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Lund University  
First Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Tomas Sniegon (Lund University)  
Second Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Michael Butter (University of Tübingen)

# Conspiracy Theories and the Polarized Polish Press

Systemic and Event Conspiracy Narratives  
in Polish Daily Newspapers  
during the Presidential Election Campaign in 2020

Olivia Rachwol  
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## Abstract

This master's thesis takes its cue from Polish sociologist Franciszek Czech (2019), who argued that the saturation of Polish magazines with conspiracy narratives suggests a deep polarization of the Polish society on a political level. Systemic and event conspiracy narratives frequently featured in media outlets both associated with the ruling Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and its opposition Platforma Obywatelska (PO) as the PiS' biggest opponent. Conspiracy theories can create doubt about political opponents and their integrity and unfold a considerable danger to democracy. Although PiS, which in English translates to Law and Justice, and PO, also known as Civic Platform, are both conservative parties, most of the Poles usually end up favoring one over the other as the PO is liberal conservative while the PiS is national conservative. Regular public contestation between these two influential parties has provoked the Polish people to further divide into two main blocs. This trend has affected the political atmosphere in Poland in a way that has further propelled political polarization in the domestic sphere, with conspiracy theories and suspicion toward one another being one of its symptoms. To complement previous studies that have focused on weekly magazines, this study has investigated the construction of articles with partisan conspiracist content through the lens of Shenhav's *Social Narrative Analysis*.

This study focuses on four different popular daily newspapers: the opinion-forming liberal-left *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the right-wing *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, and the two influential tabloids *Fakt* and *Super Express*.

The analysis shows how political tensions have been played out in systemic and event conspiracy theories in Polish mainstream media before the presidential elections in spring 2020. It could be proven that newspapers associated with either one of the two political power blocs have engaged in a further division between liberals and conservatives by disseminating partisan conspiracy narratives before the presidential election.

**Keywords:** Poland, Conspiracy Theories, Conspiracy Narratives, Narrative Analysis, political parties, Polish media coverage

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Relevance of the Research Topic and Research Questions .....	2
3. Theoretical Framework.....	4
3.1 What is a Conspiracy Theory?.....	4
3.2 Conspiracism in Poland: A Special Case?.....	6
3.3 Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Narratives.....	11
3.4 The Typology of Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Narratives.....	13
4. Methodology .....	14
4.1 Narrative Analysis .....	14
4.2 What is a Narrative?.....	15
4.3 Narrative Analysis and the News.....	16
4.4 Shenhav's <i>Social Narrative Analysis</i> .....	17
4.4.1 Introduction.....	17
4.4.2 The Thin and Thick Model of Social Narrative Analysis.....	18
4.4.3 The Study of Conspiracy Narratives as Social Narratives.....	20
4.5 Selection of Newspapers.....	23
4.6 Research Corpus and Sampling Procedure.....	25
4.7 Limitations .....	26
5. Findings .....	26
5.1 <i>Gazeta Polska Codziennie</i> : Rafał Trzaskowski's Luxury Trip to Brazil.....	26
5.1.1 Thin level analysis: Story .....	26
5.1.2 Thick level analysis: Text and Narration.....	27
5.1.3 Multiplicity and Meaning .....	30
5.1.4 Conclusion: Relevance as an event or systemic conspiracy narrative.....	34
5.2 <i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i> : <i>KGHM</i> 's lies about their useless masks from China.....	34
5.2.1 Thin level analysis: Story .....	34

5.2.2 Thick Level analysis: Text and Narration.....	35
5.2.3 Multiplicity and Meaning .....	38
5.2.4 Conclusion: Relevance as an event or systemic conspiracy narrative.....	42
5.3 <i>Gazeta Polska Codziennie</i> and <i>Fakt</i> : PO, PiS and Pedophilia .....	44
5.3.1 Thin level analysis of <i>Gazeta Polska Codziennie</i> : Story.....	44
5.3.2 Thick level analysis of <i>Gazeta Polska Codziennie</i> : Text and Narration .....	45
5.3.3 Multiplicity and Meaning .....	47
5.3.4 Thin level analysis of <i>Fakt</i> : Story.....	50
5.3.5 Thick level analysis of <i>Fakt</i> : Text and Narration .....	50
5.3.6 Multiplicity and Meaning .....	52
5.3.7 Conclusion: Relevance of the narratives as event or systemic conspiracy narratives .....	56
6. Discussion.....	58
7. Conclusion .....	60
8. Bibliography .....	61

## 1. Introduction

There are no evil voters. There are no evil regions.

There is an evil, corrupt and aggressive government. It is divisive for that it can rule. Let's fight it, not among each other.

- Donald Tusk, 2020<sup>1</sup>

Evil is attacking. It's attacking our country, fatherland, state. Attacking the institution at the center of our [Polish] identity, attacking the [Roman] Catholic church.

- Jarosław Kaczyński<sup>2</sup>

A ghost is haunting Poland – it is the ghost of conspiracism. Although conspiracy theories have always been present in Poland, they have never been as popular as they are now.<sup>3</sup> According to a survey conducted in May 2020, the tendency for Poles to believe in conspiracy theories has risen extraordinarily since 2014 where only 41 per cent had agreed with the statement that “seemingly accidental situations, such as economic crises, are in fact carefully planned”.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, it was already 73 per cent of the study participants who approved of this utterance.<sup>5</sup>

Although conspiracy theories are not a recently discovered phenomenon in Poland, the attention for them has increased since the take-over of government by the party of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)<sup>6</sup> in 2015. In Poland, the use and circulation of conspiracy theories has become even more visible and socially acceptable. During PiS party leader Jarosław Kaczyński's political campaigning in 2015, conspiracy theories were an influential method to raise voters' attention to potential dangers awaiting Poland from both in- and outside, to

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<sup>1</sup> Tusk, Donald. Twitter Post. July 14, 2020. 1:24 PM. <https://twitter.com/donaldtusk>.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *EUObserver*, “Women's rights protesters 'evil', Poland's Kaczyński says”, Jan 18, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Franciszek Czech and Paweł Scigaj, “Global and Local Conspiracy Theories in Poland in the Time of COVID 19”, *Raciu Forum*, January 12, 2021, <https://raciuforum.com/global-and-local-conspiracy-theories-in-poland-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> which in English translates to Law and Justice

which they have acquired a significant place within the PiS party's programme.<sup>7</sup> The Smolensk catastrophe of 2010, in which Jarosław Kaczyński's brother Lech died together with his delegation in an airplane crash while on the way to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre<sup>8</sup>, has become the PiS party's landmark conspiracy theory and one of the most popular but infamous manifestations of Poland's internal political polarization. Apart from being a meaningful source of political mobilization to Polish conservatives, it has also served as a counter-narrative to the official version supported by the then governing Platforma Obywatelska (PO)<sup>9</sup>. Unverified yet convincing accusations against the PO's then Prime Minister Donald Tusk, involving allegations of his complicity with Russia to cover up the real circumstances of the airplane crash, have contributed to the success of the PiS party against the liberal conservatives in the parliamentary elections in 2015.<sup>10</sup> PiS even won these parliamentary elections with an absolute majority in the Sejm, something that has not been seen since the fall of communism in Poland in 1989.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Relevance of the Research Topic and Research Questions

The relevance of conspiracy theories for Polish politics holds various implications for the present and future of conspiracy theories in Poland. The political arena is only one of many different public debate forums for conspiracy theories to flourish. Apart from politicians spreading conspiracy theories in elections campaigns, social media and alternative news channels<sup>12</sup> have also contributed heavily to the growth of conspiracist content. Moreover, there is even evidence of conspiracist content in Polish mainstream media. In a research study on conspiracy narratives in mainstream Polish news magazines, Polish sociologist

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Folvarčný and Lubomír Kopeček, "Which conservatism? The identity of the Polish Law and Justice party," *Politics in Central Europe* 16, no. 1 (2020): 167.

<sup>8</sup> Tomas Sniegón, "A Transformation of the Memorial Site of Katyń," *PONARS Eurasia*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.ponars-eurasia.org/a-transformation-of-the-memorial-site-in-katyn/>.

<sup>9</sup> in English also known as Civic Platform

<sup>10</sup> Christian Davies, "The conspiracy theorists who have taken over Poland," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/conspiracy-theorists-who-have-taken-over-poland>.

<sup>11</sup> Corinne Deloy, "The Law and Justice Party win the parliamentary elections and the absolute majority," *Parliamentary Elections in Poland*, Foundation Robert Schuman, (2015): 1, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/oeo/oeo-1614-en.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Easton, "Coronavirus: Social media 'spreading virus conspiracy theories'," *BBC News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53085640>.

Franciszek Czech concluded that media occupying “positions on opposite sides of the political divide” in Poland are saturated with conspiracy narratives about internal and external enemies.<sup>13</sup>

Ever since the PiS government took over institutions and undermined the freedom of press by restricting unfavorable journalists, the epistemic authority of the Polish public media has come under scrutiny, and critique against a growing partisanship of formerly independent media outlets has become loud. Public media, initially acting as a “social control organ”<sup>14</sup>, transformed into “overtly-pro-government outlets”.<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, private media outlets also lost in reputation. According to a survey conducted in 2019, 65 per cent of Poles reported having no trust in newspapers and magazines.<sup>16</sup> Further, only 30 per cent of Poles believed that newspapers and magazines had good intentions overall.<sup>17</sup> During the presidential campaigning of 2020, journalists themselves lamented a lack of objective journalism as independent media themselves increasingly turned into bulwarks of political camps and sources of politically not so independent opinions.<sup>18</sup> Partaking in this “highly competitive and often partisan” conflict are journalists and politicians who have not shied away from treating each other with hostility publicly.<sup>19</sup> As media may not always be successful “in telling people what to think” but at least “stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*”<sup>20</sup>, they hold a considerable potential to spark a vicious cycle of distrust and contribute to further political polarization in Poland.

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<sup>13</sup> Franciszek Czech, “Saturation of the media with conspiracy narratives: content analysis of selected Polish news magazines,” *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne*, no.2 (2019), 151. [http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-doi-10\\_14746\\_ssp\\_2019\\_2\\_9/c/19247-18985.pdf](http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-doi-10_14746_ssp_2019_2_9/c/19247-18985.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Joanna Maria Stolarek, “Poland: Freedom of the press in free fall,” *Heinrich Böll Stiftung Brussels*, May 8, 2020. <https://eu.boell.org/en/2020/05/08/poland-freedom-press-free-fall>.

<sup>15</sup> Wojciech Kość, “Polish reporters worry about newspapers turning into ‘hard-line propaganda’ outlet,” *POLITICO*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-media-democracy-kaczynski-censorship-polish-reporters-worry-about-newspapers-turning-into-hardline-propaganda-outlets/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ipsos, “Trust in the Media,” Ipsos Global Adviser (June 2019): 4, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-06/global-advisor-trust-in-media-2019.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Ipsos, “Trust in the Media,” 32.

<sup>18</sup> Marek Krzeńnicki, “Plakat z Trzaskowskim w Wyborczej. Znana gazeta potraktowała swoją nazwę zbyt poważnie,” *Bezprawnik*, July 5, 2020, <https://bezprawnik.pl/plakat-z-trzaskowskim-wyborcza/>;

Tomasz S. Markiewka, “Polityka miłości do lamusa”, *Krytyka Polityczna*, July 18, 2020, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/markiewka-polityka-milosci-do-lamusa/>.

<sup>19</sup> Grzegorz Piechota, “Digital News Report Poland,” *Reuters Institute*, 2018, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/poland-2018/>.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Raluca Radu and Tanjev Schultz, “Conspiracy theories and (the) Media (Studies),” *CA COST Action CA15101 Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories (COMPACT)* (February 2017): 3.

There is currently only little research on conspiracy theories and narratives in Poland. Even less has been reflected on the potential that they hold in the public media discourse, where they can be widely dispersed on a potentially daily basis to boost chances of a partisan candidate for a political office. This study is therefore meant to close some of the existing research gaps and shed a light on the qualitative aspects of conspiracy narratives in the Polish media landscape during the time preceding the presidential election in Poland in 2020. Selected articles derived from different outlets of the Polish daily press will be analyzed through the lens of narrative analysis. A specific focus will be put on the newspapers *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Fakt* on the one hand, and *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* and *Super Express* on the other. The analysis will show how structure and content of partisan event and systemic conspiracy narratives unfold in Polish mainstream media while also reflecting on some of the most provocative, polarizing topics of the presidential campaign between April and July 2020. The study will revolve around the following research questions:

1. How are news stories in the Polish newspapers constructed to constitute conspiracy narratives?
2. How do the conspiracy narratives identified in the left-wing liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* differ from those identified in the right-wing *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, and the tabloids *Fakt* and *Super Express*, and what do they have in common?
3. How can the identified conspiracy narratives in the Polish newspapers be socially and politically contextualized?

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 What is a Conspiracy Theory?

Engagement with conspiracy theories has received considerable attention from various scholars and fields in the last few years<sup>21</sup>. With the shift of conspiracy theories from a “fringe curiosity” to a widespread phenomenon, these theories have become a highly debated topic among researchers who realized that their popularity might hold “serious consequences”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Butter and Peter Knight, “General Introduction”, in: *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London/New York: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Butter and Peter Knight, “Bridging the Great Divide: Conspiracy Theory Research for the 21st Century”, *Diogenes* (2016), 2.



One of the most comprehensive accounts on conspiracy theories ever written was published in 2020 by Michael Butter, a German Americanist, and pioneer in contemporary conspiracy theory research. In *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, Butter defines conspiracy theories as statements which “assert the existence of a covertly operating group of people – the conspirators – who seek, from base motives and by underhand means, to achieve a certain end”.<sup>23</sup> Taking his cue from political scientist Michael Barkun, Butter says that in a conspiracy theory,

- “1) Nothing happens by accident;
- 2) Nothing is as it seems;
- 3) Everything is connected.”<sup>24</sup>

Another characteristic for conspiracy theories according to historian Geoffrey Cubitt is that they pertain to a certain degree of “intentionality, secrecy,” and the “dualism of good and evil”.<sup>25</sup> The conspirators are “imagined as evil, and their actions as causing harm to the wider mass of the innocent people”.<sup>26</sup>

Butter argues that most academics view the substances of conspiracy theories with a “great deal of scepticism”.<sup>27</sup> As they typically thematize groups that are accused of acting in secret for a longer period to achieve an ambitious goal such as world domination, they are difficult to put into practice. Real conspiracies differ from those that conspiracy theorists thematize. They are usually limited in their scope of time and the number of conspirators involved.<sup>28</sup> As conspiracy theories are viewed as unrealistic and looked down upon with contempt, they constitute “stigmatized knowledge”<sup>29</sup> in a sense that they are typically rejected by official authorities who are relied upon for truth validation.<sup>30</sup>

Conspiracy theories resemble ‘fake news’ but they are not quite the same. According to Butter and Knight, ‘fake news’ does not necessarily claim “that a sinister plot is afoot” yet, they are deliberately spread as lies to “create confusion, mobilise their audience or smear

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, transl. Sharon Howe (Cambridge/Medford: Polity, 2020), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 18-19.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted in Michael Butter and Peter Knight, “Bridging the Great Divide: Conspiracy Theory Research for the 21st Century”, *Diogenes* (2016), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Barkun, “Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge”, *Diogenes* 249-250, no. 1-2 (2015): 168.

opponents”.<sup>31</sup> Conspiracy theories however are spread because the majority of those who are spreading them, at least marginally believe that there is something true to their story. They usually do not spread theories that are completely out of the blue but rather appear to be “helping to reveal the truth”.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.2 Conspiracism in Poland: A Special Case?

To what extent conspiracy theories ultimately become part of a society, and whether they are embraced or dismissed, depends on many different factors. To start, regarding Poland there is evidence that supporters of the right-wing are comparatively more “obsessed” with conspiracy theories than their political opponents.<sup>33</sup> According to a survey from 2020, 68 per cent of those who were voters of the far-right Konfederacja had a high tendency to be conspiracist.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, of all supporters from liberal Koalicja Obywatelska (KO)<sup>35</sup>, only 35 per cent showed a strong tendency to believe in narratives. This leads to the assumption that there is a big difference between the far right and the liberal conservative side of the spectrum. At the same time, not all Poles can be equally assigned the notion ‘conspiracy theorists’.<sup>36</sup> The whole right wing is not as monolithic in their belief in conspiracy theories as it might seem, and the left is not uniformly resistant to conspiracy theories either.<sup>37</sup> Conspiracist belief among supporters of the United Right (in Polish: Zjednoczona Prawica) – an alliance of several conservative parties including PiS as its biggest party – was proportionately average with 45 per cent, and therefore like the Left (in Polish: Lewica) which scored 48 per cent. At the same time, 50 per cent of non-voters showed a high tendency to conspiracist belief.<sup>38</sup> Apparently, conspiracism is not *only* a matter of political orientation in Poland.

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Butter and Peter Knight, “General Introduction”, in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Adam Leszczyński, „Dlaczego polska prawica ma obsesję spisków?,” *Newsweek*, August 7, 2019, [https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/dlaczego-prawica-ma-obsesje-spiskow/jw7s4g8.](https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/dlaczego-prawica-ma-obsesje-spiskow/jw7s4g8;);

Franciszek Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje* (Kraków: Nomos, 2015), 190-192.

<sup>34</sup> Czech and Scigaj, “Global and Local Conspiracy Theories in Poland in the Time of COVID 19”, np.

<sup>35</sup> Koalicja Obywatelska stands for the coalition between the PO, Nowoczesna (the Modern Party) and Zieloni (the Green Party)

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

Belief in conspiracy theories is moreover a historically conditioned phenomenon that stretches throughout the whole of Polish society. Polish psychologists have argued that Poland suffers from a deep rooted “collective conspiracy mentality” through which “other nations are viewed as hostile and negatively intended toward one’s own nation” as a result of Poland’s “long history of fights against foreign powers and struggles for sovereignty”.<sup>39</sup> This collective mental state has influenced the relationship between in- and out-groups in Poland, and conspiracy theories have played an important role in cementing their antagonist position toward one another.<sup>40</sup> Despite foreign occupation of Poland being a matter of the past, many Poles still believe that “Poland and Polishness remain subject to foreign control and malign internal forces”.<sup>41</sup> As opposed to previous centuries, the main targets of hatred are not merely Jews anymore but also “Arabs, Germans and Russians”<sup>42</sup>, the European Union, the LGBT community for conservatives, the Catholic Church for liberals, as well as internal political enemies such as oppositional parties for both sides of the political spectrum.

Given that Poland regularly ranges on the lowest levels regarding generalized trust<sup>43</sup>, it is a common part of public debate for Poles to openly suspect their own government and institutions of sinister activities – especially, when they are from an opposing political party. The contemporarily observable diametrical relationship between national conservatives and liberal conservatives in Poland is saturated with reciprocal suspicion but their enmity is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, it has only become more visible to people outside Poland since the takeover of the PiS party in 2015. Suspicion about corrupt activity on behalf of state authorities is not ungrounded but “firmly rooted in the experiences of the communist era”<sup>44</sup>, and has influenced Polish politics even today. Repeated cases of corruption and bribery, and a “tendency to turn to informal exchange networks to get things done”<sup>45</sup> are decisive aspects of low levels of trust in Poland. Corruption is ingrained in the political system, but it is not directly visible to Polish citizens.<sup>46</sup> Under these conditions, conspiracy theories can flourish

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<sup>39</sup> Wiktor Soral, Aleksandra Cichocka, Michał Bilewicz and Marta Marchlewska, “The Collective Conspiracy Mentality in Poland,” in: *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 372-374.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Christian Davies, “The conspiracy theorists who have taken over Poland,” np.

<sup>42</sup> Wiktor Soral et al., “The Collective Conspiracy Mentality in Poland,” 374.

<sup>43</sup> Marta Młokosiewicz and Sandra Misiak-Kwit, “The Impact of Trust on Entrepreneurship in Poland,” *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation (JEMI)* 13, no. 4 (2017), 80.

<sup>44</sup> Kelly Hignett, “Crime in Communist and Post-Communist Europe,” *Law, Crime & History* 1, no. 1 (2011), 133.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Gregorz Makowski, „Poland’s hidden corruption,” *Notes from Poland*, February 28, 2020. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/02/28/polands-hidden-corruption/>.

because one might know that indeed something sinister is afoot behind the back of the public yet can rarely fully prove that it is happening. The relationship between the PiS and PO reflects the emotional and political baggage inherited with the transition of communism to capitalism after 1989, and a general skepticism toward the domestic political system in post-communist Poland. Two of the most famous conspiracy theories about Polish politics, the Round Table and the Smolensk conspiracy theory, are paradigmatic of this.

The Round Table discussions refer to several negotiations in 1989 where communists and anti-communists came together to broker a “compromise between the Communists” and the *Solidarność* about the future of Poland<sup>47</sup>. The *Solidarność* Lech Wałęsa as well as the Kaczyński brothers<sup>48</sup> and the contemporary chief editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza* Adam Michnik were some of the prominent figures who had participated. The results of the talks, such as partially free elections or the “introduction of market principles in the economy”<sup>49</sup>, were initially embraced by most of the Poles. At the same time, the outcome of these talks contradicted initial positions of some activists of the *Solidarność* who had previously refused to negotiate with communists. Mirosław Kofta and Wiktor Soral assume that this contradiction paved the way to the Round Table conspiracy theory. According to that, the Round Table talks succeeded because the representatives from *Solidarność* were actually “secret communist agents” and complicit in preserving the ultimate “interests of communist elites and their supporters in the new system” while hiding the actual purpose of the talks “to the broad public”.<sup>50</sup> The Round Table conspiracy continues to live on even today because the PiS government, with Jarosław Kaczyński as one of the initial participants, presents itself as the only trustworthy and “truly patriotic” remnants of the talks in 1989.<sup>51</sup> The break of the Kaczyński brothers with Wałęsa, who was by the way also accused of being a “puppet of the communist secret service”<sup>52</sup>, and Michnik’s affiliation with the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza*, only further cements the dichotomous relationship between the PiS party that understands itself as the last remnants of the “real Poles” and the liberals, as their biggest opponents, as traitors.

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<sup>47</sup> Folvarčný and Kopeček, “Which conservatism? The identity of the Polish Law and Justice party”, 165-166.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Mirosław Kofta and Wiktor Soral, “Belief in the Round Table Conspiracy and Political Division in Poland,” *Social Psychological Bulletin* 14, no. 4 (2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.v14i4.2435>.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Kofta and Soral, “Belief in the Round Table Conspiracy and Political Division in Poland,” 4.

<sup>52</sup> Kofta and Soral, “Belief in the Round Table Conspiracy and Political Division in Poland,” 3.

The Smolensk conspiracy theory ties into this antagonism as well. It reflects the persisting doubt about the tragic event that happened in 2010, when a Polish airplane crashed in Russia and killed almost one hundred individuals of the Polish establishment on the day of the Katyn massacre anniversary. According to the official version of the narrative, the airplane, with Lech Kaczyński and other 95 delegates on board, crashed after breaking “a wing on a tree in poor weather conditions” on the 10th of April 2010 in the Smolensk region in Russia<sup>53</sup> while on the way to the commemoration event. Katyn is the place that relates to two of the most painful and tragic events in Polish history. For many Poles it is a considerable source of hatred toward Russia as well as the then ruling and now oppositional PO under then Prime Minister Donald Tusk. They believe that this incident, also referred to as “Katyn II”, was no accident but a result of a conspiracy between Russia and the oppositional PO. It became an important “part of the PiS narrative and of the party’s internal mythology”<sup>54</sup> that would ultimately give rise to an even bigger popularity of respective distrust, accusations and conspiratorial beliefs than ever before. Jarosław Kaczyński accused Donald Tusk of conspiring with Russian president Vladimir Putin to conceal what happened around the airplane crash in 2010.<sup>55</sup> Critics attributed a considerable part of PiS’ electoral success to Jarosław Kaczyński’s ability to persuade the Polish population of a “shadowy leftwing cabal”<sup>56</sup>, although the conspiracy theory was never proven to be true.

Apart from that, the two biggest opposing sides of the Polish political spectrum also represent quite different social visions.<sup>57</sup> The hostility between Poland’s two largest political blocs is often referred to as Polish “Culture Wars”.<sup>58</sup> This term has, especially outside of Poland, been used to describe various manifestations of inner-Polish political conflict between the two most important political camps: the liberals, usually referred to as the overall opposition of different parties but often also simply associated with the biggest oppositional, liberal

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<sup>53</sup> *Deutsche Welle*, “EU chief Donald Tusk appears at Smolensk jet crash hearing,” August 3, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-chief-donald-tusk-appears-at-smolensk-jet-crash-hearing/a-39952780>.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Folvarčny and Kopeček, “Which conservatism? The identity of the Polish Law and Justice party”, 167.

<sup>55</sup> Michał Broniatowski, “Donald Tusk testifies in trial of his former chief of staff,” *POLITICO*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-council-president-donald-tusk-testifies-in-trial-of-his-former-chief-of-staff-smolensk-crash-jaroslaw-lech-kaczynski/>.

<sup>56</sup> Christian Davies, “The conspiracy theorists who have taken over Poland,” np.; Folvarčny and Kopeček, “Which conservatism? The identity of the Polish Law and Justice party”, 167.

<sup>57</sup> Franciszek Czech, “Saturation of the media with conspiracy narratives: content analysis of selected Polish news magazines,” 168.

<sup>58</sup> Ojewska, Natalia. “Poland’s culture war: LGBT people cornered by toxic politics are turning to civil disobedience.” Euronews, last modified October 6, 2020. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/06/poland-s-culture-war-lgbt-people-cornered-by-toxic-politics-are-turning-to-civil-disobedie>.; The Daily, “Part 4: Poland’s Culture Wars,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/podcasts/the-daily/poland-nationalism-democracy.html>.

conservative party PO, and the national conservatives, most commonly represented by the PiS party as the largest among several conservative parties. This has recently reflected especially in debates surrounding the Polish LGBT community. While the PO has been blamed for supporting the LGBT community and their “gender ideology”, the PiS party has been accused of having too close ties to the Catholic Church and furthermore associated with a reverted revolution.<sup>59</sup>

In general, the belief in and spread of conspiracy theories can also depend on the power status of political parties or movements involved in politics.<sup>60</sup> According to research done on the United States, those who are more likely to lose an election, are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, conspiracy theories can be spread as an additional way to mobilize citizens<sup>62</sup> as the use of the Smolensk conspiracy theory in the election campaigns in 2015 has shown. In Poland, where presidential elections are regularly decided in favor of either one of the two biggest, and usually almost equally strong parties PiS or PO, conspiracy theories can unfold with unprecedented potential especially during election campaigns.<sup>63</sup>

What also facilitates distrust and therefore, the endorsement of conspiracist content in Poland, is the current epistemic authority of the institutions responsible for the creation and distribution of common-sense knowledge. A liberal democracy is marked by a division of several instances holding the power over a state while controlling each other. Since 2015, Poland has gradually undermined the authority of public institutions responsible for power control. Following the PiS party’s take-over, the Polish public service media landscape was transformed into “national state media”.<sup>64</sup> The formerly independent supervisory organ of the Polish media called “National Council of Radio Broadcasting and Television” was dismissed and substituted by a national media council where officials favored by the PiS were

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<sup>59</sup> Agata Pyzik, “Poland is having a sexual revolution in reverse,” *The Guardian*, Feb 11, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/11/poland-sexual-revolution-reverse-education-contraception>.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, “Conspiracy Theories are for Losers,” in *American Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 151.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, “Conspiracy Theories are for Losers,” 150.

<sup>62</sup> Yongwang Kim, “How conspiracy theories can stimulate political engagement,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinions and Parties* (2019), 5. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2019.1651321>.

<sup>63</sup> Michał Bilewicz, “Kto wierzy w spiski,” *Charaktery*, April 11, 2018, <https://charaktery.eu/artykul/kto-wierzy-w-spiski>.

<sup>64</sup> Joanna Maria Stolarek, “Poland: Freedom of the press in free fall,” np.

put at the top.<sup>65</sup> *TVP* and other public media reportedly “mutated into a propaganda tool of the government”, to which again only those holding loyal ties with the PiS were appointed.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast to Hungary, Poland’s media landscape is still relatively diverse, and most of the private media outlets are still in operation.<sup>67</sup> Yet, during its effort to “repolonize” the media landscape<sup>68</sup>, the PiS government has repeatedly tried to “deconcentrate” it<sup>69</sup> and finally strap it from its foreign, especially German<sup>70</sup>, influence. On 7 December 2020, the state-owned oil retailer *PKN Orlen* announced to take over *Polska Press*, a media company previously owned by the German *Verlagsgruppe Passau*.<sup>71</sup> A journalist from *Gazeta Wyborcza* called it a dark day for the freedom of the press in Poland.<sup>72</sup> Before *PKN Orlen* bought *Polska Press*, it had already stopped or significantly reduced sales of PiS-unfriendly newspapers.<sup>73</sup>

As the freedom of the press is undermined and official sources cannot be trusted to be fully independent and base their decisions toward the Polish society independent of political affiliations and interests, the epistemic authority of the Polish institutions is in question. It is therefore impossible to conclude that all accusations of potential conspiracies spread in Poland are likely false and their content as much “stigmatized knowledge” as in other countries.

### 3.3 Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Narratives

Indeed, Butter indicates in his book that conspiracy theories are generally less stigmatized and a far more common part of official sources “in other cultures, such as Eastern Europe and the Arab world” than the Western world.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Jo Harper, “Polish government wants to curb role of foreign media,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-plans-limitations-foer-foreign-owned-media/a-55534861>.

<sup>69</sup> Anna Wolska, “Jak będzie wyglądać repolonizacja mediów? Nasza ANALIZA [redakcja poleca],” *EURACTIV.pl*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/demokracja/news/orlen-rozmowy-o-zakupie-polska-press-tak-bedzie-wygladac-repolonizacja-mediow/>.

<sup>70</sup> Rafał Chabasiński, “Repolonizacja mediów według PiS nie może się udać. Tylko czy aby na pewno musi?” *BEZPRAWNIK*, August 29, 2020, <https://bezprawnik.pl/repolonizacja-mediow-wedlug-pis/>.

<sup>71</sup> Kowalski & Schmidt, “Verlagsgruppe Passau verkauft Polska Press an den Staatskonzern Orlen,” *RBB Fernsehen*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.rbb-online.de/kowalskiundschiidt/themen/verlagsgruppe-passau-verkauft-die-polska-press-an-den-staatskonz.html>.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Joanna Maria Stolarek, “Poland: Freedom of the press in free fall,” np.

<sup>74</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 27.

On the one hand, popular yet unlikely conspiracy theories as the Smolensk conspiracy theory<sup>75</sup>, or the Round Table conspiracy, might fit into the notion of an improbable and likely false conspiracy theory as defined by Butter. However, these extreme and obvious conspiracy theories are difficult to find in media outlets, and therefore not part of the daily media conspiracism.<sup>76</sup>

Franciszek Czech defines conspiracy narratives as stories expressing conviction that key information is being hidden from the public against influential opinions, official statements or common sense by a group of individuals, who are working in secret in order to enrich themselves at the cost of the whole collective.<sup>77</sup> Any type of action “to the detriment of a given group, breaking the established social order” can constitute a conspiracy.<sup>78</sup> Since Polish media regularly operates more subtly and not with sweeping allegations as in classical conspiracy theories, this study will take its cue from the notion of conspiracy narratives. This will broaden the scope of my research in the sense that cases which might have gotten lost otherwise in the research process will be picked up as relevant examples to understand that suspicion and distrust in Poland goes beyond what can be understood as classical conspiracy theory.

According to Czech, conspiracy narratives do not have to be false. In fact, they can even turn out to be true. This aspect contradicts the definition of conspiracy theories to which conspiracies are only imagined and do not actually exist.<sup>79</sup> This is important for the investigation of conspiratorial content in Poland, where it is unjustifiable to conclude *a priori* that every accusation of a potential conspiracy is false.<sup>80</sup> Conspiracy narratives furthermore constitute counter-narratives to others, usually official, narratives and they are polemic by nature.<sup>81</sup> Even though they are often spread by the opposition that seeks to undermine common sense and the official discourse of the government of public institutions dominating the public discourse, conspiracy narratives can also be spread by the government, or institutions representative of the majority as a response to the opposition’s accusations.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 17.

<sup>76</sup> Franciszek Czech, “Saturation of the media with conspiracy narratives: content analysis of selected Polish news magazines,” 166.

<sup>77</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, 125.

<sup>78</sup> Czech, “Saturation of the media with conspiracy narratives”, 156.

<sup>79</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, 126.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*



Conspiracy narratives thematize actions done on purpose. They are not stories about unfortunate accidents, coincidences, or spontaneous reactions but typically, the “heroes of conspiracy narratives” carefully consider their actions and hide their intentions as part of a larger plan.<sup>83</sup> They also do not have to be narratives in a strict sense. They can consist of any conglomerate of words thematizing a conspiracy. Sometimes even just one word can be enough for a statement to be considered a conspiracy narrative.<sup>84</sup> This means, singular theses can already constitute a conspiracy narrative just as much as a complex, theoretical system.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, conspiracy narratives can be dangerous or simply anti-systemic and critical of the status quo. They might seek to improve the system currently in power for a better, fairer one.<sup>86</sup> Finally, not all narratives are conspiracy narratives. A conspiracy narrative can only be viewed as such when it is publicly relevant, and when it thematizes affairs that counteract the interest of a whole community or society. Thus, conspiracy narratives are usually political, and they can be used to provoke political reactions.

### 3.4 The Typology of Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Narratives

According to Michael Barkun, conspiracy theories can be divided into three categories depending on their scope: Event, systemic and super conspiracy theories.<sup>87</sup>

Event conspiracy theories, however, are more limited in their scope as they refer to a “discrete event or set of events”.<sup>88</sup> The goals are not as broad as in the other categories, as the “conspiratorial forces are alleged to have focused their energies on a limited, well defined objective”.<sup>89</sup>

Systemic conspiracy theories thematize conspiracies of a “single, evil organization” which are “believed to have broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country, a

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<sup>83</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, 128.

<sup>84</sup> Czech, “Saturation of the media with conspiracy narratives”, 160.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, 129.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (London: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

region, or even the entire world”.<sup>90</sup> The group accused of conspiring is accused of having planned “to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions”.<sup>91</sup>

Super conspiracies refer to “multiple conspiracies” which are “believed to be linked together hierarchically” and involve both systemic and event conspiracy theories.<sup>92</sup>

Even though Barkun speaks of conspiracy theories and not narratives, the typology is also useful to divide between different conspiracy narratives as offered by Czech. Henceforth, I will additionally distinguish between event, systemic and super conspiracy narratives inspired by the typology proposed by Barkun.

## 4. Methodology

The following chapter connects the theoretical basis on conspiracy narratives as provided by Czech and Barkun with an apt methodological toolset to explore the qualitative composition of conspiracy narratives in daily Polish newspapers. I will first present a basic introduction to narrative analysis as my broad methodological framework before I continue diving deeper into the specific methodology of *Social Narrative Analysis* as proposed by political scientist Shaul R. Shenhav. In the last part, I will operationalize Shenhav’s concept through connections to Czech’s theory of conspiracy narratives and Barkun’s typology of conspiracy theories.

### 4.1 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis has seen a considerable surge in support among researchers from various disciplines in the last decades. It has affected not only traditionally qualitative but also quantitative-method oriented research fields, among them sociology, political science, psychology and media science.<sup>93</sup> Although narrative analysis originally emerged “from examining

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<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Shaul R. Shenhav, “Thin and thick narrative analysis: On the question of defining and analyzing political narratives,” *Narrative Inquiry*, 15, no. 1 (2005): 75-76.

literary works”<sup>94</sup>, many research fields have continued to recognize the utility of narrative research due to humans’ natural tendency to speak and “think in narratives”.<sup>95</sup> Narrative research challenges the “positivistic paradigm”<sup>96</sup> in that it “advocates pluralism, relativism and subjectivity” and refuses that there is only one possible interpretation of reality and truth.<sup>97</sup> Narratives are important for humans to help conceive of themselves, not only as individuals but as parts of a society<sup>98</sup>, and they often reflect “taken-for-granted discourses and values”.<sup>99</sup> One might even say that narrative analysis has revolutionized social science<sup>100</sup> because it enabled various aspects of human lives, previously dismissed as either unimportant or not valuable enough, to be now considered a valid source of scientific evidence.

## 4.2 What is a Narrative?

From daily communication between peers to visual data to mental reflections in psychology, a narrative can take many forms. Its definition can possibly range from a simple “representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence”<sup>101</sup>, to broader ones involving various other qualified elements.<sup>102</sup>

However, not all talk or text is automatically a narrative. Many definitions proposed in the various research fields of narrative analysis commonly view a narrative “often synonymously with ‘story’”.<sup>103</sup> A story demands “the consequential linking of events or ideas”<sup>104</sup>, connecting them into a “meaningful pattern”, a plot, without which the selected happenings connected with one another “would otherwise be random”.<sup>105</sup> Yet whether a narrative is ultimately made of “spoken, written” or “visual materials”, broad in its definition or rather

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<sup>94</sup> Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 2008), 4.

<sup>95</sup> Shenhav, “Thin and thick narrative analysis”, 76.

<sup>96</sup> Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach and Tamar Zilber, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 1998), 1.

<sup>97</sup> Lieblich et al. *Narrative Research*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Shenhav Shaul R., *Analyzing Social Narratives* (New York/London: Routledge, 2015), 3.

<sup>99</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Lieblich et al. *Narrative Research*, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Shenhav, “Thin and thick narrative analysis”, 79.

<sup>102</sup> Shenhav, “Thin and thick narrative analysis”, 79-85.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 3.

<sup>104</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 5.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

short: a narrative is told for a particular audience to take something away from it.<sup>106</sup> They are sources of meaningful information to the receptors of the narrative.

This process certainly “has effects in social interaction that other modes of communication do not”.<sup>107</sup> By being “strategic, functional, and purposeful”<sup>108</sup>, narratives usually draw on the reader’s emotional predisposition toward a certain topic, fulfilling a range of different societal and political functions. From potentially mobilizing their audience “into action for progressive social change”<sup>109</sup> to misleading them<sup>110</sup>, narratives can also be used to “remember, argue, justify, persuade” or “entertain”.<sup>111</sup> They are in any way essential for the construction of individual and group identities, especially regarding making sense of the past. The purpose of retelling history is much more than striving for an actual, objective representation of the past. Rather, it is about creating a story for a particular audience so that they can make sense of an experience, be it as an individual or a group.<sup>112</sup>

### 4.3 Narrative Analysis and the News

Although there is this ethos that news must be impartial, researchers agree that news is much rather a social construction<sup>113</sup> than a neutral reflection of social reality. When news cannot be seen as simply informative and objective anymore, news stories become tools to challenge social hierarchies<sup>114</sup>, especially when they contain conspiracist content, which is *per definitionem* of public relevance and critical of the activities of some political actors or groups.<sup>115</sup> Even though journalists themselves often regularly view their outputs as facts, claiming that “if you put six journalists in a news event, all six will produce the same news story”, researchers have argued that a lack of objectivity in newspapers is inherent in the very construction of an article.<sup>116</sup> Contemporary newspaper discourses are “systematically-organized

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<sup>106</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 3.

<sup>107</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 3.

<sup>108</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 8.

<sup>109</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 9.

<sup>110</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 8.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 8.

<sup>113</sup> Roger Fowler, *Language in the News* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1991), 19.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Claire Konkes and Libby Lester, “Incomplete Knowledge, Rumour and Truth Seeking,” *Journalism Studies* 18, no.7: 827, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2015.1089182](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1089182).

<sup>115</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, 129.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Karen S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 159.

sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution”<sup>117</sup> but are themselves influenced by the values of other institutions and financial resources that support them. News is constructed along narrative frames through which an article becomes a “fully developed, fully fleshed-out story with characters, scene descriptions, conflict(s), actions with motives, and, ultimately, resolutions”.<sup>118</sup> To see how certain events, characters, and their statements are combined to constitute such story which is at its core also conspiracist is the main objective of this study.

#### 4.4 Shenhav’s *Social Narrative Analysis*

##### 4.4.1 Introduction

Since the function of narratives can vary, depending on whether the audience is an individual or a group<sup>119</sup>, the method for a narrative analysis needs to consider the constellation of the respective audience. When it comes to the analysis of media discourse, newspapers usually address their readers both as individuals as well as part of a certain political group, depending on the overall rubric and topic that is thematized in an article. Therefore, the rubric concerning politics will naturally be more directed toward the reader as part of a political group than other parts of the newspaper. Also, when stories thematize activities of individuals belonging to one or the other political party thematized in the articles, they are usually not displayed as individuals but as parts of the group which they are publicly associated with.

Therefore, everything that is said about them in a newspaper article, is to be considered socially and politically relevant because it was selected by a media outlet to be covered in their news medium. This is even more so the case of conspiracy narratives. I have therefore chosen to structure my analysis along the guidelines of Shaul Shenhav’s *Social Narrative Analysis*.

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<sup>117</sup> Fowler, *Language in the News*, 42.

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing*, 159.

<sup>119</sup> Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, 8.

#### 4.4.2 The Thin and Thick Model of Social Narrative Analysis

Shenhav argues that there are four key aspects to approach a narrative, with each one of them yielding a different outcome. These four components are divided into a model including “thin” and “thick” levels of narrative analysis.<sup>120</sup>

The thin level is “narrow in scope” and primarily meant to make sense of the story on a surface level.<sup>121</sup> It corresponds with Shenhav’s first key aspect called “story”, which “refers to the chronological sequence of events” and characters within a narrative.<sup>122</sup>

However, a mere analysis of events and characters would be random without respect to the plot of a story, which refers to “the ways in which the events and characters’ actions in a story are arranged”.<sup>123</sup> In the social domain, it is very typical for storytellers to leave out information, and instead emphasize selected events in addition to characters in order to achieve a certain effect in the reader’s mind. A specific plot can have an ideological meaning “because it might rehearse particular patterns of thinking”.<sup>124</sup> Therefore, the thin analysis reveals what reaction might be provoked in the reader by the mere constellation of events and characters, tied together to create a plot of a specific meaning.

The thick level analysis investigates the process of narration and looks at the way rhetorical forms are used to provoke a certain reaction in the addressee.<sup>125</sup> It examines the rhetorical devices used to create specific assumptions about the event, the actors, their actions and the overall context of the political narrative at hand by combining the elements of the story with two other “classical elements of narrative analysis”: text and narration.<sup>126</sup>

On the textual level, characters that were mentioned on the story level, can be analyzed deeper for their “points of view” and not just merely their “actions”.<sup>127</sup> The researcher gets an idea of the perspective of the narrator, especially how he or she perceives the individuals as well as what events referred to in the narrative will be like. A textual analysis can take a more thorough look at the whole story and consider “descriptions of places, the tone and

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<sup>120</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 82.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 20.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 32.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 33.

<sup>125</sup> Shenhav, “Thin and thick narrative analysis”, 88-89.

<sup>126</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 84.

<sup>127</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 41.

nuances of messages, characterizations of protagonists” and many other potential aspects.<sup>128</sup> Thus, it reveals something about the way in which the narrator wants the audience to perceive the events and the characters in the narrative. Text can furthermore take different manifestations aside from being written.<sup>129</sup> In the social context, “visual modes” can also disclose meaning for the analysis of a social narrative because they can be used to send yet another message to the reader.<sup>130</sup> Especially when analyzing a tabloid, the scanning of headlines along with an analysis of the images depicted next to them can provide a researcher with additional essential information about the narrative at hand.

Narration is concerned with the “act or process of producing a narrative” and is defined as “the process of communicating the story”.<sup>131</sup> The study of narration is concerned with two levels: the “societal sphere”, also called “extra-textual narration”, and the “textual sphere”, i.e. the “textual narration”.<sup>132</sup> As social narratives aim to tell a story to achieve a specific goal, both the textual and extratextual levels are essential in order to finally make sense of the meaning of a social narrative. On the extratextual level, the researcher sheds light on the societal context of a social narrative, the role of the story tellers as well as the audience within this given context.<sup>133</sup> The textual level is more concerned with “the process of narration as evidenced in the text”<sup>134</sup>, and with that, the specific rhetorical devices as well as the use of voices within the narrative.<sup>135</sup>

Usually, the textual sphere is not easily separated from the societal sphere as both go hand in hand to create meaning. Despite analyzing the role of the narrator and the textual elements in light of the societal context, I will expand on the meaning of the “societal sphere” largely in the rubric “multiplicity” which is special about Shenhav’s *Social Narrative Analysis*. The term refers to the “process of repetition and variation through which narratives are reproduced at the societal level”.<sup>136</sup> At the center of research for the multiplicity of social narratives is the “core element”.<sup>137</sup> The main purpose of identifying the core element of “multiplied narrative” is to identify the main elements of a narrative in order to see how it varies

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<sup>128</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 39.

<sup>129</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 38.

<sup>130</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 37.

<sup>131</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 47.

<sup>132</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 48-49.

<sup>133</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 48.

<sup>134</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 49.

<sup>135</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 48.

<sup>136</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 66.

<sup>137</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 62.

in other social narratives. For this study, Shenhav's historical approach, in which core elements of social narratives are tracked down over a longer period to see how they change, seems to be the most suitable one.<sup>138</sup> However, due to the limited scope of this study, a longitudinal analysis is not feasible to the extent that he recommends. Instead, I have appropriated the general idea to compare narratives about the same topic with one another to see what irregularities they show, or even if they are multiplied by others in the first place.

#### 4.4.3 The Study of Conspiracy Narratives as Social Narratives

This study is concerned with investigating newspaper articles as holistic manifestations of what can be coined as a conspiracy narrative. Due to the specific social and political characteristics, conspiracy narratives are apt to be investigated as an extreme version of social narratives, as understood by Shenhav. Conspiracy narratives visibly aim at dividing one group from another whether it be morally, politically, socially, economically or any other way that is suitable for drawing lines between one and the other. To which they are based on the accusations of betrayal and loss of trustworthiness inherently present in a conspiracy narrative.

There is however a basic discrepancy between Czech's definition of a conspiracy narrative and Shenhav's definition of a social narrative that needs to be eliminated before a social narrative analysis can be conducted. Czech assumes that a conspiracy narrative can be any claim thematizing or pointing at a conspiracy within the range of a single evocation or statement and a fully developed story. In comparison, narrative researchers usually use the term narrative synonymously with story which comprises more than a statement and a line of events connected with one another. At the same time, narrative researchers also look at broader texts or narratives such as literary texts or even psychological interviews which can be divided into different, in-cohesive narratives with various storylines and multiple narrators. This is usually not the case for newspaper articles which are coherent stories, fabricated along frames in order to tell a predictable and politically clear message.

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<sup>138</sup> Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, 65.



In this study, the articles will be approached as consistent narratives about a single topic in which all events mentioned are part of a larger story that tie together to send a specific message to the reader. With that in mind, I will not look at conspiracy narratives as both statements and stories as Czech but rather focus on the articles only as fully developed stories where singular conspiracist expressions or statements are analyzed merely on the level of text and narration. At the very end, I will reflect on all these conspiracist references found in the text and decide whether the narrative of the article is suitable to be defined either as an event, or as a systemic conspiracy narrative, or even as a mixture of both categories.

In line with these basic premises, as well as the other theoretical and methodological components presented, guiding questions were developed to lead me through the analysis. The thin level covers the basic structure of the story, the order of the events and characters as listed in the article.

On the thick level, the textual and relevant narrative aspects of the story will be looked at to evaluate the relationship between the in- and out-group of the news story as well as further textual elements that point toward a conspiracy narrative. In the next step, the deeper societal context of the news story will be examined. Finally in the last part of the analysis, I will build on the preceding components of the analysis and draw conclusions as to what characterization of conspiracy narrative the narrative at hand deserves.

<b>Leading questions on the story level</b>
What are the main events discussed?
Who are the main characters of the events?
When did it happen?

Table 1: An example of guiding questions to the analysis of the story of a newspaper article

<b>Leading questions on the textual and narrative level</b>
How are the events and characters textually and narratively structured to provoke the reader's attention and suspicion toward the circumstances of the news story?
In what way is the out-group, i.e., the accused individual or political entity, likely to be interpreted as an instance that tries to hide something from the public to their own benefit and the detriment of a group, and against the established social order?
What role does the narrator as part of the in-group, i.e., the "good ones" in the story, claim to have, implicitly or explicitly, toward the respective audience of the article?

Table 2: An example of guiding questions to the analysis of text and narration of a newspaper article

<b>Leading questions on the level of multiplicity and meaning</b>
What is the societal context of this newspaper article?
How was the narrative responded by other newspapers and how was it multiplied?
What further background information derived from other media outlets proves that this alleged conspiracy narrative is a challenge to commonsense or other official statements?

Table 3: An example of guiding questions to the analysis of multiplicity and meaning of a newspaper article

<b>Conclusion</b>
Is the narrative at hand an event or a systemic conspiracy narrative? If so, why?

Table 4: An example of a conclusion for a qualitative narrative analysis of conspiracy narratives

## 4.5 Selection of Newspapers

Four different newspapers were chosen for the conduction of a narrative analysis of conspiracy narratives in newspapers.

*Gazeta Wyborcza*, published by *Agora S.A.*, represents the liberal-left side, as it is described as “pro-European, highly critical of the government and frequently calls for protests against the national conservative PiS government”, and its journalists as representatives of “liberal and centre-left positions”.<sup>139</sup> In 2003, Andrzej Józef Madera published an article about the phenomenon surrounding *Gazeta Wyborcza*, referring to it as a newspaper that emerged in 1989 as a result of the Round Table talks. This put a cut between the censorship under the Polish Peoples’ Republic and the future of Poland’s newspaper landscape.<sup>140</sup> He claimed that *Gazeta Wyborcza*, whether liked or not, would leave nobody oblivious to its content.<sup>141</sup> In 1992, Polish scholars referred to the headlines of *Gazeta Wyborcza* as the most interesting and funniest but legally often in a grey zone.<sup>142</sup> It has remained an opinion-forming newspaper and often highly-debated newspaper although it has lost in readers over the last years as most Polish newspapers have. Compared to spring 2019, *Gazeta Wyborcza* had even the most fundamental losses in spring 2020, with a decrease in daily sales of around 15 per cent from around 92.000 to 78.000.<sup>143</sup>

*Fakt* has emerged to be not only highly appreciated by many Polish readers but also infamous for being provocative for almost two decades now. Shortly after its establishment in 2003<sup>144</sup>, the tabloid, which belongs to the German-Swiss publishing house *Ringier Axel Springer*, was granted the award of being the “Hiena Roku” [Hyena of the year] in both 2004 and 2005 according to the *Stowarzyszenie Polskich Dziennikarzy* [Association of Polish Journalists].<sup>145</sup> As *Fakt* is foreign-owned, it has been a thorn to PiS officials and the “repolonization”

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<sup>139</sup> “Gazeta Wyborcza”, Eurotopics, last modified April 21, 2021, <https://www.eurotopics.net/en/148554/gazeta-wyborcza>.

<sup>140</sup> Andrzej Józef Madera, “Fenomen “Gazety Wyborczej”,” *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne*, no. 1 (2003): 158-164.

<sup>141</sup> Madera, “Fenomen “Gazety Wyborczej””, 155.

<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Madera, “Fenomen “Gazety Wyborczej””, 169.

<sup>143</sup> Michał Kurdupski, „Sprzedaż dzienników ogólnopolskich w marcu spadła o 15 proc. W I kwartale liderem „Fakt”, „Przegląd Sportowy” najbardziej w dół,” *Wirtualnemedi*a, May 7, 2020, [<sup>144</sup> “Fakt”, \*Polsko-Niemieckie Dni Mediów\*, last accessed April 21, 2021, <http://dnimediow.org/artykul-fakt,303.html>.](https://www.wirtualnemedi</a>a.pl/artykul/sprzedaz-gazeta-i-kwartal-2020-fakt-gazeta-wyborcza.</p>
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<sup>145</sup> Łukasz Szewczyk, ““Fakt” ponownie Hieną Roku,” *Media2*, December 18, 2005, <https://media2.pl/media/4852-Fakt-ponownie-Hiena-Roku.html>.

process of the media. In 2020, *Fakt* was accused of being a “Niemiecki szmatławiec!” [German rag] and its content the result of political manipulations from Berlin.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, it is often compared to the German tabloid *Bild* and stylistically very similar to *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Super Express*.<sup>147</sup> *Fakt* is also the most-sold newspaper in Poland.<sup>148</sup> Despite a decrease by almost 10 per cent, *Fakt*'s daily sales were still around 206.000 in spring 2020, compared to 229.000 in spring 2019.<sup>149</sup>

*Super Express* is a Polish tabloid which has existed since 1991 and is published by *ZPR Media S.A.*<sup>150</sup> It is politically conservative<sup>151</sup> and it has been a very appreciated tabloid to PiS voters.<sup>152</sup> *Super Express* is stylistically similar to a British tabloid and “it likes to cast itself in the role of defender of the man”.<sup>153</sup> Ever since the establishment of *Fakt* in 2003, both tabloids have been in “fierce competition”.<sup>154</sup> Even though it initially lost in readership, it has managed to recover and it occupies a “top market position” now.<sup>155</sup> *Super Express* lost only almost 7 per cent in one year, from about 116.000 in spring 2019 to about 108.000 in spring 2020.<sup>156</sup>

*Gazeta Polska Codziennie* is a right-wing daily newspaper that has been published by *Forum S.A.* since 2011.<sup>157</sup> It has been described as “the brainchild of a team of right wing journalists who do not beat about the bush as to their political leanings and their strongly anti-government stance”.<sup>158</sup> When *Polskie Radio* [Radio Poland] published this description of *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, Poland was yet governed by Donald Tusk. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*

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<sup>146</sup> *TVP Info*, “Niemiecki szmatławiec!” Burza wokół dziennika „Fakt”, July 3, 2020, <https://www.tvp.info/48807325/wy-bory-prezydentnie-2020-fakt-atakuje-prezydenta-andrzeja-dude-wieszwiecej>.

<sup>147</sup> “Fakt”, *Polsko-Niemieckie Dni Mediów*, last accessed April 21, 2021, <http://dnimediow.org/artykul-fakt.303.html>.

<sup>148</sup> *Bankier.pl*, “Spadła sprzedaż dzienników. „Gazeta Wyborcza”, „Rzeczpospolita” czy „Fakt” w dół,” December 3, 2020, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Sprzedaz-dziennikow-w-pazdzierniku-spadla-rdr-o-17-4-proc-do-463-7-tys-sztuk-ZKDP-8013760.html>.

<sup>149</sup> Michał Kurdupski, „Sprzedaż dzienników ogólnopolskich w marcu spadła o 15 proc. W I kwartale liderem „Fakt”, „Przegląd Sportowy” najbardziej w dół,” np.

<sup>150</sup> “Super Express,” *Eurotopics*, last accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.eurotopics.net/en/148801/super-express>.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Michał Wenzel, “Media a poglądy polityczne,” 2017, last accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.swps.pl/centrum-prasowe/informacje-prasowe/18355-media-a-poglady-polityczne>.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Michał Kurdupski, „Sprzedaż dzienników ogólnopolskich w marcu spadła o 15 proc. W I kwartale liderem „Fakt”, „Przegląd Sportowy” najbardziej w dół,” np.

<sup>157</sup> “Gazeta Polska Codziennie,” *NaTemat*, last accessed April 22, 2021, <https://natemat.pl/t/1269.gazeta-polska-codziennie>.

<sup>158</sup> *Radio Poland*, “New right wing daily launched ahead of election,” *RadioPolskie.pl*, September 9, 2011, <http://archiwum.thenews.pl/1/8/Artykul/54824>.

has further been described as a “political tabloid of a conservative and patriotic character”<sup>159</sup>. *Gazeta Polska*, which is the weekly version of *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, has been popular among PiS voters as well.<sup>160</sup> However, throughout the last few years, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* has lost attraction to its readers. While its initial daily sales in 2011 had been around 34.000<sup>161</sup>, and almost 14.000 in spring 2019, in spring 2020, they went down to around 12.000.<sup>162</sup>

#### 4.6 Research Corpus and Sampling Procedure

Inspired by the cyclical process proposed by Mautner<sup>163</sup>, the archives of all four newspapers were carefully examined for potential theme blocs.

First, the front-pages of all four newspapers were scanned for explicitly provoking headlines in order to make sense of the main topics between May and July 2020. In the second step, I checked what topics explicitly referred to accusations against presidential candidate Andrzej Duda (PiS) and/or Rafał Trzaskowski (PO/KO) and/or other governmental or party officials. Since each one of the four newspapers is independent from the other and not necessarily equally interested in the same topic as the others, a topic could already be considered relevant for this study even if it appeared only on one of the newspaper’s front pages. In the third step, out of all the potential topics identified in step two, three topics were chosen as representative examples of partisan conspiracist content. The main goal was to find a conspiracy narrative which would not only be interesting but would also be covered in one way or another by other newspapers. Therefore, I selected only those articles for further research that were responded to by at least one, ideally more, of the other three newspapers selected.

In addition to that, I searched for responses from other media outlets aside from the other four selected newspapers. This step was complementary to the main analysis and ensured that enough information was at hand to draw valid conclusions about the societal meaning

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<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Wenzel, “Media a poglądy polityczne,” np.

<sup>161</sup> *WirtualneMedia*, “‘Gazeta Polska Codziennie’ sprzedaje 34 tys egz.,” December 6, 2011, <https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/gazeta-polska-codziennie-sprzedaje-34-tys-egz>.

<sup>162</sup> Michał Kurdupski, „Sprzedaż dzienników ogólnopolskich w marcu spadła o 15 proc. W I kwartale liderem „Fakt”, „Przegląd Sportowy” najbardziej w dół,” np.

<sup>163</sup> Gerlinde Mautner, “Analyzing Newspapers, Magazines, and Other Print Media,” in *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michał Krzyżanowski (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 35.

of the conspiracy narratives discussed. The analysis was conducted in Polish, the original language of the selected newspaper articles.

#### 4.7 Limitations

Although the selected analysis of articles from four newspapers cannot account for a full representation of the media discourse in Poland nor the degree of political polarization and use of conspiracy narratives beyond the time period surrounding the presidential election in 2020, their analysis will help explain what has been relevant in some of the most popular and politically antagonistic newspapers and tabloids during that time. This study underlines the usefulness of the concept around conspiracy narratives as an additional layer to conspiracy theories. It can shed a light on the current situation of Polish newspapers and help explain at least partially why the Polish society and politics are so polarized but also, why Polish newspapers are decreasingly trusted and perceived to be biased and partisan. Shenhav's *Social Narrative Analysis* also does not mention anywhere the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and narratives as a social narrative worth being studied in the public discourse. This study therefore manifests a new contribution to the debate as research questions leading the social narrative analysis had to be developed anew.

## 5. Findings

The sampling procedure and investigation of the four newspapers yielded the selection of three different themes relevant for this study, amounting to the analysis of four main articles and several different side articles.

### 5.1 *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*: Rafał Trzaskowski's Luxury Trip to Brazil

#### 5.1.1 Thin level analysis: Story

The first article thematizes accusations against Rafał Trzaskowski, the presidential candidate of the PO, of being wasteful of taxpayers' money during a business trip to Brazil as Minister of Administration and Digitization in 2014. Trzaskowski is the main character of the story, while a female consultant from the ministry, the male director of the Information Society

Department, as well as non-further specified representatives of the Department of Communication of the Ministry of Digitization and Administration occupy roles of side characters. The main events discussed in the article revolve around the circumstances and financial details of the trip.

The main source of analysis was found in *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, published as part of its daily printed version on the 8 July 2020. It was titled “BRAZYLYJSKIE LUKSUSY KANDYDATA PLATFORMY” [BRAZILIAN LUXURIES OF THE PLATFORM’S CANDIDATE]. This headline was used both on the front-page and the fourth page, the actual page of the article.

### 5.1.2 Thick level analysis: Text and Narration

On the left top of page four, the reader is primed to believe that indeed something suspicious happened:

*Scandal \ Trip at the expense of the ministry.*

This statement is further complemented by a lead text underneath the main headline, according to which then Minister of Administration and Digitization Rafał Trzaskowski and two of his colleagues spent six days in a luxurious hotel in Brazil at the cost of the taxpayer. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* explicitly claims that Rafał Trzaskowski went on this trip only under the pretense of participating in a discussion panel about freedom of speech on the internet. As Trzaskowski’s participation in a discussion panel over the freedom of speech on the internet only lasted:

“okolo 30 minut!” [around thirty minutes!],

it is initially unclear why he ultimately spent six days there at the expense of the taxpayer, amounting to costs of over 60.000 Złoty. The reader is prone to believe that these thirty minutes were the only purpose for Trzaskowski to go to Brazil. A cost of over 60.000 Złoty appears to be in no relation to such a short purpose and is suspicious.

In the article, the reader is introduced to an expressive paragraph about Brazil where it is described as a country in South America that is known primarily for its supreme soccer league and the carnival in Rio de Janeiro. This description is likely to awake positive associations with the reader. Yet, as the author mentions that Brazil is literally a dreamed-of holiday destination for many people, the description can also provoke envy, especially in

relation to the following statements: he did not have to pay for this trip from his own pocket. Consequently, Rafał Trzaskowski, a man who seeks to become the new president of Poland, went to Brazil without paying for such an exceptional trip himself but at the expense of the taxpayer, i.e., the reader. Already in the introduction, the narrator occupies the role of an informing instigator.

In the following, the author continues with more precise information on the background of Trzaskowski's trip and includes a quote from the ministry itself. The participation in the panel of the *NetMundial* conference in Sao Paulo, in which Trzaskowski flew to Brazil in the first place, is explained as a result of an initiative of the Brazilian president. Aside from Trzaskowski, some of the most important technical organizations had engaged in this conference to discuss how to improve the management of the global internet.

*Gazeta Polska Codziennie* adds to this statement what was apparently not said by the ministry: that the panel itself lasted only one and a half hours, and that Trzaskowski's performance was even shorter. This is further contrasted by an interjection: "Jednak w Brazylii kandydat na prezydenta spędził w sumie sześć dni!" [But the candidate spent ultimately six days in Brazil!]. The author of the article wants the reader to see that the actual length of his stay bears no proportion to the task Trzaskowski had to fulfill at the *NetMundial* conference. Through that, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* becomes the admonisher and the side that has the good intention toward the taxpayer while Trzaskowski and the ministry who protect the purpose of this trip, become the exact opposite. Through exclamation marks, the news article is transformed into a "silent speech". It is literally as if the narrator screams at the reader to pay attention to what he must tell.

While *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* tries to depict itself as the investigator of this case and the implicit protector of the societal order, Trzaskowski, his colleagues and the ministry occupy the role of those who have broken the social order first by depriving the public of tax money, and then trying to hide it. This is underlined by further details about the trip which also emphasize the author's reliability and proficiency of investigation. It was reportedly exactly 63.128,65 Złoty that the ministry spent. Another direct connection between Trzaskowski and the high expenses is drawn as *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* explains why the cost of the flight tickets was the most expensive part of the trip: Instead of taking a roundtrip flight in the economy class as his colleagues from the ministry did, Trzaskowski was traveling business



class, where he would be served meals and drinks while traveling to Brazil in a more comfortable way than in the economy class. His ticket cost the ministry 20.8 thousand Złoty, while, in comparison, the flight of his colleagues cost “only” 16.5 thousand Złoty.

To emphasize that Trzaskowski’s expectations must have been extraordinarily high, the author adds that he and his colleagues all spent six days in the five-star luxury hotel Hyatt in Sao Paulo, which ultimately cost the ministry 21.7 thousand Złoty. The ministry is quoted to have justified the choice of this expensive hotel with a recommendation from the Brazilian organizers. The ministry said that the hotel was most probably chosen for logistical reasons. In the light of the whole news story, this argument bears no importance regarding the details previously laid out by the newspaper. Instead, it further supports the reader in establishing a negative view of Trzaskowski and those who have protected him. In contrast, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* is the implicit hero of the story as its journalists have managed to reveal all the details before the presidential election took place.

The article ends abruptly, without any specific conclusion, with the following statement: “Z dokumentów, do których dotarła „Codzienna” wynika, że Trzaskowski za wyjazd do Brazylii otrzymał również... dietę w wysokości 990 zł.”

[From the documents which “Codzienna” got to, follows that Trzaskowski received for his trip also...a reimbursement of 990 Złoty.]

Considering the details previously presented, a conclusion is redundant because it is implicit in the article’s whole construction. Ultimately, the reader is left to make their own conclusions based on the information presented. This in turn can make the author seem like an objective investigator who has simply listed all relevant details to inform the reader. Additionally, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* is taking the role of an investigator, an admonisher and an activist in that it has shown the reader, i.e., the taxpayer, relevant information that needs to be considered before a vote for one of the candidates - Rafał Trzaskowski or Andrzej Duda - is casted. As the article came out on the 8 July 2020 alongside the term “WYBORY” [ELECTIONS] underneath the headline on the front-page, the topic was displayed to be relevant for the election on 12 July 2020.

### 5.1.3 Multiplicity and Meaning

The article represents a common sentiment of PiS supporters toward the opposition as it reflects the prejudice to think of PO politicians as corrupt and wasteful of taxpayer money.<sup>164</sup> Many Poles associate the time between 2007 and 2015, in which the PO had a coalition with the party Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL), with secretive corruption of tax money on behalf of the former government under Donald Tusk.

The PiS party has used this narrative to make a point against their political opponents to separate their political character and goals from the PO. The corruption of the PO-PSL coalition has repeatedly been thematized by Jarosław Kaczyński: “Polska została zrabowana na dwieście kilkadziesiąt miliardów złotych.”<sup>165</sup> [Poland has been robbed of two hundred several dozen billions of Złoty]. In response to the accusations of corruption made against the PO, PiS has claimed the role of the “savior” of Poland for themselves. PiS has argued to bring the previously robbed public money back to the Poles, for instance through the 500+ program for children, additional retirement wages, and lesser taxes.<sup>166</sup> Already in 2012, when the PO was still governing, PiS supporters with Kaczyński at their front had used “Platforma złodzieje” [PO thieves] as their slogan during their march “Obudź się, Polsko” [Wake up, Poland].<sup>167</sup> Various narratives of the PiS party’s political campaigning aside from the one around the Smolensk catastrophe were coined as conspiracy theories. Sweeping accusations that were used against the opposition and liberal media or individuals such as *Gazeta Wyborcza* or George Soros were also interpreted as such.<sup>168</sup> It has been a typical part of the political discourse of the national conservatives to frame politicians and influential individuals of the opposing side not simply as corrupt but also as thieves, communists, especially former communist agents, Jews, or the “homosexual lobby”.<sup>169</sup>

The spread of critique against the PO and their tax money robbery was part of the presidential campaign in 2020 as well. On 28 June 2020, Andrzej Duda emphasized that he did not want

<sup>164</sup> Samuel Pereira, “Kradzież publicznych pieniędzy? PO: Nic się nie stało, Polacy, nic się nie stało,” *TVP Info*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.tvp.info/44117105/kradziez-publicznych-pieniedzy-po-nic-sie-nie-stalo-polacy-nic-sie-nie-stalo>.

<sup>165</sup> Jakub Szymczak, “Kaczyński: PO-PSL ukradło 400 miliardów, a Banaś odzyskał 200. Niestety, to brednie.” *OKO.Press*, October 9, 2019, <https://oko.press/kaczynski-po-psl-ukradlo-400-miliardow-a-banas-odzyskal-200-niestety-brednia/>.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Gazeta.pl*, “Obudź się, Polsko: PiS, Radio Maryja i "S" w Warszawie [MINUTA PO MINUCIE]”, September 29, 2012, [https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/14,114912,12576166,Obudz\\_sie\\_Polsko\\_PiS\\_Radio\\_Maryja\\_i\\_S\\_w\\_Warszawie.html](https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/14,114912,12576166,Obudz_sie_Polsko_PiS_Radio_Maryja_i_S_w_Warszawie.html).

<sup>168</sup> Jarosław Karpiński, “Wszystkie spiski prawicy. Oni naprawdę w to wierzą, czy tylko koniunkturalnie manipulują swoim elektoratem?,” *naTemat.pl*, February 8, 2017, <https://natemat.pl/201105,wszystkie-spiski-prawicy-oni-naprawde-w-to-wierza-czy-to-tylko-koniunkturalnie-mobilizuja-elektorat>.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*

the old days to come back.<sup>170</sup> He reminded his audience that under the former government before PiS, i.e., the PO-PSL, Poland had been fooled. He accused Trzaskowski of trying to sell the increase of the retirement age as a step toward modernization after the PO under Tusk robbed Poles of their pension funds (in Polish: Otwarte Fundusze Emerytalne (OFE)) and increased taxes.<sup>171</sup>

The article published by *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* only further supports an already existing mindset about the PO being a group of tax mafiosi who have robbed Poles of their money<sup>172</sup>. It sends the message to the reader that Trzaskowski, his colleagues and the ministry would have furthermore kept this controversial information under lock and key if *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* would have not published it. This is because they have succeeded to do so already for the last six years until *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* published the story.

A similar version of the narrative published in *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* was found in the daily tabloid *Super Express*, published on the 8 July 2020.<sup>173</sup> The article was found on page six of the printed version of the tabloid yet no hint toward Trzaskowski's trip was found on the front-page. It draws the attention of the reader with a large headline, titled "Brazylijska eskapada Trzaskowskiego" [Brazilian escapade of Trzaskowski]. This is complemented by another line pointing toward a conflict between PiS officials and Trzaskowski, in which the former has accused the President of Warsaw of wasting money, saying: "POLITYCY PiS OSKARŻAJĄ PREZYDENTA WARSZAWY O ROZRZUTNOŚĆ" [PiS POLITICIANS ACCUSE PRESIDENT OF WARSAW OF WASTEFULNESS]. Otherwise, there is no reference to Trzaskowski's trip to Brazil on the front page of that day's edition of *Super Express*. The article is covered solely on page six.

To underline the ridiculing of Trzaskowski's "escapade" on behalf of the governing party, the news story starts with an introduction to a comment made by a PiS politician, Sebastian Kaleta. He referred to Trzaskowski's trip to Brazil as "Samba Rafała Trzaskowskiego". This contemptuous and ironic phrase makes the reader believe instantly that Trzaskowski went to Brazil to have fun and not for work purposes. Through the explicit referral to PiS politicians being the accusers, the reader is primed to associate them with the morally superior side of the conflict as part of the in-group. Trzaskowski is degraded to a former minister who took

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<sup>170</sup> *Konkret24*, "'Zabrali Polakom OFE". Sprawdzamy słowa prezydenta i premiera," *TVN24.pl*, July 6, 2020, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polityka,112/zabrali-polakom-ofe-sprawdzamy-slowa-prezydenta-i-premiera,1021878.html>.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Samuel Pereira, "Kradzież publicznych pieniędzy? PO: Nic się nie stało, Polacy, nic się nie stało," np.

<sup>173</sup> *Super Express*, "Brazylijska eskapada Trzaskowskiego," July 8, 2020, 6.

advantage of his trip, that was meant to be for professional purposes, and transformed it into a personal vacation. This notion is then further supported by the basic facts to this case that were also presented in *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*. At the same time, their referral to PiS politicians accusing Trzaskowski can also be interpreted as an attempt of *Super Express* to remain as much outside of the discussion as possible, taking only position to the extent that is needed to cover such a story.

In contrast to the article in *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, the narrator in *Super Express* is not involved in the conflict but appears as an extra-narrator who has gathered information and revealed it to the public based on information provided by *Niezalezna.pl*, which is related to *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*. *Super Express* might therefore appear more objective to its audience than *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* as it is only a multiplier of the main narrative. Yet neither of the newspapers have left out the core message: that it has only recently revealed that the potential future President of Poland wasted public money to go on an extended vacation to Brazil.

The narrative published in *Gazeta Polska Codziennie/Niezalezna.pl* and *Super Express* was relevant to the public media broadcaster *TVP*. As a response to these articles, *TVP* broadcasted the case on the 8 July 2020, also referring to it as “Samba Rafała Trzaskowskiego”<sup>174</sup>. *TVP* does not refrain from judging Trzaskowski directly, saying that he has been complaining about the PiS continuously throughout the entirety of his presidential campaign without considering his and his party’s mistakes. *TVP* continues covering the details of the case by referring to *Super Express* and *Niezalezna.pl* prior to an interview with a journalist from *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* being displayed. He says that this trip to Brazil shows who this human really is: completely irresponsible and visibly unable to take his position office seriously enough.<sup>175</sup> Three citizens are interviewed for their opinion afterwards. Aside from showing disappointment, one of the interviewees argues that Trzaskowski wasted money that should have been given to the poor instead.<sup>176</sup>

Oppositional media were visibly less excited about this news story. On the 8 July 2020, *Gazeta Wyborcza* merely published an article in which the title translates to: Monitoring the “News” of *TVP*: Will Rafał Trzaskowski withstand the Brazilian attack?

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<sup>174</sup> Adam Miałczyński, “TVP Wiadomości Samba Trzaskowskiego 2020 07 08 19 36 23,” *YouTube*, July 8, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGCvoc\\_V2Io](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGCvoc_V2Io).

<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *ibid.*

The article is both critical and satirical toward the coverage of the news story by *TVP*. In the beginning, the author says ironically that the PiS state-apparat now finally found something that might hurt the presidential candidate of the PO.<sup>177</sup> He continues ridiculing the public broadcaster for displaying “Brazylijskie samba Trzaskowskiego” as their topic of the day, despite the case being six years old. In contrast to *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*’s original article, the notion of Trzaskowski trying to hide the story for such a long time bears no relevance. Instead, *Gazeta Wyborcza* interprets the case in an opposite way, claiming that despite having 2 billion Złoty of public funds available for propaganda, they still failed to find something better than a six-year-old story.<sup>178</sup> Apart from accusing the public broadcaster of overwhelming their audience with numbers regarding the costs of the trip, the length of the stay and the quality of the hotel, the author also quotes some of the interviewees of *TVP*, who seemed to be outraged:

“Trzaskowski to jest człowiek kompletnie nieodpowiedzialny” [Trzaskowski is a completely irresponsible human being] or “daj ludziom biednym, a nie wyjeżdżaj na wycieczki” [give to the poor people instead of going on trips].

Reportedly, *TVP* “Wiadomości” [News] also said that they do not want the Germans to elect their president, that German media are disturbing the election, and that German journalists are attacking the Polish president.<sup>179</sup> The article ironically ends by saying that at least Trzaskowski was not displayed walking the March of Equality or otherwise connected with the LGBT community. There was also nothing on Trzaskowski giving money to the Jews after taking it away from the Poles. This might, as the article concludes, be either a break with former habits or a sign that *TVP* lacked time and space to cover that as well.<sup>180</sup>

Trzaskowski responded to the accusations by defending his trip to Brazil. He said that he went to Brazil for the sake of the conference which he described as an important event concerning the management of the internet.<sup>181</sup> He criticized the style of reporting of *TVP* harshly:

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<sup>177</sup> Wojciech Czuchnowski, “Monitoring “Wiadomości” TVP: Czy Trzaskowski wytrzyma brazylijski atak?” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 8, 2020, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,26112151,monitoring-wiadomosci-tpv-czy-trzaskowski-wytrzyma-brazylijski.html?disableRedirects=true>.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Polsat News*, “Rafał Trzaskowski zareagował na doniesienia ws. jego podróży do Brazylii,” July 8, 2020, <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-07-08/rafal-trzaskowski-zareagowal-na-doniesienia-ws-jego-wyjazdu-do-brazylii/>.

Instead of informing public opinion, you are trying to find cheap sensation without even consulting any information first. I have the following appeal to you - direct a question first, and then create headlines, such is the basis of journalistic reliability.<sup>182</sup>

#### 5.1.4 Conclusion: Relevance as an event or systemic conspiracy narrative

The article published by *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* constitutes an event conspiracy narrative because it thematizes a questionable and suspicious business trip to Brazil which has allegedly been used by Trzaskowski and his colleagues to their own benefit while the circumstances as they were described by the right-wing media were ultimately denied. Furthermore, the whole trip including its extension seems to have been at an unreasonable cost for the Polish taxpayers. The story reminds of previous accusations and conspiracy theories spread out publicly according to which the PO politicians are thieves who have deprived the Poles of their tax money. Accusations against the PO have served the PiS throughout the years to emphasize their own legitimacy and to underline the perceived inherent crookedness of the opposition, especially the PO.

## 5.2 *Gazeta Wyborcza*: KGHM's lies about their useless masks from China

### 5.2.1 Thin level analysis: Story

One of the most relevant topics for Polish newspapers in 2020 was certainly COVID-19. Since the official outbreak of the pandemic in Poland in March up until the presidential elections in July, the management of the pandemic by the Polish government was one of the favorite topics of the Polish press. An article found in the printed version of *Gazeta Wyborcza* from 9 June 2020 exemplifies the side critical of the Polish government.

The article is a follow-up to an investigative story published in April 2020<sup>183</sup> which thematized a purchase of masks against COVID-19. These were initially ordered by the state-owned Polish mining company *KGHM* for 60 million Złoty from China and supposed to be further sold to the Polish government to help especially medical personnel in Poland to be protected from the virus. These masks turned out to be useless because they did not fulfill

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<sup>182</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Jacek Harłukowicz, "Dziwne zakupy KGHM," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 23, 2020.

the necessary European safety standards to protect the public from the Coronavirus<sup>184</sup>. The article analyzed on behalf of this study explicitly thematizes the various lies on behalf of *KGHM* and its accomplices in the company *Quantron*, the Chinese government and the Polish government.

The article comprises twenty-two paragraphs which are divided into five parts. Three parts have appeared on the front-page and two on the third page. On the front-page, the follow-up article was titled “Kłamstwo za miliony” [A lie in return for millions] and was continued on page three under the headline “Afera z maseczkami KGHM” [The scandal concerning the masks from *KGHM*].

The first part introduces the reader to the background of the case. The main suspects at this level are Marcin Chludziński, the head of the company *KGHM*, and the Polish government.

The second part thematizes the demands imposed on *KGHM* from the Chinese government to sign a document that would preliminarily and wrongly state that the masks are in line with European standards. Another distributor, *Quantron*, is disclosed to be involved as well.

The third part thematizes conflicting statements about the distribution of these masks to medical personnel. *KGHM* is depicted as a liar.

The fourth part points at secretive business negotiations between *KGHM* and *Quantron*, which further prove that the fulfillment of European standards was never part of the deal.

The last paragraph thematizes the transport of the masks via an *An-225 Mirja*, the biggest airplane in the world. *KGHM* is again depicted as a liar.

### 5.2.2 Thick Level analysis: Text and Narration

The headline “Kłamstwo za miliony” [A lie in return for millions] works as a teaser to the reader, revealing from the start that *Gazeta Wyborcza* has an important story to tell where secrecy, lies and large amounts of money behind the back of the Polish public are involved. The subheading “Afera z maseczkami od KGHM” further complements the headline while the lead specifies what the story is about. Marcin Chludziński, the head of the company

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<sup>184</sup> *Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy RP*, „Gazeta Wyborcza” nie musi zamieszczać sprostowań KGHM ws. maseczek z Chin,” *Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy RP, Oddział w Katowicach*, November 12, 2020, <http://sdrp.katowice.pl/2020/11/12/gazeta-wyborcza-nie-musi-zamieszczac-sprostowan-kghm-ws-maseczek-z-chin/>.

*KGHM*, has lied about the masks from China fulfilling the European Union's required standards.

In the first part, the author introduces the reader to the main purpose of the article. He says that the story marks yet another revelation to a scandal previously exposed by *Gazeta Wyborcza*. It shows, as the introduction ironically points out, how the PiS government has been fighting the coronavirus pandemic. Instead of providing for clarification about the purchase of useless masks, the Polish government and Chludziński have transformed the transport of masks via the biggest airplane in the world, an *An-225 Mirja*, into a PR show.

In addition to that, *Gazeta Wyborcza* reports that Chludziński even attacked the newspaper for spreading fake news up until it was scientifically proven by the Central Institute for Labour Protection (in Polish: Centralny Instytut Ochrony Pracy) that the masks did not fulfill any of the required norms. The information provided up until the second paragraph allows the reader to make a first judgement about the government's purchase of masks from *KGHM* in that it is suspicious, saturated with secrecy and that both are hiding important information from the public. By pointing at scientific proof for their claims in the beginning, the author further supports his own argumentation and discredits the reliability of the accused.

*Gazeta Wyborcza* generally points at several inconsistencies in *KGHM*'s statements which further adds into the suspicion against the company. Reportedly, none of the representatives of the company had monitored the accuracy of the masks before finalizing the fifteen-million-dollar deal (around sixty million Złoty). At the same time, Chludziński had confirmed in a document on 11 April 2020, three days before the arrival on 14 April 2020, that all masks would have the required European certificates. However, what further undermines the company's trustworthiness, is that apparently the Chinese government required such a document to be signed. An informant, entangled in *KGHM*'s deals in China, told *Gazeta Wyborcza* that the Chinese side wanted to insure itself against potential claims from the customer.

Shortly after, another document was signed behind the back of the public through the help of *KGHM*'s distributor *Quantron*, further confirming that the masks were in accordance with the required standards to be admitted in Poland. The representative of *Quantron* also confirmed that none of the masks would be distributed among medical personnel.



*Gazeta Wyborcza* exposes that in public Chludziński said something completely different. On 17 and 30 of April 2020, he informed the state of the transport on Twitter, further confirming that the masks were indeed to be used also by medical personnel in Poland. *Gazeta Wyborcza* quotes him, saying:

“Maseczki już pomagają w walce z koronawirusem, ich jakość jest potwierdzona badaniami. Hejt nie zatrzyma pomocy dla polskich szpitali.” [The masks already assist in the fight against the coronavirus, their quality is scientifically proven. Hate speech is not going to stop the help for Polish hospitals].

Today, as the author of the article claims, the company declines having distributed the useless masks among medical personnel.

Also, *Gazeta Wyborcza* complains that *KGHM* did not respond to the questions posed by *Gazeta Wyborcza* to clarify why Chludziński signed the document without knowing anything about the quality of the masks. *Gazeta Wyborcza* only received unverified responses with excuses about the current situation and confirmation about the required quality of the masks. The author of the article again refuses a statement of *KGHM*, saying that it is not completely true. The distributor *Quantron*, who also signed documents confirming the adequacy of the masks for their distribution in Poland, apparently only supplied *KGHM* with masks that fulfilled the Chinese norm GB2626-2006. When *Gazeta Wyborcza* posed further questions about *KGHM*'s deal with *Quantron*, they received no answer about the quality of the masks, a recall of the masks or the money. An informant from *Quantron* however confirmed that a recall would be out of place because *Quantron* delivered exactly what they were supposed to deliver. This supports *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s claim that *KGHM* was lying and trying to hide the actual circumstances of the deal in order to convince the public that their masks were in line with the EU's requirements.

Furthermore, the Polish government did not provide any further clarification on that either, except for confirming and defending on Twitter what had been said by Chludziński before, and what completely counters the previous findings:

“Sprzęt sprowadzony przez *KGHM* spełnia wymagania polskie i europejskie” [The equipment imported by *KGHM* meets Polish and European requirements].

The Polish government is presented as a confidant to *KGHM* and *Quantron* who have so far failed to take any responsibility regarding a deal that cost the Polish public around sixty

million Złoty instead of ensuring that useful masks in accordance with the EU's requirements were delivered.

At the end of the article, *Gazeta Wyborcza* shows that Chludziński even lied about his effort to borrow the biggest airplane in the world for their transport. Previously he had said that it was thanks to his contacts in China that such an airplane could be organized to transport the masks from China to Poland. In fact, as *Gazeta Wyborcza* says, *KGHM* had nothing to do with it. It was a coincidence that this airplane could be used for *KGHM*'s and *Quantron*'s transport.

All the information that *Gazeta Wyborcza* provides the reader with is visibly aimed at discrediting the actors involved in the transport of these masks. The investigative work of *Gazeta Wyborcza* is implicitly presented as an essential part of getting closer to the truth because the official statements from the companies and the Polish government are not trustworthy. The only instances that are presented as reputable and worthy of reliance are *Gazeta Wyborcza* and their informants.

By inaugurating the reader into the background information and pointing toward alleged lies and inaccuracies, *Gazeta Wyborcza* is more than an investigator. By commenting on what is true and what is a lie, the author becomes a source of morality in a fight that would otherwise be invisible to the reader. On multiple occasions, *Gazeta Wyborcza* critically comments on quotes from *KGHM*, underscoring that they are not as truthful as they present themselves. By doing so, and further picking on the details of the case, the newspaper purposefully undermines the authority as well as trustworthiness of the official statements presented by *KGHM* and the Polish government. Instead, the evidence presented in the article further confirms that the involved actors simply wanted to save their deal and reduce any further risks to inform the public about the actual quality of the masks. This is ultimately what the headline "Kłamstwo za miliony" [A lie in return for millions] has suggested from the start.

### 5.2.3 Multiplicity and Meaning

*Gazeta Wyborcza*'s counter-narrative about the true circumstances surrounding *KGHM*'s mask deal is only one example of the newspaper's accusations against the PiS government's hazardous management of the pandemic.

Several cases involving lies, corruption, wastefulness of public money and nepotism on behalf of the Polish government became public in spring 2020. The main target of failure and unreliability in the other cases was the PiS government's Health Minister Łukasz Szumowski. According to *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s investigations, Szumowski had purchased useless masks from a skiing teacher<sup>185</sup> and overpriced respirators from an arms dealer and former communist agent<sup>186</sup>. Szumowski was also accused of nepotism by having enabled his brother Marcin Szumowski, a biotech company owner, to receive public grants of millions of Złoty.<sup>187</sup>

*Gazeta Wyborcza* was at the forefront of the accusations against *KGHM* as well as the cases concerning Health Minister Szumowski. Therefore, *Gazeta Wyborcza* also received relatively more attention and hostile sentiment.

On the one hand, *Gazeta Wyborcza* focused on covering more details regarding the actual cases instead of pointing at the financial details of the inconsistencies of the Health Ministry's activities. Various articles ended up being published on Szumowski and his colleagues' suspicious business deals in the middle of the pandemic. In that way, *Gazeta Wyborcza* became the investigative frontrunner and a major source of content and inspiration for other newspapers.

On the other hand, *Gazeta Wyborcza* also openly showed throughout the presidential campaign 2020 that it was more than just a liberal newspaper. On 17 June 2020 for instance, a big billboard was hung on a house wall on Chmielna Street in Warsaw to raise attention toward *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s investigations against the PiS. With the three PiS officials Jarosław Kaczyński, Matesuz Morawiecki and Łukasz Szumowski being displayed as sources of major scandals in Poland, the banner was a major provocation to the PiS party.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Wojciech Czuchnowski, "'Wyborcza' ujawnia: 5 mln zł za bezużyteczne maseczki dla znajomego ministra Szumowskiego z narą," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 12, 2020, [https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,25936849,-demaskuje-afere-w-resorcie-zdrowia-5-mln-zl-za-bezwartosci-owe.html?\\_ga=2.235976257.1711423333.1617708586-42736718.1599837692](https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,25936849,-demaskuje-afere-w-resorcie-zdrowia-5-mln-zl-za-bezwartosci-owe.html?_ga=2.235976257.1711423333.1617708586-42736718.1599837692).

<sup>186</sup> Judyta Watoła and Jacek Brzuszkiewicz, "Respiratory od handlarza bronią z czarnej listy ONZ. Szczegóły transakcji resortu Szumowskiego," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 22, 2020, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,25965040,respiratory-od-handlarza-bronia-z-czarnej-listy-onz-znamy-szczegoly.html>.

<sup>187</sup> Judyta Watoła and Przemysław Jedlecki, "Biznesowa ośmiomica braci Szumowskich. Rodzinno-polityczny układ z setkami milionów złotych," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 26, 2020, <https://katowice.wyborcza.pl/katowice/7,35063,25972882,biznesowa-osmiomica-braci-szumowskich.html?disableRedirects=true>.

<sup>188</sup> *WirtualneMedia*, "'Gazeta Wyborcza' startuje z kampanią o aferach PiS-u. Billboard i specjalna strona o dziennikarskich śledztwach," June 18, 2020, <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/gazeta-wyborcza-startuje-z-kampania-o-afarach-pis-u-billboard-i-specjalna-strona-o-dziennikarskich-sledztwach-reporterzy-sledczy-wyborczej-odkrywaja-ujawniaja-rozliczaja>.

On 29 May 2020, further banners thematizing Szumowski's scandals and ridiculing the health minister illegally appeared on Warsaw's bus stops. While *Gazeta Wyborcza* did not report on the source of these banners, *TVP* claimed that these hateful banners came from the publishing house *Agora*, to whom *Gazeta Wyborcza* belongs.<sup>189</sup>

When *Gazeta Wyborcza* then also put a poster of Trzaskowski into its printed version on 5 July 2020, a journalist claimed:

“Prawdziwych dziennikarzy już nie ma. Zamiast tego, poważna gazeta daje czytelnikom plakat z Trzaskowskim.” [There are no real journalists anymore. Instead, a serious newspaper hands out its readers a poster of Trzaskowski]<sup>190</sup>.

*Gazeta Wyborcza* writes and acts both as an informant and a political activist. By pointing toward lies and controversies on behalf of the Polish government and its partner *KGHM* already in its headlines, it wants the reader to pay extraordinary attention to the suspicious activities that are being done at the expense of Polish citizens. *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s investigative articles from spring 2020 were presented not only to inform the reader about cases of corruption. Rather their true goal was to raise attention toward the Polish government's cases of corruption as well as their failure to manage COVID-19 in a useful and not a malicious way. *Gazeta Wyborcza* has explicitly pointed at lies and secrets to show the reader that the reality of the PiS party is a different one than the promises they have made to their Polish citizens.

In recent years, the PiS party has presented itself as *the* political solution to many internal problems in Poland. It promised to take care of the “socio-economic issues”, for instance by providing extensive subsidy programs for children.<sup>191</sup> This was one of the most pressing matters to low-income families who felt that they had been bypassed by the former government and not adequately included in “Poland's post-communist economic transformation”.<sup>192</sup> At the same time, the PiS government also introduced measures that indicated a democratic backsliding in Poland. For example, it stopped financing Polish newspapers who were openly critical of their politics. In 2020, *Gazeta Wyborcza* was the only supra-regional Polish newspaper where the government had not published any information on the pandemic

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<sup>189</sup> *TVP Info*. “Hejterskie plakaty na przystankach spółki należącej do Agory.” May 29, 2020. <https://www.tvp.info/48295466/warszawa-hejterskie-plakaty-wymierzone-w-lukasza-szumowskiego-na-przystankach-spolki-nalezacej-do-agory-wieszwiecej>.

<sup>190</sup> Marek Krześnicki, “Plakat z Trzaskowskim w Wyborczej. Znana gazeta potraktowała swoją nazwę zbyt poważnie.”

<sup>191</sup> Aleks Szczerbiak, “Why is Poland's Law and Justice party still so popular?” *LSE Blogs*, October 1, 2019,

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/10/01/why-is-polands-law-and-justice-party-still-so-popular/>.

<sup>192</sup> *ibid*.

at all.<sup>193</sup> The deprivation of public funding and open discrimination of *Gazeta Wyborcza* has been a step toward preferential treatment of pro-governmental media and mitigation of critics with the Polish government.

In the case surrounding the suspicious deal of *KGHM*, national conservative media outlets have openly accused *Gazeta Wyborcza* of spreading false information and trying to manipulate its readers. In response to the topic surrounding the useless masks ordered by *KGHM* and further distributed and acknowledged by the Polish government, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* published at least two counter-narratives. These were explicitly directed at *Gazeta Wyborcza* and lasted several months with encompassing coverage on *KGHM*'s masks deal.<sup>194</sup>

In the first one, the newspaper *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* says that *KGHM* has become a victim of *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s accusations.<sup>195</sup> *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* defends the representatives of the companies, saying that the documents were there to serve both as part of the deal between the supplier in China and the Polish distributors as well as a guarantee to institutions that the masks would be in line with the required EU standards. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* says that the documents were signed in expectation of the masks fulfilling the standards of the European Union. The article accuses *Gazeta Wyborcza* of trying to mislead its readers by ignoring the context in which the masks were purchased.

In the second statement published, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* complains about *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s repeated attacks on *KGHM*.<sup>196</sup> Therein, the author claims that *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s author based his narrative on many oblique and semi-true statements as well as manipulations.<sup>197</sup> *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* denies *Gazeta Wyborcza* and its journalistic credibility to the extent that it demonizes the newspaper. Further suggesting that *KGHM* was not only depicted wrongly and that the article of *Gazeta Wyborcza* needs to be corrected but that the accused individuals are victims of *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s insinuations and purposeful manipulations.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Karolina Zbytniewska, "Jak ograniczana jest wolność mediów w Polsce – Analiza rynku medialnego," *EURACTIV.pl*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/demokracja/linksdossier/jak-ograniczana-jest-wolnosc-mediow-w-polsce-analiza-ryнку-medialnego/>.

<sup>194</sup> Marlena Nowakowska. "KGHM ofiarą oszczerstw „Wyborczej”," *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, <https://gpcodziennie.pl/131863-kgmofiaraoszczerstwwyborczej.html>.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> Adrian Siwek, "„Wyborcza” znowu atakuje KGHM," *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, <https://gpcodziennie.pl/130523-wyborczaznowuatakujekgm.html>.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> Marlena Nowakowska. "KGHM ofiarą oszczerstw „Wyborczej”," np.

An explicit counter-narrative to the follow-up article from 9 June 2020 was found on the right-wing digital portal *wPolityce*. It was titled: “Kolejny kuriozalny i obrzydliwy atak „Gazety Wyborczej” na KGHM za sprowadzanie sprzętu ochronnego do Polski” [Another bizarre and disgusting attack from *Gazeta Wyborcza* against *KGHM* for the import of protective equipment to Poland]<sup>199</sup>. The author accuses *Gazeta Wyborcza* of repeatedly trying to ruin *KGHM*’s purchase of masks to the Poles because they hate the PiS government and would do anything to destroy it. It is, as the author says, a shame that not even a pandemic could halt these emotions.<sup>200</sup>

Both *Super Express* and *Fakt* overall were not specifically interested in that topic. A posterior digital research through keywords merely yielded an article from *Super Express*, published on 18 May 2020. The tabloid stated that a scientific investigation into the usefulness of the masks finally had revealed that the masks indeed did not fulfill any norms required by the European Union. The article also refers to the masks ordered from China as allegedly being completely useless. There is, however, no hint toward *KGHM*’s or the Polish government’s lies nor any other kind of suspicious or malicious behavior. The last paragraph merely states that the Polish company has itself become another victim of Chinese distributors.<sup>201</sup>

#### 5.2.4 Conclusion: Relevance as an event or systemic conspiracy narrative

The analyzed article constitutes an event conspiracy narrative in which *Gazeta Wyborcza* accuses *KGHM*, *Quantron* and the Polish government of trying to whitewash their suspicious and wasteful masks deal in the middle of a dangerous pandemic at the cost of the Polish citizens. Further, they are accused of untruthful statements to protect their contract on the purchase of masks that were even scientifically proven to not be of enough use to protect the public sufficiently from the Coronavirus.

*Gazeta Wyborcza*’s article further entails a counter-narrative to official statements from PiS officials, affiliated individuals and media. It was unclear for several months whether *Gazeta Wyborcza* was at least partially right or not. Except for the scientific approval, there was no direct statement that would confirm that their investigations were justified.

<sup>199</sup> *wPolityce*, “Kolejny kuriozalny i obrzydliwy atak „Gazety Wyborczej” na KGHM za sprowadzanie sprzętu ochronnego do Polski,” June 9, 2020, <https://wpolityce.pl/media/504051-kolejny-kuriozalny-i-obrzydliwy-atak-gw-na-kghm>.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Super Express*, “Koronawirus. Maski ochronne z Chin nie spełniają norm bezpieczeństwa,” May 18, 2020, <https://www.se.pl/wiadomosci/polska/maski-z-chin-nie-spelniaja-norm-bezpieczenstwa-aa-GDAU-VNbt-BAdT.html>.

Ultimately, *Gazeta Wyborcza* won two legal cases with *KGHM* after the company had accused the newspaper of spreading lies. The case had gone to court after two articles, titled “Dziwne maseczki od KGHM” [Strange masks from *KGHM*]<sup>202</sup> and “Maseczki z Chin na śmietnik” [Masks from China for the dumpster], were published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 23 and 30 April 2020 respectively. *KGHM* had demanded from *Gazeta Wyborcza* to correct the information as well as the accusations and manipulations that *Gazeta Wyborcza* had provided its readers with.<sup>203</sup> The court ruled that *KGHM*'s demands were unjustified. The result of the case was published in November 2020.<sup>204</sup>

Due to the various contradicting statements circulating throughout the media landscape, the case remained largely unverified throughout the presidential campaign and beyond. The reader was left to decide based on his or her own judgement whether the one or the other side was right about their accusations.

Even months after the presidential election, *Fakt* revealed on 3 November 2020 that it was still unclear as to whether or not the masks were useful. The author of the article cited a member of the Polish parliament, Marcin Kierwiński, who ridiculed the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of being wrongfully proud of ordering a mass of useless masks. Kierwiński responded to *Fakt* that the uncertainty concerning the security of these masks was a scandal and travesty on behalf of the Prime Minister of Poland.<sup>205</sup>

In March 2021, the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* took up the case again, asking the Bureau of the Prime Minister what finally happened to the allegedly worthless masks. One of the responsible people from the Bureau responded to *Rzeczpospolita*: “Nie wiem” [I don't know]. It remains unclear how the case was ultimately solved and whether the masks could be further used or what else happened to them.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Bankier.pl* “KGHM wysłał pozew "Gazecie Wyborczej",” April 30, 2020, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/KGHM-wyslal-pozew-Gazecie-Wyborczej-7874576.html>.

<sup>204</sup> *Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy RP*, “„Gazeta Wyborcza” nie musi zamieszczać sprostowań KGHM ws. maseczek z Chin”, np.

<sup>205</sup> *Fakt*, “Szokująca odpowiedź Kancelarii Premiera. Chodzi o maseczki za 10 mln zł!” November 3, 2020, <https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polityka/co-z-maseczkami-z-chin-posel-kierwinski-zapytal-premiera/wsgdbhz>.

<sup>206</sup> Grażyna Zawadzka and Izabela Kacprzak, “Co stało się z tysiącami masek z Chin? Zmowa milczenia,” *Rzeczpospolita*, last modified March 8, 2020, <https://www.rp.pl/Koronawirus-SARS-CoV-2/303079913-Co-stalo-sie-z-tysiacami-masek-z-Chin-Zmowa-milczenia.html>.

### 5.3 *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* and *Fakt*: PO, PiS and Pedophilia

The third topic was chosen to underline a reoccurring source of conflict in Poland which is not limited to a few single events but has repeatedly been thematized as an issue of systemic relevance in Polish media. It represents some of the most controversially debated political positions of the PiS and the PO and reflects how their ideological positions have been connected to accusations of pedophilia by their respective political opponent. Due to the thematic similarity, I have decided to analyze the two main articles within a single chapter.

#### 5.3.1 Thin level analysis of *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*: Story

The first article was derived from the printed version of *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* from 1 July 2020, and it is titled “Trzaskowskiego „tak” dla adopcji dzieci przez homoseksualistów” [Trzaskowski’s “yes” to the adoption of children by homosexuals]. This headline was found both on the front-page and the third page of that day’s edition. The article thematizes details to Trzaskowski’s plans regarding the LGBT community in Poland and their right to adopt children. The article exemplifies a typical conservative call to protect Polish children from homosexuals, who are often associated with pedophilia<sup>207</sup>, and their so-called “LGBT ideology”<sup>208</sup>.

The article consists of four paragraphs. Trzaskowski is the main character of the narrative, while some of his political colleagues are mentioned as side characters and supporters of his ideological position to allow homosexuals to marry and adopt children. They are accused of supporting an ideological position that is, according to *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, not accepted by most of the Polish citizens, and to which they have not provided the Poles with further explanations. The article revolves around several events and statements from the opposition that suggest that an ideological overthrow against the will of the Polish people is nearby.

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<sup>207</sup> Tris Reid-Smith, “Polish lawmakers press on with anti-gay ‘Stop Pedophilia’ law,” *Gay Star News*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/polish-lawmakers-press-on-with-anti-gay-stop-pedophilia-law/>.

<sup>208</sup> Steven Hoffman, “What is ‘LGBT ideology,’ and why are Polish people talking about it?” *Krakow Post*, June 20, 2020, <http://www.krakowpost.com/22453/2020/06/what-is-lgbt-ideology-and-why-are-polish-people-talking-about-it>.



### 5.3.2 Thick level analysis of *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*: Text and Narration

Above the actual headline of the text, the reader is primed with the following hyperbolic statement: LGBT \ KO's<sup>209</sup> candidate for president is preparing an ideological revolution for the Poles.

The lead between the headline and the actual text introduces the reader to the content of the story: Rafał Trzaskowski wants to enable homosexual couples to adopt children, legalize same-sex marriage and destroy the traditional family model as well as its values, despite most Poles not accepting these matters. Before the reader can make his or her own judgement, the abstract primes the reader with several hyperboles, covered as Trzaskowski's own goals, so that the reader knows already from the start what to expect from the rest of the text. Trzaskowski's goals, including the possibility for homosexuals to adopt children, to marry and the destruction of the traditional family model, are displayed by the storyteller as if they were truly said in that way, even though there are no quotation marks attached. The end of the abstract concludes that Trzaskowski has even been supported in his aim by his political environment. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* used a metaphor to visualize the other KO officials' silence toward that topic. It is said that Trzaskowski's colleagues took, as translated from Polish, "water into their mouth". That means, they were not willing to reveal anything to *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*. Early on, the abstract is already visibly critical, degrading and patronizing toward Trzaskowski in addition to his colleagues from the KO. This is because they are individuals who are not willing to defend and explain themselves, despite acting against the will of the Polish people. Their position as the oppositional traitor is further underlined by the headline of the article where Trzaskowski is displayed as an "ideological revolutionist" and a threat to the rest of the Poles.

Although several matters are mentioned only as part of Trzaskowski's whole program, the emphasis is on the adoption of children by homosexuals. The first paragraph only focuses on reciting elements of Trzaskowski's presidential program as published before the first round of the election. Trzaskowski's program is reportedly affiliated with a program previously introduced by *Nowoczesna* (which translates to Modern and stands for the Modern Party), according to which a relationship between two people shall not depend on their gender. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* emphasizes the importance of Article Seventeen of this program which states that the chances of an adoption of a child shall not be hindered by the

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<sup>209</sup> Although Trzaskowski is mainly associated with the PO, he was officially the common candidate of all three parties.

gender of the potential parents. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* amplifies this notion by saying that this statement officially opens the door to a legal adoption of children by homosexuals. After stating that this was not Trzaskowski's first controversial statement on the LGBT community, the article continues with a flashback to a TV program called *Kropka nad i* broadcasted on *TVN24*. In the program, Trzaskowski had already revealed as a guest and then President of Warsaw in 2018, that he would love to be the first President of Warsaw enabling same-sex couples to marry each other.

*Gazeta Polska Codziennie* continues to defend their visibly PO and LGBT-skeptical position by saying, "Warto tutaj wspomnieć, że w czerwcu 2020 r. pracownia Estymator zapytała Polaków, czy pary homoseksualne powinny mieć prawo do adopcji dzieci. Aż 79 proc. badanych stwierdziło, że nie. Za było jedynie 10 proc., a 11 proc. nie miało zdania." [It is worthwhile remembering here that in June 2020 the lab *Estymator* asked Poles whether homosexuals couples should have the right to adopt children. As much as 79 per cent of the respondents said no. Only 10 per cent were supportive, and 11 per cent had no opinion on that].

The article ends with an ambiguous claim. Even though, as *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* claims, the editors tried to talk to various officials of the Koalicja Obywatelska (KO), most of them did not even respond. Only one, PO's Borys Budka, answered saying that he had no interest in responding to *Gazeta Polska*. Through that statement, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* appears as the potential conflict solver who is simply denied further communication by those who are causing conflict in the first place, i.e., the officials of the KO who are supportive of something that is not in the interest of most of the Poles.

The news report is one-sided as it refuses to inform the reader that the equality of homosexuals and heterosexuals is not simply a matter of Polish law or Polish interests but of international human rights. The right for homosexuals to marry or adopt children just as heterosexuals are allowed to, is reduced to something negotiable, depending on whether or not most Poles approve of it. In that regard, the politicians of the PO/KO are depicted as pseudo-representatives of the Poles in that they openly promote same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by homosexuals against the will of the Polish people. Additionally, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* says that the politicians of the PO/KO refuse to explain this matter to the newspaper. The newspaper elevates itself to a source of morality by saying that PO's Borys Budka did not want to talk to such a newspaper as *Gazeta Polska*. The reader is left to believe that these politicians are anti-Polish as they act against the will of most Poles without even

trying to make their case and explain themselves. Based on this article, the reader is informed that the politicians of the opposition are going to act behind the back of the Poles and introduce a law that will enable homosexuals to marry each other, to adopt children and to further expand the “LGBT ideology”. All proof laid out in the article supports *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*’s claim in the subheading according to which Trzaskowski is preparing an ideological revolution for the Poles which endangers the traditional, and highly regarded by Polish conservatives, model of the Polish family.

### 5.3.3 Multiplicity and Meaning

The debate around the LGBTQ+ community in Poland, their “ideology” and their support of pedophilia has been connected to Trzaskowski’s decision to sign the LGBT charter in 2019 during his office as Mayor of Warsaw. The so-called “karta LGBT” enabled the LGBTQ+ community further protection from discrimination as well as benefits and help for them to better manage their lives.<sup>210</sup> This act was on the one side interpreted as a drop of water in an ocean, and therefore, as a bare minimum of benefits to the LGBTQ+ community in Poland.<sup>211</sup> However, for the opposing, more conservative side, this act turned out to be interpreted as much more than just a minimum of help. Homosexuals were declared pedophiles, and a campaign called “Stop pedofilii” [Stop pedophilia] was established as a counter-movement to Trzaskowski’s “LGBT karta”. An article from *Ordo Iuris*, a Polish “ultra-conservative institute”<sup>212</sup>, further specifies that Trzaskowski’s “LGBT karta” also advocates a specific sexual education of children from the age of four.<sup>213</sup> This has provoked Trzaskowski’s “LGBT karta” to be interpreted as a manifesto of a perversion of children, and therefore, a danger to children in Poland. While PiS party’s Jarosław Kaczyński spoke of an early sexualization of children in Poland, the far-right went as far as claiming the “LGBT karta” to be supportive of masturbation in pre-schools, and a belittlement of pedophilia.<sup>214</sup> Instead

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<sup>210</sup> Emilia Wyciślak, “Karta LGBT a pedofilia, czyli dlaczego ciągle żyjemy mentalnie w średniowieczu,” *Bezprawnik*, February 25, 2019, <https://bezprawnik.pl/karta-lgbt-a-pedofilia/>.

<sup>211</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Lidia Kurasinska, “This ultra-conservative institute has infiltrated the Polish state, on a relentless quest to ban abortion,” *OpenDemocracy*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/ultra-conservative-institute-has-infiltrated-polish-state-to-ban-abortion/>.

<sup>213</sup> *Ordo Iuris*, “Obywatelski projekt „Stop pedofilii” pomoże w ochronie dzieci,” August 22, 2019, <https://ordoiuris.pl/rodzina-i-malzenstwo/obywatelski-projekt-stop-pedofilii-pomoze-w-ochronie-dzieci>.

<sup>214</sup> Dominika Sitnicka, “Przedszkolaki zmuszane do masturbacji? Zobacz, co jest faktem, a co fantazją o Deklaracji LGBT,” *OKO.press*, March 11, 2019, <https://oko.press/przedszkolaki-zmuszane-do-masturbacji-zobacz-co-jest-faktem-a-co-fantazja-w-deklaracji-lgbt/>.

of referring to the “LGBT karta” as a result of standards promoted by the World Health Organization, many conservative politicians openly transformed the discourse into a matter of protection of Polish children from Trzaskowski’s support of pedophilia.<sup>215</sup>

Trzaskowski’s signing of the “LGBT karta” also provoked the establishment of so-called “LGBT free zones” in various municipalities and regions of Poland. The debate continued intensifying, especially during the presidential campaign, as Duda “repeatedly pledged to never allow gay marriage or gay adoption in the country and has claimed that the existence of LGBT+ people in Poland is a “foreign ideology” that goes against Polish family values”.<sup>216</sup> He also denied their existence in Poland.<sup>217</sup> An act taken on behalf of President Andrzej Duda further supports the hypothesis that to the conservative bloc, the “LGBT ideology” and all benefits for homosexuals connected to it have constituted a major danger to traditionally constructed Polish families. On 6 July 2020, Duda announced to change the Polish constitution in a way that would explicitly forbid same-sex couples to adopt a child.<sup>218</sup> In practice, he has not only forbidden same-sex couples to adopt children from outside but also, to integrate their own, biological children into a same-sex relationship. This constitutional change has been highly criticized for it forbids children to grow up in a family different from the traditional model in which only heterosexual couples are allowed to be the parents of a child.<sup>219</sup> Duda even said that he hopes for this constitutional change to be accepted also by the opposition: “Mam nadzieję, że taka propozycja zostanie poparta przez PSL, niektórych posłów PO i – co oczywiste – Konfederacji, bo wielokrotnie deklarowali, że są zwolennikami ochrony dobra dziecka. Teraz mogą to udowodnić” [I hope that such a proposal is going to be supported by PSL, some deputies from the PO – [and] of course – Konfederacja because they have declared multiple times to be supporters of the child’s good. Now they can prove that].<sup>220</sup>

The topic has been highly exploited by conservative politicians and media to motivate not only their own electorate but also conservatives from the far-right Konfederacja to vote in 2020 for Andrzej Duda instead of Rafał Trzaskowski.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> Elliot Douglas, “How the EU can stop Poland's 'LGBT-free zones',” *Deutsche Welle*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-eu-can-stop-polands-lgbt-free-zones/a-55042896>.

<sup>217</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Anton Ambroziak, “Dudy gra wyborcza zakazem adopcji. „To okrutne. Prezydent odbiera dzieciom prawo do rodziny”,” *OKO.press*, July 6, 2020, <https://oko.press/dudy-gra-wyborcza-zakazem-adopcji/>.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.*

On 10 July 2020, *Gazeta Wyborcza* posted a response to an article published previously by the right-wing extremist magazine *Sieci*.<sup>222</sup> Therein, *Gazeta Wyborcza* criticizes the magazine for claiming that Trzaskowski is not only supportive of pedophilia but that his plan is also to introduce a massive, nation-wide, obligatory pedophilia in Poland.<sup>223</sup> Although there was no direct response to the main article found in *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s article represents a stance against the repeatedly negative claims against Trzaskowski published in far-right media. Several front-pages covering accusations of Trzaskowski being a supporter of pedophilia or having a close connection with a convicted pervert could be identified in *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*'s archive. The core message resembles that of the PiS party's officials: Trzaskowski supports pedophilia, and he is going to continue doing so even if he is elected Poland's new president. Trzaskowski's plan of establishing an equal relationship between homosexual and heterosexual couples is demonized to the utmost to mobilize the reader to go to the election and make the "right choice" at the ballot.

*Super Express*'s article on that topic proved to be less provocative as overall it seems that the tabloid has tried to merely describe the conservatives' and liberals' worldview conflict.<sup>224</sup> At the very beginning, *Super Express* even quotes Andrzej Duda for comparing the LGBT community to Bolsheviks, and PiS deputy Przemysław Czarnek for claiming that the LGBT community were not equal with normal people.<sup>225</sup> The interviewee who responded to the questions of *Super Express*, was PO politician Sławomir Nitras. He is cited, *inter alia*, for calling the government's behavior a disgrace and a statement against Polish citizens, which, as Nitras says, is going to have long-term consequences.<sup>226</sup> The article is overall provocative in a balanced way without explicitly favoring any of the two political blocs, except for the fact that only Trzaskowski's side was reflected on. This might be beneficial, but it does not have to be. Even though the article starts with Nitras claiming that Trzaskowski was the only one who behaved properly in that matter, it ends with Nitras being presented as controversial. On the one hand, he says that Trzaskowski has consistently supported same-sex marriage, yet on other hand he ends up saying that Trzaskowski is not planning to legalize same-sex

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<sup>222</sup> Grzegorz Wysocki, "Skandaliczne publikacje "Sieci": Trzaskowski popiera pedofilię," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 10, 2020, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,26117435,skandaliczne-publikacje-sieci-trzaskowski-popiera-pedofilie.html?disableRedirects=true>.

<sup>223</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> Łukasz Gągulski, "Legalizacja małżeństw homoseksualnych w Polsce? Ujawniamy plan Trzaskowskiego. Wybory 2020," *Super Express*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.se.pl/wiadomosci/polityka/legalizacja-malzenstw-homoseksualnych-w-polsce-ujawniamy-plan-trzaskowskiego-wybory-2020-aa-Risc-aAV2-xv5a.html>.

<sup>225</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> *ibid.*

marriage. This inconsistency might as well have a negative effect on the reader because it questions the reliability and integrity of Trzaskowski and his colleagues from the PO/KO.

### 5.3.4 Thin level analysis of *Fakt*: Story

The second main article on this topic was derived from *Fakt* and thematizes almost the exact opposite. It calls for a protection of Polish children from the PiS party's unwillingness to prosecute pedophilia. On 1 July 2020, an article appeared in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, saying that President Andrzej Duda had pardoned a pedophile. In the following days, several newspaper outlets published articles on that topic. One of them was the tabloid *Fakt*. Throughout the next days preceding the presidential election, *Fakt* would choose this topic in one way or another on the 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 13 July 2020 to be their main topic and therefore on the center of the front-page.<sup>227</sup> The main topics would cover either Duda's decision to pardon a pedophile or accuse the general state apparatus of the PiS of doing too little for the weakest in Poland and further accuse them of protection of pedophiles.

This analysis focuses on the article from the 2 July 2020 because on that day, *Fakt* published its first big response toward Duda's pardoning. The front-page's headline was titled "SZOK! Podpis prezydenta pomógł pedofilowi" [SHOCKING! The president's signature helped a pedophile], while the actual article on page two was introduced with a big banner, saying: "Dlaczego prezydent ułaskawił pedofila?!" [Why did the president pardon a pedophile?!]. The article is relatively short and comprises only four paragraphs. It thematizes the background events to the pardoning, in which Andrzej Duda is the main character, while the pedophile and his family members are only mentioned marginally. Further side characters are two commentators who have taken an argumentative stance against Duda's decision to pardon a pedophile.

### 5.3.5 Thick level analysis of *Fakt*: Text and Narration

Even though the actual article is covered only on page two, the headline "Dlaczego prezydent ułaskawił pedofila?" [Why did the president pardon a pedophile?!] occupies at least a third of the whole page. The word "ułaskawił" is coloured in blood red, contrasting the other

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<sup>227</sup> "Fakt," E-Prasa, Nexto.pl, [https://www.nexto.pl/e-prasa/fakt\\_p34137.xml?archival&\\_offset=192&\\_order=-1](https://www.nexto.pl/e-prasa/fakt_p34137.xml?archival&_offset=192&_order=-1).

words which are painted in white. The subheadlines on the right top of the page suggest that the article is breaking news: “+++MUSIMY NATYCHMIAST POZNAĆ SZCZEGÓŁY TEJ BULWERSUJĄCEJ SPRAWY +++ PODPIS ANDRZEJ DUDY SPRAWIŁ, ŻE PEDOFIL ZNIKNAŁ Z RADARÓW +++” [WE HAVE TO FIND OUT IMMEDIATELY ABOUT THE DETAILS OF THIS APPALLING CASE +++ ANDRZEJ DUDA’S SIGNATURE CAUSED THAT THE PEDOPHILE DISAPPEARED FROM THE RADARS +++].

The headlines are visibly aimed at raising attention and provoking the readers to make premeditated conclusions without knowing the details to that case yet. In fact, the reader is probably likely to think that there is not much to add to that case anyway as it is already enough to know that Andrzej Duda pardoned a pedophile.

Most of the article, kept in relatively tiny letters, supports what was said already in the headlines. In the lead, the author of the article continues using exclamation marks to make their point from the subheadlines. The first line says: “Polacy muszą jak najszybciej poznać kulisy tej bulwersującej sprawy!” [The Poles need to find out as soon as possible about the background of this appalling case!]. According to this sentence, it is apparently not quite clear yet what and why it happened. Despite this lack of information, the reader is left to believe that Duda has purposefully hidden the background information about this case. The lead further specifies what is known about that case, while mentioning a few facts that are indeed not in favor of Duda. Apparently, Duda not only enabled the pedophile to be in contact with his daughter and victim again but he also made it possible that the pedophile could disappear from the radar. The reader is left to believe that a pedophile who constitutes a potentially lifelong danger to the public, is free to move around wherever he likes. *Fakt* adds that Duda reportedly justified his decision with a shocking argument:

“Nie doszło do gwałtu!” [There was no rape!].

In the second paragraph, *Fakt* reflects on some of the further arguments brought upon by Andrzej Duda. According to that, he made his decision of pardoning this man based on different premises than him being a pedophile, as he had served his sentences related to that already before. Duda argued that his decision concerned a family matter, and that he only pardoned him regarding his prohibition to rapprochement. Yet, the author of the article invalidates these claims, saying that Duda allowed the pedophile to disappear from public ra-

dars. This would enable him to apply for jobs where pedophiles were not allowed, for instance at schools. In that way, the author implicitly suggests that Duda gave priority to a family's, or rather a pedophile's, good instead of protecting the common good of the Polish people. He also did all this behind the back of the public. This is further supported by *Fakt*'s claim that affiliated authorities have refused to publish any further information on that matter.

Two commentators, a lawyer named Krzysztof Izdebski, and a former deputy, Mirosława Kałna, are included into the last paragraph to criticize Duda's decision. While Izdebski claims that it is in the interest of the President to reveal all the necessary background information to the public, Kałna, who has been working for the security of children for years, says: "Od lat walczymy ze skutkami takich okrucieństw i uważamy, że w takich sprawach nie powinno się stosować prawa łaski!" [We have been fighting with the effects of such atrocities for years now and we think that in such matters the right to pardon should not be exerted!]. Their comments and expertise are further extended underneath the main article. As two commentators who are professionals and know this subject, they validate the stance presented by *Fakt* and implicitly also the voice of the concerned "people". As they represent the interest of the common good, together with *Fakt* they become the antagonists of Duda and his supporters. On the other hand, Duda is depicted to be the hero of the pedophile as a threat to the common good. *Fakt* even says in the fourth paragraph that it is unclear what circumstances of that case were even worthy to be considered enough to pardon a pedophile.

### 5.3.6 Multiplicity and Meaning

The accusations of pedophilia brought forward against the PiS party differ from the PO. When accusations of pedophilia are made against conservatives, they are often related to cases of pedophilia in the Catholic Church. The PiS and the Catholic Church promote the traditional patriarchal family model, in which the division of gender roles is strictly defined in favor of the man. It constitutes part of the conservatives' "counter-ideology" to the liberal "LGBT ideology" and it is a column of many Polish Catholic families. The PiS party's notion of the ideal family has been criticized, not only because it favors inequality between genders but also because it undermines the position of the weakest who are unable to defend themselves against their parental authorities. After Duda's pardoning Barbara Nowacka, a



deputy of the KO, commented: “Czy to są właściwe standardy, czy to jest ta wizja rodziny, którą ma PiS?”<sup>228</sup> [Are these appropriate standards, is this PiS’ vision of a family?].

The opposition has also repeatedly accused the government of being too close to the Church. 71 per cent of supporters to the PO, and even 48 per cent of supporters to the extreme-right party Kukiz-15, think that the Church is not neutral enough toward the Polish government and too deeply entangled with Polish politics.<sup>229</sup> This has affected Polish media and politics considerably. For years, a powerful myth has been circulating in Poland among politicians and media outlets that Catholic priests remain utterly unpunished for their sexual offenses toward children because they are protected by the Polish government.<sup>230</sup> Although the myth has been reported to be only partially true<sup>231</sup>, it has influenced political debates in Poland a lot. A very popular interpretation of this myth is that Polish priests are not subject to Polish law at all because of their concordat, or that they own Vatican passports that enable them to stay completely free from punishment until the bishop says otherwise.<sup>232</sup>

These already well-known conspiracy theories are further strengthened when a newspaper like *Fakt* publishes that Andrzej Duda has pardoned a pedophile without any further explanation. According to Andrzej Sidorski<sup>233</sup>, the biggest problem with myths surrounding pedophilia in Poland is that they are constantly being upheld and fed by Polish politicians and the media. Although it is *per se* valuable and necessary for a newspaper to inform its readers about suspicious activities behind their back, the article from *Fakt* is purposefully intense and polarizing.

*Gazeta Wyborcza* published an article on Duda’s pardoning of a pedophile already on 1 July 2020.<sup>234</sup> Therein, the author claims to base his knowledge, similarly as *Fakt*, on a news story previously published by the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*. *Gazeta Wyborcza* complains that it is, as usually the case for pardons, not possible to make any further judgement on the official

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<sup>228</sup> *Dziennik.pl*, “PO pyta: Co sprawiło, że prezydent ulaskawił pedofila? Czy to wizja rodziny PiS?,” July 1, 2020, <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/7761717,ulaskawienie-prezydent-andrzej-duda-przemoc-gwalt-pedofilia-po-jan-grabiec-barbara-nowacka-polityka.html>.

<sup>229</sup> Agnieszka Kazimierzczuk, “Sondaż: Kościół za blisko PiS,” *Rzeczpospolita*, last modified September 18, 2017, <https://www.rp.pl/Spoleczenstwo/170919037-Sondaz-Kosciol-za-blisko-PiS.html>.

<sup>230</sup> Andrzej K. Sidorski, “„Milczenie ofiar” jest faktem. Jak można to bagatelizować i pozostawiać je same?” *OKO.press*, June 21, 2020, <https://oko.press/milczenie-ofiar-jest-faktem/>.

<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> Wojciech Czuchnowski, “Andrzej Duda ulaskawił pedofila. Tłumaczy: "To była sprawa rodzinna",” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 1, 2020, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,26087813,andrzej-duda-ulaskawil-pedofila.html>.

statements. In that way, *Gazeta Wyborcza* implicitly also discredits the value of the PiS party's official statements in general. The author continues to complement their lack of explanations on behalf of the President with their own information on the topic, revealing to the reader all the details about the actual punishment of the person as well as the criminal code in Poland. According to that, a person accused of harassing a loved one and causing harm to their body shall be sentenced to at least five months and maximum six years prison.<sup>235</sup> Yet, instead of showing understanding, politicians of the PiS party are quoted to have accused the opposition of political calculation and brazen slander instead. In the last paragraph, Ryszard Kalisz, former Minister of the Polish Left Party SLD [in Polish: Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej], is asked for his opinion on that matter:

“To są piekielnie trudne sprawy. Nie ma żadnych ograniczeń prezydenckiego prawa łaski, ale moim zdaniem w takim przypadku prezydent powinien zachować wyjątkową ostrożność, zwłaszcza że popierający go PiS jest w takich sprawach wyjątkowo kategoriyczny.” [These are hellishly difficult matters. There are no restrictions on the presidential right of grace, but in my opinion the president should exercise extreme caution in such a case, especially since the PiS who supports him is exceptionally categorical in such matters.]

Otherwise, *Gazeta Wyborcza* thematized pedophilia in the previous months as well but in a different manner than *Fakt*. The front-pages of the printed versions of 15 and 16 May 2020 were centered on pedophilia in the Catholic Church. That *Gazeta Wyborcza* chose the front pages of these two days, is no coincidence. On 16 May 2020, investigative journalists and brothers Tomasz and Marek Sekielski, had published the second part of their controversial on pedophilia in the Catholic Church in Poland documentary.<sup>236</sup> The movie *Tylko Nie Mów Nikomu*<sup>237</sup>, which thematizes cases that have previously been swept under the carpet, was published on YouTube on 11 May 2019. It has been clicked twenty-four million times since its release. As it was subtitled in different languages and accessible to a global audience, the documentary received enormous attention both nationally and internationally. As a response to the uproar caused by that, Jarosław Kaczyński decided to bring in a new draft bill concerning the prosecution of pedophiles. Soon after the publication of the movie, he pled for

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<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> SEKIELSKI, “ZABAWA W CHOWANEGO,” *YouTube*, May 16, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0ym5kPf3Vc>.

<sup>237</sup> SEKIELSKI, “TYLKO NIE MÓW NIKOMU,” *YouTube*, May 11, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrUvQ3W3nV4&t=171s>.

changing the criminal code in favor of the children affected by pedophilia, raising the potential prison sentence of the offender to thirty years.<sup>238</sup>

*Fakt* received major criticism not only in response to the topic itself but the way they depicted the case. In addition to the story from 2 July 2020, *Fakt* filled the front-page of 3 July 2020 with details of Duda's pardon of a pedophile. On the front-page, a photo of Duda is displayed in an unfavorable way that makes him look as if he was caught doing something shameful. The photo is of a bad quality and candid, as if it was derived from a security camera. The headline underneath says: “Trzymał córkę, bił po twarzy i wkładał jej ręce w krocze” [He held his daughter, hit her in the face and put her hands into the crotch]. At first glance, all signs point toward Duda being a pedophile, especially because it is commonly known that Duda has a daughter as well. Only at a second glance, when reading the smaller subheading, it becomes obvious that it is not Duda who is accused of being a pedophile: “Panie Prezydencie, jak Pan mógł ułaskawić kogoś takiego?” [Mister President, how could you pardon somebody like this?]. The front-page is purposefully provocative and very ambiguous. It can make the reader suspect that maybe Duda pardoned a pedophile because he is himself one.

*Super Express* published an article on the coverage of *Fakt* from 3 July 2020. Therein, the newspaper reveals how former Prime Minister Beata Szydło reacted to this news story: “To ohydna manipulacja” [That [is] hideous manipulation].<sup>239</sup> This statement takes a two-folded stance. On the one hand, it is directed at the whole news story that already attracted much attention and uproar in Poland. On the other hand, it is also directed at *Fakt*'s front-page from the 3 July 2020 in which Duda is depicted as a potential pedophile himself.

Beata Szydło further said in *Super Express*: “Podła, ohydna manipulacja, która powinna być potępiona zarówno przez polityków, jak i środowisko dziennikarskie [...] Coś niebywałego, do czego zostaje sprowadzona polityka w Polsce. To się w głowie nie mieści.” [Evil-minded, hideous manipulation, which should be condemned by politicians as well as journalists [...] [it is] something incredible to what Polish politics is being deflated. You can't wrap your head around that]. She continued saying that this was not the first time that the

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<sup>238</sup> *MDR Nachrichten & Themen*, “Film über Kindesmissbrauch erschüttert Polen,” May 13, 2019, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/welt/osteuropa/politik/polen-film-paedophilie-katholische-kirche-100.html>.

<sup>239</sup> *Super Express*, “Duda ułaskawił pedofila. Beata Szydło przerażona. Mocne słowa,” July 3, 2020, <https://www.se.pl/wiadomosci/polityka/szydlo-mocno-o-okladce-dziennika-z-duda-wybory-2020-aa-FebE-L2ts-N6xM.html>.

German group *Ringier Axel Springer*, to which *Fakt* belongs, tried to intervene in Polish politics. According to Szydło, the mistress of the pedophile and mother of his daughters was even grateful for him being pardoned by the President, and she did not want to be exploited [for a news story] and live a normal life in calmness.<sup>240</sup>

*Gazeta Polska Codziennie* also posted a counterstatement to *Fakt*'s coverage on Andrzej Duda pardoning a pedophile. In their article titled "Hieny z 'Faktu'" [Hyenas from *Fakt*], *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* complains that it is nothing new that the other side will come up with even the most absurd accusations when it comes to the battle for victory.<sup>241</sup> The author continues reminding the reader that even under Donald Tusk, the PO was open to many barbarisms. However, what *Fakt* did, is reportedly next level in terms of its pathological background. By spreading vulgar fake news and combining it with the ostentatious suggestion of Duda himself engaging in pedophile actions is off limits.<sup>242</sup>

The narrative criticizing Duda for pardoning a pedophile was explicitly rejected by the news portal *wPolityce*.<sup>243</sup> Therein, the author accused both *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Fakt* and other media and politicians of the opposition for cynically spreading manipulative information on that topic. Already in the headline, *wPolityce.pl* basically rejects the articles published from the other side of the political spectrum, saying that it is rubbish to claim that Duda pardoned the rapist of a child and helped a pedophile.<sup>244</sup>

### 5.3.7 Conclusion: Relevance of the narratives as event or systemic conspiracy narratives

In the first main narrative on Trzaskowski protecting pedophilia through the planned legalization of adoption by homosexuals, the PO is associated with an ideological danger to Poland, especially Polish liberals who do not see any reasons for an inequality between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Instead of reflecting on the reasons why Trzaskowski might be interested in legalizing marriage and adoption for homosexuals, the article visibly tries to

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<sup>240</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> Dawid Wildstein, "Hieny z „Faktu”," *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, <https://www.gazetapolska.pl/22759-hieny-z-faktu>.

<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> *wPolityce*. "Prezydent ułaskawił gwałciciela dziecka? Pomagał pedofilowi? Bzdura! Sprawdź jak media i opozycja cynicznie manipulują tragedią rodziny." July 2, 2020. <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/507416-ujawniamy-duda-ulaskawil-pedofila-tak-manipuluja-media>.

<sup>244</sup> *ibid.*

provoke the reader and point at a nearby ideological revolution against the will of the Poles. The narrative does not refer to an explicit event but it thematizes general ideological perceptions of the PO. It presents them implicitly as a conspiracy of a few politicians against the common good of the Polish people who have, as reported, rejected that homosexuals should be allowed to adopt children. The narrative provokes already existing patterns of prejudice and suspicion as it reminds the reader of the “LGBT karta” signed by Trzaskowski, and the debate on pedophilia that followed it. The article constitutes a systemic conspiracy narrative.

In the second main narrative in which Duda is accused of having pardoned a pedophile, the PiS is presented as a danger to Polish children, especially because it is commonsense to know by now that there have been many cases of pedophilia in the Catholic Church which have not really been prosecuted. Even though the case is an example of an event conspiracy narrative, the article ties into a systemic conspiracy narrative as well. In February 2021, the already PiS-friendly courts in Poland were seen to be “conspiring to restrict access to public info”.<sup>245</sup> Since the pardoning of a pedophile became so loud and hotly debated in Poland before the presidential elections, the oppositional newspapers wanted to raise attention to something bigger. The goal of the article was not merely to show the reader an example of a single case of pedophilia not being punished by a PiS-affiliated president properly but to call the PiS party’s own ideological affiliations, especially its history with the Catholic Church and its unresolved cases of pedophilia, into question. The case shows that President Andrzej Duda has not bothered to pardon a pedophile without informing the public about the exact circumstances. To the reader, he can justifiably now appear as a part of a larger group of conspirators who have proven for years now that they have been willing to break the social order to protect their ideological interests at the detriment of the Polish society.

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<sup>245</sup> Claudia Ciobanu, “PIS-FRIENDLY HIGH COURTS IN POLAND SEEN CONSPIRING TO RESTRICT ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFO,” *REPORTING DEMOCRACY*, February 26, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/26/pis-friendly-high-courts-in-poland-conspire-to-restrict-access-to-public-info/>.

## 6. Discussion

In the following part, I want to come back to the three research questions that I have posed in the beginning of this study.

1. How are news stories in the Polish newspapers constructed to constitute conspiracy narratives?

Czech's definition of conspiracy narratives allowed me to include not only articles more obviously relating to controversial partisan conspiracy theories such as those about the LGBT community or the Catholic Church but also narratives concerning single negotiations or contracts leading to financial corruption, which were later publicly neglected and largely remained unsolved. The broad definition of Czech was useful to catch news stories about alleged financial corruption, potentially influential on the outcome of the presidential election in 2020, which would have otherwise not withstood the premises of the classical definition of conspiracy theories. Yet, these stories are important for Polish politics as they have been used regularly to create suspicion against the political opponent. For the PiS party's campaigning, the notion of the PO politicians being thieves and liars was an essential part of their success in 2015. It could be shown that in 2020, Trzaskowski's trip to Brazil was also widely appreciated by governmentally friendly media even though the story was typically not covered by government-critical media. At the same time, the range of assumed corruption cases of PiS officials during the pandemic served as an important source for the oppositional media to confirm their anti-PiS sentiment and suspicion while they were either harshly criticized or neglected by government-friendly news outlets. The same effect was observable in the coverage of the news stories connected to pedophilia where the partisan bias and the ideological differences between liberals and conservatives were even more obvious than in the articles on financial corruption.

2. How do the conspiracy narratives identified in the left-wing liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* differ from those identified in the right-wing *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, and the tabloids *Fakt* and *Super Express*, and what do they have in common?

All four newspapers *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Fakt* and *Super Express* engaged in a conspiracist discourse before the presidential election in 2020. Each one of them either published their own conspiracy narrative, distributed or critically responded to another conspiracy narrative.

The selected newspapers took advantage of provocative headlines to attract the reader and raise suspicion about a political opponent. Satirical elements as well as a harsh critique of their “colleagues” in the opposing newspapers were a common method to devalue another interpretation of a news story. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* openly rejected and discredited the information provided by *Gazeta Wyborcza* or *Fakt*. At the same time, *Fakt* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* undermined the other side of the political spectrum as well by rejecting their view of a story. *Super Express* proved to be the least emotionally entangled news source of the four selected newspapers. Otherwise, it was visible that all newspapers operated with selective information and statements that could be phrased as “semi-truths”. Textually and narratively, the opponent was framed in a way that would make him obviously look like the “bad” one who had been exposed to have done something at the expense of the “good” ones. *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Fakt* contributed to governmentally critical conspiracy narratives while protecting the opposition and rejecting conservative conspiracy narratives. *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* and *Super Express* on the other hand protected the interests of the PiS government and those affiliated with them while explicitly discrediting conspiracy narratives of the opposing side.

### 3. How can the conspiracy narratives identified in the Polish newspapers be politically and culturally contextualized?

The analysis of Polish newspapers for conspiracy narratives before the presidential election in 2020 has further underlined that Poland is indeed politically divided, and that partisan media outlets also seem to have different agendas regarding the relevance of certain news stories over others. According to the analysis, there was no basic understanding for the other political side, and media outlets were not left out of the political debate. It could be shown that before such an important decision as the presidential election in 2020, partisan hostile sentiment had entered a societal sphere that should be as independent as possible and informative to the readers without entangling them too much into the Polish political mud fight. It could also be further underlined that the two biggest political blocs represent very different visions of Poland, and that their political prejudices toward who is to be protected and who is to blame were even visible in the mainstream newspapers in Poland.

## 7. Conclusion

This study on conspiracy narratives has shown that event and systemic conspiracy narratives are not only observable in Polish magazines but also in Polish daily newspapers. Based on examples of suspected financial corruption and the alleged protection of pedophilia coming from both sides of the political spectrum, it could be proven that the Polish media discourse was very emotional and saturated with accusations and suspicion toward political opponents before the presidential election in 2020. The analysis has furthermore shed light on the seriousness of the Polish political polarization. The reciprocal scapegoating evident in the examples reflects not only that newspapers tend to reproduce ideology but that they can go as far as refusing the integrity and the information validity of an “ideologically” opposing newspaper.

Future research would profit from an even broader and more longitudinal perspective on the polarization of Polish newspapers. Furthermore, it would be interesting to research the perspectives of the readers of the Polish media outlets and to ask them for their opinions on the articles written in the newspapers. Due to the rising number of conspiracy theorists in Poland, it would be highly beneficial to find out more about the sources that have further contributed to Poles being more and more conspiracist leaning. One of the most fundamental characteristics of the media is its influence on public opinion. If mainstream media promote partisan suspicion and hatred, this sentiment might be likely to spillover on the audience. The question, however, is to what extent they have contributed to it, and whether people have stopped reading newspapers because of the quality of the content, or for other reasons.



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