communication in the country (Kajta *et al.*, 2025; Matuszewski and Szabó, 2024)

The corpus comprises of the following ads:

- a) Straszyl, straszyl, a sami ich wpuścili! #OszustwaPiS (They threatened, they threatened, and they let them in themselves! #FraudPiS), 1.2m views, September 8;

<sup>2</sup> For example, the video "Poland under PiS rule uses solutions straight out of Belarus, police use force against protesters and opposition!" has been watched almost 197,000 times, whereas the same material on YouTube has only 3.3 thousand views (as of July 2025).

- b) Halo, Jarek? A z tymi spółkami to chyba przegiąłeś. #TelefonDoJarka (Hello, Jarek? I think you've gone overboard with these state-owned companies, #PhoneToJarek), 497.9k views, September 11;
- c) Wyprzedali majątek narodowy za bezcen, a teraz pytają Polaków o zgodę! (They sold off the national assets for nothing and now they are asking the Poles for permission!), 259.7k views, August 11;
- d) Po ośmiu latach przypomnieli sobie, że trzeba dbać o wszystkich, nie tylko o swoich. O czym przypomną sobie jutro? #ZagrozeniePiS (Eight years on, they remembered that it's important to look after everyone, not just their own. What will they remind themselves of tomorrow? #DangerPiS), 253.3k views, September 6;
- e) Szokująca wypowiedź! Morawiecki chciał podwyższenia wieku emerytalnego! #MateuszHipokryta (Shocking statement! Morawiecki wanted to raise the retirement age! #MateuszHypocrite), 246.5k views, October 5;
- f) Nieudolność PiS w pandemii doprowadziła do katastrofy! Wstrząsający raport NIK! #OkradaliChorych (PiS's failure to deal with the pandemic has led to disaster! Shocking report from the Supreme Audit Office! #They-RobbedTheSick), 243.2k Views, September 12;
- g) Czy Wicepremier do spraw bezpieczeństwa Jarosław Kaczyński wiedział o nielegalnym procederze wizowym? Rząd milczy, @Woloszanski2023 pyta. #AferaWizowaPiS (Did Deputy Prime Minister for Security Jarosław Kaczyński know about the illegal visa process? The government is silent, @Woloszanski2023 is asking. #VisaAffairPiS), 217.5k views, September 21a;
- h) W Polsce za rządów PiS stosuje się rozwiązania rodem z Białorusi, policja używa siły wobec protestujących i opozycji! #ZagrozeniePiS (Poland under PiS rule uses solutions straight out of Belarus, police use force against protesters and opposition! #DangerPiS), 196.3k views, September 21b;
- i) Doprowadziliście Polskę do dziadostwa. Nie umiecie rządzić. Jesteście partaczami! #DziadostwoPiS (You have run Poland into the ground. You do not know how to govern. You are all bunglers! #PiSShambles), 196.7k views, September 28.

Overall, this study seeks to address the following research questions, which are designed to explore the delegitimization strategies employed by PO in its 2023 parliamentary campaign and their broader implications for political discourse analysis:

1. How does Poland's largest liberal party portray its political opponents, and in what ways does this portrayal differ from the discourse employed by (far) right-wing parties?

2. What specific semiotic and multimodal strategies does Civic Platform employ in its 2023 election ads to delegitimize the Law and Justice party?
3. How does Bar-Tal's model of delegitimization apply to Civic Platform's campaign discourse, and what insights does it provide into the party's strategic messaging?
4. How does disparaging humor contribute to the construction or erosion of political legitimacy, and in what ways can it address existing analytical gaps in political discourse studies?

## Analysis

### *Disparaging Humor*

The strategy of disparaging humor was present in multiple videos. Its aim was to show prominent PiS representatives as incapable of managing the state and making bad decisions. Jarosław Kaczyński (the leader of PiS) and Mateusz Morawiecki were most often portrayed using this strategy.

Regarding Kaczyński, the September 11 spot recontextualizes an election video of PiS which shows its leader answering the German Chancellor's phone call. The German leader wants to convince Kaczyński that the retirement age in Poland should be the same as it was during Tusk's term, to which Kaczyński replies: "Tusk is gone and these practices are over." In the analyzed video, Sławomir Nitras, current Minister of Sports and Tourism, calls Kaczyński and states that "under Tusk no one stole money from Treasury Companies as under the PiS government". The response of Kaczyński is analogous to that in the above-discussed video of PiS, which creates a comic effect, showing Tusk as an honest politician and Kaczynski as allowing his subordinates to steal from the state. It is worth noting that Nitras uses colloquial language ("milking state-owned companies"), diminutives (he calls Kaczyński "Jarek" instead of "Jarosław"), and the singular form of "you", which in Poland is used only when a certain degree of familiarity has developed, which is not the case between Kaczyński and Nitras.

When it comes to Morawiecki, the September 21b spot shows an excerpt from the politician's speech, which Morawiecki slips in saying that "the big threat is the return of the Law and Justice government". The September 6 video is dedicated entirely to Morawiecki. In the discussed video, the politician is addressed by Poland, which is represented by a female voice (in all other materials, the voiceover, if present, belongs to a male). The main focus of the spot is the accusation that, despite eight years in power, PiS does not know the real needs of the Polish people, as the party is supposed to be focused on providing benefits for its representatives. "Poland" communicates this by saying "we know each other poorly". Analogous to

the previous spot, she addresses Morawiecki by name, diminishes the seriousness of his status as prime minister. The spot in question uses a strategy of contrast, humorously portraying Morawiecki as caring only for the interests of his own political camp. For example, "Poland" mocks PiS's campaign promise to improve the quality of meals in public hospitals, contrasting the stale bread allegedly given to patients in Polish hospitals with shots of PiS politicians eating lavish meals in expensive restaurants. In these fragments, wordplay is also used, e.g., when Patryk Jaki (a PiS MEP) is shown, the voiceover says "for the faithful to the authorities a meal was provided, and not just any meal" (*dla wiernych władzy posilek się znalazł, i to nie byle jaki*), which is a wordplay on the MEP's surname and a Polish colloquial phrase (*byle jaki* means "not just any", but it could also be translated as "mediocre").

In addition, "Poland" sarcastically remarks that "[President] Duda<sup>3</sup> ordered 9 tonnes of seafood for himself to the palace", although in reality these are the products used to prepare meals for the guests of the Presidential Palace. In the context of potent cultural symbols, the spot uses the association of seafood as a common symbol of wealth and luxury<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the bright tone and vivid colors highlight the food's salience, which contrasts with the plain shots of slices of bread. In comparison, by not showing anything in the foreground, the message that the Morawiecki government is failing to support hospital patients beyond offering them stale bread and butter is reinforced.

In another fragment, Morawiecki's alleged lack of interest in the affairs of ordinary Poles is contrasted with the actions of local governments; in the ad, the latter are shown as developing local infrastructure despite the lack of support by Morawiecki's government. In addition, "Poland" addresses the former prime minister with the words "if you would just get out of the government limousine sometimes", suggesting that it is there, rather than among the people, that he spends most of his time. The contrast between him and local governments is also communicated visually: a person resembling Morawiecki and shown waving at a government limousine, which symbolizes luxury, is juxtaposed against a selection of investments

<sup>3</sup> As in the case of other PiS politicians, when talking about Andrzej Duda, the discussed video does not mention the name of his function, referring to him only by his surname, which is considered highly inappropriate and can be seen as another attempt to delegitimize a high-ranked PiS-affiliated official.

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is a reference to a quote from the so-called wiretapping scandal of 2014, when a weekly news magazine revealed recordings of conversations between PO politicians in Warsaw restaurants with expensive dishes (octopus or boiled beef cheeks), commenting in vulgar terms on the Polish political scene. The publication of the tapes led to the resignation of many high-ranking politicians, severely damaging the image of PO (Larson, 2017, p. 343).

**Figure 1.** Contrast Between the Situation of Hospital Patients and High-Ranked Law and Justice Officials



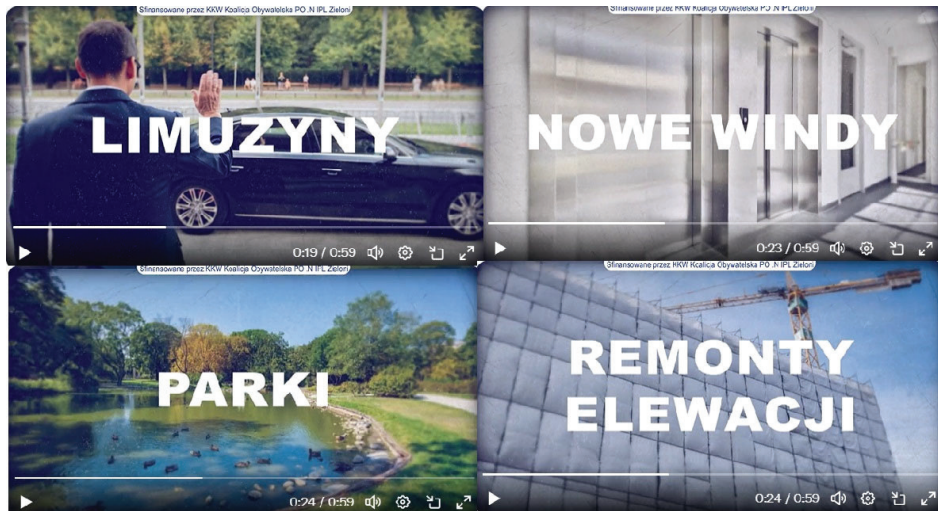
undertaken by local governments. Therein, salience is highlighted by the use of brightness and intense colors. In the case of the shot with Morawiecki, these visual resources emphasize his wealth and detachment from the problems of common people; regarding local governments, the shots stress the effects of their work, undertaken despite the lack of support from the government.

### *Trait Characterization*

In the PO narrative, the characteristics attributed to PiS are inextricably linked to breaking or ignoring the law in force in Poland. The trait that was particularly highlighted in multiple videos was hypocrisy. In the discussed videos, PO showed PiS as an unreliable party whose politicians manipulate public opinion, thereby framing PiS politicians as either complicit in or directly responsible for illegal actions. Such



**Figure 2.** The Alleged Laziness of Mateusz Morawiecki Compared to the Investments of Poland's Local Governments



representation constructs a discursive image of PiS figures not merely as political adversaries, but as actors operating outside the boundaries of legal and ethical governance.

In a controversial spot released on October 5, PO quoted Morawiecki's statement from 2010 in which the politician expressed hope that "the government will act with determination to raise and equalize the retirement age". Donald Tusk's government's decision to raise the retirement age is widely believed to have contributed to the decline in support and subsequent loss of power (Grzebyk, 2021, pp. 132–133). Shortly after winning the 2015 elections, PiS reversed the Tusk government's reform, which Morawiecki himself had repeatedly criticized. By portraying Morawiecki as allegedly having views completely different from those declared in public, PO accused the then prime minister of hypocrisy and disingenuousness.

The spot from August 11, on the other hand, directly calls PiS politicians hypocrites. The material in question refers to one of the questions in the referendum, which took place alongside the 2023 parliamentary elections ("Do you support the selling off of state assets to foreign entities, leading to the Poles' loss of control over strategic sectors of the economy?"). In attributing hypocrisy to PiS politicians, PO cites transactions with the Hungarian oil company MOL, as a result of which it took over 417 stations of the Polish Lotos group, and the Saudi Arabian company

Saudi Aramco, which took over a 30% stake in *Rafineria Gdańska* (one of Poland's biggest refineries). The ad thus uses a simple argumentative scheme: since PiS has made bad decisions on the management of state assets, it has no legitimacy to ask the Poles about these issues in a referendum.

It is worth noting the explicitly negative vocabulary used in the spot: Donald Tusk calls party politicians "fools", while the formation itself was said to have "sold off national assets for nothing". Towards the end of the spot, a rhetorical tricolon can be discerned: "enough lies, enough deceit, enough PiS", which clearly portrays PiS as immoral. On the visual level, on the other hand, the spot features shots of Vladimir Putin exchanging handshakes with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and embracing with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud of Saudi Arabia. The shots in question are a clear suggestion that Russia is pleased with PiS's cited actions, which is further evidence of the party's hypocrisy: PiS has repeatedly argued that Russia is Poland's main enemy, accusing Donald Tusk's government of being pro-Russian (Folvarčny and Kopeček, 2020, pp. 177–178). In many Western European countries, Vladimir Putin functions as the archetype of an autocrat who exercises power in a non-democratic manner. The accusation of supporting Putin's regime, especially in Poland, is particularly resonant given the difficult Polish-Russian relations and the possible threat of an armed attack on Poland.

Pointing out the hypocrisy of PiS is also an important element of the September 8 spot, which focuses on the migration policy of Morawiecki's government. In the analyzed video, PiS was portrayed as extremely unreliable, since, despite repeatedly warning against illegal migration to Poland, its representatives were alleged to have directed the granting of visas to people from Africa and Asia to Poland for bribes (the ad in question is described in more detail in the orientalism section). The dark color creates connotations of something clandestine that those involved are trying to hide. US dollars, on the other hand, are a clear symbol of wealth; in the context of the discussed ad – acquired illegally.

In addition to hypocrisy, another key negative attribute attributed by PO to PiS is mismanagement. In addition to the August 11 spot discussed above, accusing the then government of mismanagement is the main theme of the September 28 spot. In this relatively short ad (30 seconds), PO accuses PiS of causing high inflation, failing to receive EU funds from the Next Generation EU fund, long queues in hospitals, a misguided migration policy, destroying Polish forests, and causing an ecological disaster on the Odra River. The PiS government was thus unambiguously portrayed as not being in control of the situation in Poland. At the lexical level, the colloquial, expressive, and unambiguously negative language is again to be noted: "You have run Poland into the ground. You do not know how to govern. You are all bunglers!", "Scandal after scandal". Moreover, when there is a shot depicting



**Figure 3.** The Portrayal of Law and Justice as Pro-Russian and Corrupt

Prime Minister Morawiecki, the voiceover addresses him by his first name and in the second person singular (“it’s probably your business too”). Visually, towards the end of the spot, when the line “You are all bunglers!” is uttered, other important PiS politicians appear in addition to Morawiecki and Kaczyński: former Prime Minister Beata Szydło, the then Minister of State Assets Jacek Sasin or former Minister of Justice Attorney General Zbigniew Ziobro (along with multiple members of his former party Sovereign Poland). This represents an extension of the bunglers category, showing that it is not only Kaczyński and Morawiecki who are responsible for the state of Poland at the time. On the other hand, the “ordinary people” shown in the ads live in neglected houses, have old furniture and household appliances, and wear old and tattered clothes. The spot argues that eight years of PiS rule led them to this state. In turn, the politicians depicted in the material in question wear elegant clothes, which clearly contrasts their position with that of the aforementioned ordinary people. Overall, these elements in the video contribute to its considerable symbolic value and main message: Law and Justice has ruined Poland.

The inability to manage the state and ensure the health security of Poles is also a key theme of the September 12 spot. In this video, the ruling party is accused of mismanagement and illegal actions during the coronavirus pandemic. On the visual level, the spot presents shots of coffins and cemeteries, reinforcing the notion that PiS’s actions contributed to the deaths of many people who could have been saved; the so-called excess deaths during the pandemic. The spot also employs a personali-

**Figure 4.** Poor Poles and Politicians Who Have Ruined Poland

zation strategy, using the anaphoric phrase: “Your loved ones did not have to die”. At the same time, the shots show an unconscious man under a ventilator and a person standing in the rain with a sad expression on his face; the latter appears to be mourning the former. To depict them, close-up shots were used, which is meant to emphasize the pain and suffering of the depicted by focusing solely on them and not presenting what is in the background. Overall, PiS is accused of causing the deaths not of abstract individuals, but of specific family members. On the lexical level, the accusations directed at PiS are worded in a strong and unambiguous manner (“they led to the disaster”, “PiS was lost in the pandemic like a child in a fog”). These expressions show PiS as an incompetent formation.

### *Outcasting*

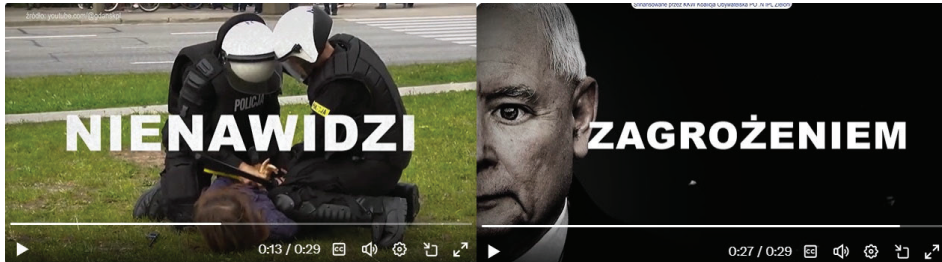
When it comes to outcasting, other than criminalization, which appears to be the leitmotif of the vast majority of the videos, evilification and orientalism were observed.

Regarding the former, numerous fragments demonstrate the portrayal of PiS or its specific politicians as fundamentally evil. For example, in the September 12 spot, PiS politicians are accused of “stealing from the sick”, which clearly portrays them as acting in a condemnable manner. The September 21b spot, on the other hand, claims that “PiS hates women” and that the alleged brutality of the services against them is supposed to be the result of “an order from Jarosław Kaczyński”. In this ad, Kaczyński himself is presented as a broadly defined “danger”. This message is further reinforced by the visual representation, which shows a fragment of Kaczyński’s face against a black background. The choice to show only half of the

**Figure 5.** The Effects of the Faulty COVID-19 Politics of Law and Justice

politician's face suggests a deliberate framing that could imply ambiguity. It creates a sense of mystery, potentially provoking curiosity or doubt in the audience regarding the politician's intentions or character. The dark background serves to isolate the subject, focusing the viewer's attention on the half-visible face. The use of darkness can evoke feelings of foreboding, uncertainty, or seriousness, suggesting that there might be something hidden or unspoken about the politician's persona or political actions. In addition, the lack of any background makes Kaczyński's facial expression more salient.

Orientalist discourse was used by PO in the context of the discursive construction of people trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian border. Such discourse can be seen in the spots from September 8 and September 21a. Both ads clearly show the influx of people from other countries as a threat to Poland's security. In turn, PiS is portrayed as putting the Poles in danger and profiting from the corrupt practice of selling illegal visas. The first ad uses the topos of numbers, twice pointing out that "the Law and Justice government invited 250,000 illegal immigrants from Asia and Africa to Poland". The verb "invited" suggests that the previous government acted deliberately, while also highlighting the perceived ignorance of its officials, as they supposedly did not recognize the threats associated with illegal mass migration. Additionally, identifying the individuals as "from Asia and Africa" emphasizes their distinctness and evokes the existing narratives of fear and danger prevalent in Polish discussions about migration since 2015, linking these immigrants to potential terrorism and a perceived threat to Poland's cultural coherence (Straczuk, 2024).

**Figure 6.** The Portrayal of Jarosław Kaczyński as Inherently Evil

Visually, “immigrants” are depicted as having dark skin, accentuating the cultural gap between them and predominantly homogenous Poland. They are consistently shown in motion, suggesting they are fleeing from something; different shots capture them hiding in abandoned structures, living in makeshift tents, and gathering around fires, with everyone dressed in warm jackets or carrying bags. Furthermore, none of the “immigrants” directly face the camera, a technique that reduces them to mere subjects for our scrutiny, rather than portraying them as active participants engaging with the viewer (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141).

A similar portrayal of “immigrants” can be seen in the second video. Bogusław Wołoszański, who speaks in the analyzed material – at the time a PO candidate in the parliamentary elections, now an MP – constructs migration in an analogous way to representatives of far-right discourses (cf., e.g., Scarvaglieri and Luginbühl, 2024; Doerr, 2017; Richardson and Wodak, 2009). The politician directly refers to people at the Polish-Belarusian border as a “threat”. He also uses a dehumanizing procedure, speaking of a “wave of illegal immigrants”, which takes away their individual characteristics and compares them to a destructive element. The aspect of illegality is also emphasized – in the ad “immigrants” are mentioned four times, and three times they are referred to as “illegal immigrants”. In addition, their attempts to get into Poland are portrayed as “encroachment”, which suggests the aggressive nature of their actions. Visually, the shots show them as groups that are constantly on the move; their faces are never shown – the viewer sees them from a distance and from a relatively low angle, which enhances the otherness of the depicted (Hart, 2014, pp. 91–95). Moreover, in the rare instances when they are portrayed individually, they are shown in the dark, their gaze is distracted (as if trying to escape the viewer’s focus), and parts of their faces are illuminated in red and blue, reminiscent of police lights, suggesting that they are wanted by the services. It is worth mentioning that when they are presented on screen, Wołoszański says the phrase “illegal immigrants”, as if confirming their criminal status. Also, the perspectives employed in



**Figure 7.** The Construction of Immigrants Through Orientalist Discourse

the video (worm eye's view – Figure 7 bottom middle; close-up – Figure 7 bottom right) show “immigrants” as large, which stresses the feeling of imminent danger.

There are also different strategies of orientalization that were not present in the previous video. For instance, in the analyzed material one could see shots of “immigrants” destroying the barrier at the Polish-Belarusian border, which contributes to their portrayal as an aggressive and uncontrolled mass. These shots are accompanied by short texts in Arabic. This suggests that the dangerous people at the border are Arabs, alluding to the stereotype in Polish migration discourse after 2015 that portrays them as possible terrorists and criminals.

### *Group Comparison*

In terms of group comparison, the September 21b video directly compares the actions of PiS to those of the Belarusian government. Such a phrase is uttered explicitly at the beginning of the video (“Poland under the Law and Justice government uses Belarusian-style solutions, police use force against protesters”) and the faces of both Alexander Lukashenko and Kaczyński are shown, suggesting that they are to blame for the actions of the services in their respective countries. In the context of Poland, comparing a politician to Lukashenko carries similar weight to comparing them to Vladimir Putin. Opinion polls clearly indicate that Lukashenko is seen by the Poles as a politician who rigged elections in Belarus and thus holds power illegally. Moreover, voters of all Polish mainstream parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, mostly sympathize with the Belarusian opposition and anti-Lukashenko protesters (CBOS, 2020). In addition, the Poles perceive Lukashenko as the politician responsible for the outbreak of the humanitarian/migration crisis at

**Figure 8.** The Alleged Similarity Between Lukashenko and Kaczyński in Their Treatment of Protesters



the Polish-Belarusian border (Fraszka, 2021). Therefore, comparing the actions of a Polish political party to that of Lukashenko is a strong delegitimization act.

The discussed video begins with shots showing long rows of armed police officers. The police are shown attacking the protesters, which is accompanied by the statements read by the voiceover: “Under the Law and Justice government, solutions straight out of Belarus are being applied in our country. The police use force against protesters. The police violate the immunity of opposition MPs and detain them with impunity.” In Belarus, opposition activists and their supporters are frequently arrested, and many are imprisoned on various charges, often politically motivated. During protests, police often use force to disperse demonstrators. Reports of brutal treatment of detainees are common, including the use of physical and psychological violence. It should also be noted that many Poles or people of Polish origin who work for the Belarusian opposition have been persecuted or imprisoned. Examples include Andżelika Borys, the leader of the Union of Poles in Belarus, and Andrzej Poczobut, a Polish-Belarusian journalist who has been imprisoned since 2021 on charges of alleged extremism (Miarka, 2024).

The discussed video attempts to compare the situation of Belarusian oppositionists to the case of Kinga Gajewska, an MP who, during Prime Minister Morawiecki’s rally, was stopped by the police and led by officers into a police van on suspicion of committing an offence (use of undeclared sound equipment). It should be noted that after having shown her MP card, Gajewska was immediately

released by the police officers, and the police themselves made available the full recording of the detention the day after (TVN24, 2023). Although the shots in the spot are highly suggestive (Gajewska is held down by several police officers and she is clearly frightened), the suggestion that brutal and unlawful detentions of opposition representatives are common in Poland seems unwarranted. Another excerpt from the spot shows a police officer spraying gas in the face of a man protesting during Kaczyński's visit to Inowrocław in 2022. What the ad does not mention, however, is the fact that the public prosecutor's office, which dealt with the police officer's case, concluded that he had acted within the bounds of the law. Moreover, the protester himself was charged with insulting a police officer (Szefer, 2022). In other words, the portrayal of the police in the spot in question is extremely one-sided and does not show the full picture regarding their actions.

## Conclusions

This study sheds light on the properties of liberal discourse in relation to delegitimization strategies using the example of PO spots that targeted PiS and its various policies. Unlike the standard and most commonly analyzed genres, such as the speech or the election program, video ads use multiple channels of communication and are created with the expectation of reaching large audiences, especially in the light of the fact that they can go viral quickly on social media. In addition, their role is to evoke emotion and a specific impression that the viewer can easily remember. Having that in mind, the study broadened the methodological framework on (de)legitimization by implementing a selection of methods pertaining to MDA, which allowed a thorough examination of the visual resources used in the ads, going beyond the level of content analysis. In addition, the inclusion of disparaging humor in Bar-Tal's (1990) classic delegitimization model made it possible to reconstruct and interpret these delegitimization strategies which do not rely on accusing political opponents of breaking the law or acting against the state's *raison d'être*, but use more subtle mechanisms such as sarcasm, irony, or wordplay. This nuanced approach reveals the complexity of modern political communication, where delegitimization can be achieved through more sophisticated and less overt means. By examining these subtler techniques, the study provides a richer understanding of how political messages are crafted to influence public perception and shape the narrative around political opponents. In line with the author's assumptions, the strategy of dehumanization present in Bar-Tal's original model was not used by PO. Interestingly, use of political labels, another component of delegitimization mentioned by Bar-Tal, was also not observed. While the political opponents of the liberal party were highly criticized and delegitimized, their ideological principles remained largely unchallenged. Instead, the formation focused on discrediting the competence, credibility,



and moral integrity of individual political figures – often using irony, sarcasm, or visual exaggeration – to undermine trust without engaging in a direct ideological confrontation. This fact distinguishes the liberal PO from right-wing/far-right discourses which tend to use neutral terms like “socialists”, “leftists” or “communists” as strategic slurs; this is especially common in political cultures where socialism carries negative connotations (see, e.g., St. Onge, 2015; Chelcea and Druță, 2016).

In the analyzed ads, one of the dominant delegitimization strategies was criminalization – the actions of the government of the day were explicitly shown as contrary to the law and targeting ordinary people. Trait characterization was also a frequent strategy: the negative traits that were attributed to PiS were hypocrisy and mismanagement of the state, which in turn was framed as bringing about an economic collapse in Poland, which primarily affected ordinary Poles. High-ranking government officials and ministers of the time were also denied legitimacy by ostentatiously addressing them by their first names. Particularly delegitimized PiS politicians were the chairman of the party Jarosław Kaczyński and the then prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki. The former was depicted using an evilification strategy. His actions were said to stem from hatred of selected social groups, with Belarusian dictator Lukashenko as his role-model. Morawiecki, on the other hand, was shown as a politician uninterested in the fate of ordinary Poles and focused on ensuring the prosperity of himself and those associated with the party. Overall, while Morawiecki was relatively often portrayed using disparaging humor, Kaczyński was usually portrayed in a serious manner and directly described by PO as a threat to Poland. This contrast in portrayal methods highlights the strategic use of tone and framing to shape the public perception of political figures. By portraying Kaczyński in a more menacing light and Morawiecki with humor, PO sought to evoke distinct emotional responses from viewers, reinforcing their narrative of governance failure and moral corruption. Overall, although it is PiS that has been criticized for using polarizing delegitimization strategies and insulting political opponents (Alekseev, 2024; Lewandowski and Polakowski, 2024), the present analysis has shown that similar accusations can also be made against PO, which used a number of diverse delegitimization strategies against PiS. Surprisingly, many of them fit into the discourses of far-right parties, which clearly outline an “us vs. them” dichotomy, use unreliable argumentation and ascribe the worst qualities to political opponents (Lazaridis *et al.*, 2016; Wodak, 2021). This finding challenges the common perception that only PiS engages in such divisive rhetoric, suggesting that polarization in Polish politics is a broader, reciprocal phenomenon. The academic focus on right-wing or far-right discourse has overlooked how centrist, liberal, and left-leaning parties contribute to polarization, shaping public perceptions and influencing political competition in ways that deserve further scrutiny.

What is perhaps most surprising, given the liberal profile of PO, is the fact that the ads discussing migration used orientalist discourse. The fact that PO uses this type of discourse is all the more unexpected as its high-profile politicians (including Donald Tusk) have repeatedly criticized PiS for, in their view, treating immigrants and refugees instrumentally and portraying them as a threat to Poland's security, while ignoring the humanitarian dimension of refugee/migration crises (Bodnar and Grzelak, 2021; Cienski, 2021). Although the European liberal discourse on migration has changed in recent years compared to the first period after the outbreak of the refugee crisis in 2015 (see Triandafyllidou, 2018, for a detailed discussion of the threat and solidarity frames – the two dominant frames in European political discourse of that time), such an explicit use of racist tropes and the most trivial stereotypes about people from Asia and Africa by a mainstream liberal party is surprising and may be indicative of a broader shift in the attitude towards migration among formations of a similar ideological profile. This shift suggests that political expediency may be influencing discourse, with PO adopting strategies previously associated with far-right rhetoric to appeal to broader segments of the electorate. The use of such orientalist and racially charged tropes signals a significant departure from the party's previous stance, raising questions about the future direction of liberal political rhetoric in Europe, especially in the light of recent research suggesting that European liberal media and political discourses have started to shift from compassion to emphasizing control and security (Mayblin *et al.*, 2023; Valente *et al.*, 2023; Kostopoulos and Mylonas, 2024). One may note that liberal parties and media have started to instrumentalize fear and put forward exclusionary narratives within mainstream discourses. This not only raises critical concerns about the erosion of core liberal values, but also challenges the conventional boundaries of discourse classification, suggesting that analytical frameworks traditionally reserved for studying far-right rhetoric may now also be relevant for examining the communicative strategies of liberal actors.

It should be noted that this study is mainly qualitative in nature. While it certainly provides interesting and surprising conclusions about the discourse of the leading Polish liberal party, it is difficult to speak of broader trends based on the obtained results. However, this paper may become a starting point for comparative studies that will take into account electoral material from different countries. As mentioned earlier, similar studies have so far focused on right-wing and far-right formations, leaving an important gap in the literature. The problem of focusing almost exclusively on one side of the ideological spectrum in research has led to accusations of bias and selectivity in analysis being levelled at political discourse scholars. When discussing (de)legitimization strategies, it is worth taking into account different ideologies and viewpoints in order to obtain as complete a picture of reality as possible. It is widely acknowledged that politics and the media are closely

intertwined, with political actors frequently leveraging media platforms to promote their worldview. The humanities and social sciences offer effective tools for examining the dynamics at this intersection. The discourse analyst's task is to critically examine media-political narratives, noting what is downplayed or concealed, and to interpret these elements with fairness and rigor.

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