

Populist Discourse in the Polish Media

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5. Indicators of Populist Discourse in News Tickers on *Wiadomości* TVP1

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Introduction

In the age of an inarguable growing importance of internet media (including social networks) in political communication, TV news broadcasts are in decline. It is a gradual process, as research shows that a large part of society still acquires knowledge of current events through TV (Matsa, 2018). Television is still a primary source of information for 64% of Poles. One should note, however, that among respondents aged 18–24 in a 2017 survey, 58% named the internet as their main news source (CBOS, 2017). Therefore, although television is decreasing in significance, especially with the younger generation, this still leaves a substantial number of people relying on it to provide them with news.

The current use of news tickers (in the broad sense) is an expression of modern changes in the ways people consume media. Even though their history extends back to the 1950s, they have come a long way from the blurred scraps of paper used then. Their modern form was widely employed for the first time in the coverage of 9/11. Textual information presented during news broadcasts is most often located at the bottom of the screen. The ticker or crawl (crawler) is the scrolling part. Lower thirds mainly include static layout elements. We usually distinguish between three types of lower thirds (Rodrigues, Veloso, and Mealha, 2012, p. 358), of which the one-tier type is the subject of this research. These are used to display the headline of a news story while it is being presented. It is a widely confirmed thesis that lower thirds have a great impact on news perception and interpretation (Fratello, 2014, p. 108), resembling newspapers headline, which play a similar role (van Dijk, 1988, pp. 35–36) even if their perception varies (Fratello, 2014, p. 109).

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the presence of indicators of populist communication in news tickers on *Wiadomości*, the main evening newscast on the Polish public television station TVP1. Attention has been drawn to these short text messages because of their language and rhetoric – considered controversial by many political commentators in Poland and abroad. Such opinions have been articulated even by those supporting the Law and Justice government and are part of a wider discussion regarding biased and manipulative narration used by Polish public broadcasters (Zaremba, 2017; kw, 2019).

This chapter responds to the call for deeper investigation into the role of the media in promoting populism (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2018, p. 7). We would argue that the current political situation in Poland presents an interesting case. Although in the 1990s the media in Poland underwent a transformation from a state-owned system to a dual-

istic model with private and public electronic media, some features of the system have remained the same, including the politicization of public electronic media. The process of politicization is reflected in the influence that politicians hold over the content of public TV and radio, which can be achieved through appointment of media personnel (Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki, 2008, pp. 13–14), as well as by controlling the content of newscasts and commentary programmes. That leads to a clear contradiction between the public mission, which obliges the public broadcaster (Telewizja Polska [TVP] and Polskie Radio) to stay impartial, and its practice – heavily influenced by the political parties in power. According to Polish media law, TVP should not favor or promote any political organisation or orientation while expressing its own views on politics or any other matters that are subjects of public debate (TVP, 2005). However, the ways that TVP has presented events throughout the years, have clearly been the result of political colonization (Herbut, 2002).

In 2015, following parliamentary elections, the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party (Law and Justice, hereafter PiS) took radical action. Not only did they replace the managers of TVP and Polish Radio, but they also announced a new media law, called the ‘small’ one since it was only a partial reform of the media system. The intention of the government was revealed by Ryszard Terlecki (head of the party’s parliamentary caucus), when he said: “If the media think that they can keep feeding Poles with the critique of our changes or our proposals of changes for weeks on end, then this needs to be stopped” (kło, rzw, 2015). When Andrzej Duda, the President of Poland, signed the new laws, his spokeswoman Małgorzata Sadurska explained that he had done so because the state media should be “impartial, unbiased and credible” (kło, mart, js, rzw, 2016).

The politicization of TVP is a subject of concern for many entities, including the European Parliament and various organizations monitoring freedom of speech. On June 2017, Freedom House presented a report “Pluralism Under Attack: The Assault on Press Freedom in Poland,” whose conclusion states (among others): “Since coming to power in the fall of 2015, PiS has sought to control coverage of its controversial political agenda by strengthening its grip on the media. It has replaced the heads of the public television and radio broadcasters, appointing one of its former lawmakers as director of TVP. *Wiadomości*, TVP’s main news program, has become a propaganda outlet for the government. (...) These changes go far beyond efforts by previous governments to secure favorable coverage in the public media. Further changes to the public media proposed by PiS, abandoned for now amid criticism at home and abroad, suggest that the government may try to increase its control over these outlets even more in the future. (...) With respect to Poland’s endurance as a democracy, changes introduced by PiS to the media landscape are alarming. In the short term, they mean that public television is feeding voters the party line every night. This creates a bias that goes against the very idea of a ‘public broadcaster’” (Chapman, 2017, p. 16).

In the medium-term, PiS’ control of the public media contributes to an uneven playing field in the run-up to elections: first the local elections in 2018 and then the parliamentary and presidential votes in 2019 and 2020. The 2019 legislative elections and their aftermath will be crucial in determining whether Poland remains a democracy in more than name. In the longer term, PiS’ politicization of the public media could leave these institutions permanently scarred, setting a precedent for future administrations to sack the incumbent officials and replace them with loyalists of their own (Chapman, 2017, p. 16).

This issue was also noticed by foreign media when more than a hundred TVP journalists were fired or quit in protest (Foster and Day, 2016), or when the new government introduced laws that enabled them to appoint new authorities of TVP and Polish Radio. The BBC's correspondent A. Easton explained that "(...) incoming governments in Poland put their own people in to run large state companies, institutions, and the public media – but the PiS is going faster and further this time" (BBC, 2016). Indeed, since January 2016 the office of the President of Polish Television has been held by Jacek Kurski, a former PiS Member of Parliament and Member of the European Parliament.

Interestingly, while reporting on the changes in the Polish public media, foreign reporters also took notice of TVP1 *Wiadomości* tickers, such as: "Opposition with no offer for voters," "Poles want changes in courts, not protests," "Total opposition's total hysteria," "Total opposition in total disarray," or "Total opposition totally divided," emphasizing the fact that these tickers were not taken from a "marginal right-wing website" or a satirical show, but from the main newscast of the Polish public broadcaster (Chapman, 2018).

Since previous studies (Przyłęcki, 2012; Stępińska and Adamczewska, 2017; Lipiński and Stępińska, 2018) have shown a clear tendency of PiS to use populist discourse, we decided to examine the presence of indicators of populist discourse in the tickers of *Wiadomości*, as well as to trace the political bias of these messages in the period when PiS has been in power for couple of years.

Methodology

The sample covered all the main evening editions of *Wiadomości*, the main newscast of the public TV station TVP1, broadcast between May 1st and September 30th 2018. We selected a cluster of data that exceeds the period of study in printed press presented in other chapters in order to capture a phenomenon that developed in 2018. For the purpose of the study, we used the same codebook that was used for a content analysis of printed press (see chapter 1).

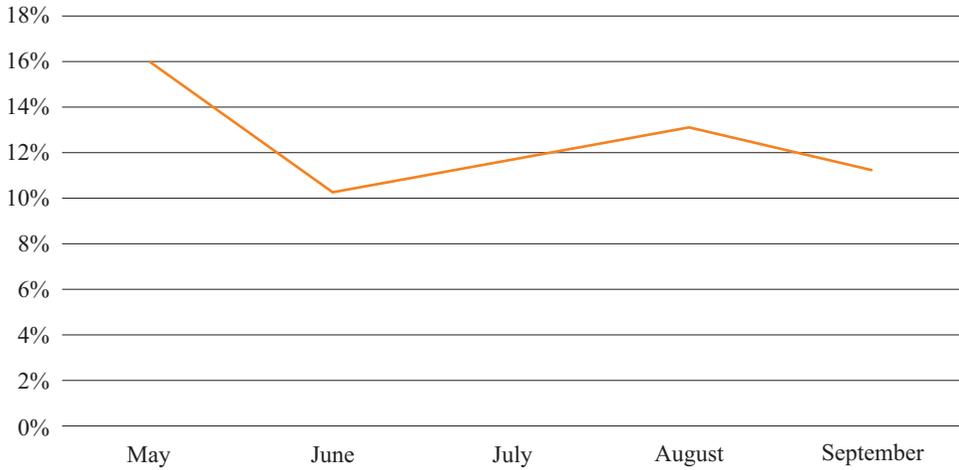
In total, 153 editions, including 1,683 news items, were recorded and analysed.¹ All of the items under study were accompanied by a static lower third containing the news title, a newspaper headline counterpart, as described previously. In the analysis, we also took into consideration the anchor's presentation of the story, in order to provide relevant context. The research was conducted using the Content Analysis System for Television (CAST – see chapter 1).

Findings

Quantitative analysis of the *Wiadomości* (TVP1) content revealed that 212 out of 1,683 (almost 13%) of the news items included at least one element of populist discourse. The percentage of items containing any indicator of populist discourse did not change significantly across the study period, although one may notice some fluctuations, e.g. from 16% in May 2018 to 11% in June 2018.

¹ The size of the sample should be large enough to prevent uneven distribution of analysed units (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 116–117).

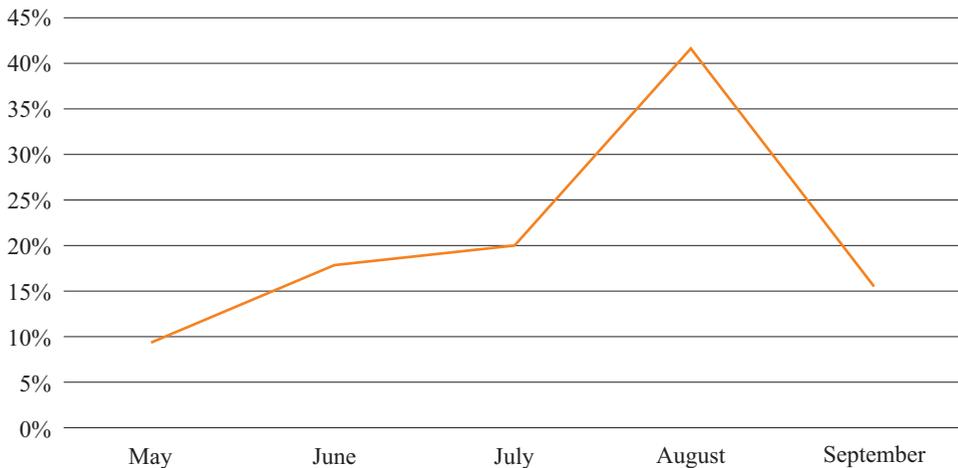
Graph 5.1. Tickers including at least one element of populist discourse (%), N=212



Source: Own elaboration.

More significant differences can be observed with regards to specific elements of the communication discourse. For example, with the rise of intensity of the Supreme Court crisis, *Wiadomości* (TVP1) increased its focus on the judges (see Graph 5.2). In August 2018, the Polish Supreme Court appealed to the European Court of Justice with a prejudicial question, referring to the law adopted by the Parliament (reduction of the retirement age for Supreme Court Judges). This resulted in unfavourable reactions from government members, the President's representative, and the acting President of the Constitutional Tribunal.

Graph 5.2. Percentage of tickers referring to 'judicial elites'. Number of occurrences May – 4 (n=42), June – 5 (n=28), July – 7 (n=35), August – 15 (n=36), September – 5 (n=32)



Source: Own elaboration.

The constitutional crisis in Poland began in October 2015, when the Platforma Obywatelska party (Civic Platform, hereafter PO) appointed five Constitutional Tribunal judges. The party was predicted to lose in the upcoming elections, so the replacement was unconstitutional according to PiS, the winner of the parliamentary election. In December 2015, parliament introduced a new law that changed the majority vote (2/3) and set the mandatory participation as at least 13 of 15 judges. These changes caused anti-government protests and were criticized by the European Commission who considered them as breaking the rule of law. New judges were elected, so they could forestall those that were elected previously. They were sworn into office at night, which only showed the importance of this to the ruling party (Szuleka, Wolny, and Szwed, 2016, pp. 6–10).

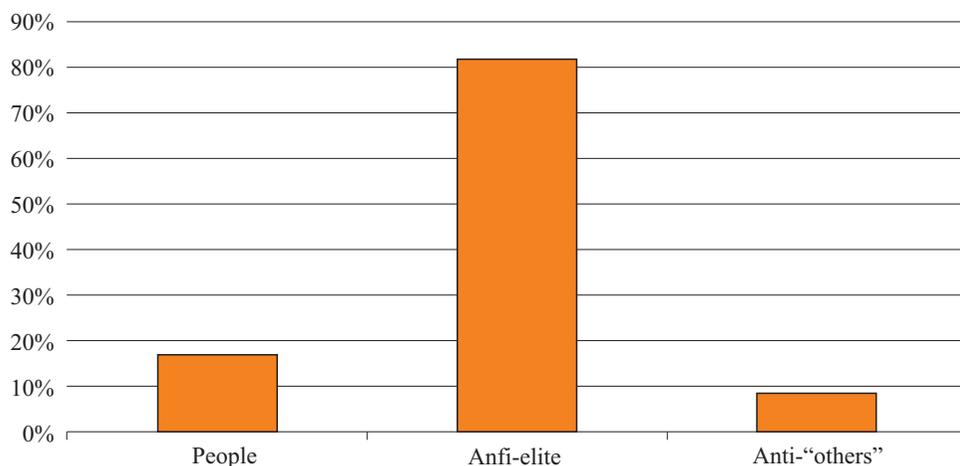
The next institution to be reorganized was the Supreme Court. In July 2018, the new law forced 27 of 72 judges to retire (including the First President of the Supreme Court, prof. Małgorzata Gersdorf). The retirement age was lowered from 70 to 65, which is reminiscent of the Hungarian Judicial reform introduced by Victor Orban. These steps also provoked domestic and international reaction. Not only the opposition parties, the Supreme Court, and the National Council of the Judiciary, but also the European Commission recognized that these changes were unconstitutional. In December 2018, a newer law was introduced, reinstating the judges that had been forced to retire.

The Elite

Findings revealed that references to ‘the elite’ were the most frequent (174 occurrences, 82%) (see Graph 5.3). Reference to ‘the people’, constituting *empty populism*, as suggested by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave (2007), were represented to a lesser extent (36 occurrences, 17%). ‘The others’ category was only marginally present (18 occurrences, 8%). This seems to support the thesis, formulated by many commentators, that TVP’s main concern is fighting political opposition of the PiS government (Oseka, 2018; Jędrzejewski, 2019).

Looking deeper into the types of elites presented by *Wiadomości*, one can see a predominant presence of particular parties, judicial elites, individual politicians, and international institutions (they appeared in 87% tickers, combined). As seen in Graph 5.3, the most heavily referenced category of ‘the elite’ is a ‘particular party/coalition’ (38%). In fact, all of these tickers targeted political opposition of PiS. Coincidentally, all explicit references to the term ‘opposition’ also constituted 38% of the tickers belonging to this category. At the same time, almost one quarter of tickers referring to ‘the elite’ explicitly targeted PO (23%) and 6% – Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish People’s Party, hereafter PSL), while 2% referred to Nowoczesna (Modern Party). The remaining 31% of the tickers in this category didn’t mention any entities directly but, with the accompanying anchor’s introduction, left no doubt who the target was: e.g. “Stinking politics of the local government” (29.05.2018), “Slanders and lies” (15.05.2018), “Forgotten by the state” (07.07.2018).

It worth presenting some examples of tickers expressing the anti-elitist attitude: “PO’s policy is dictated by Berlin” (25.09.2018), “PSL’s political gain thanks

Graph 5.3. Types of indicators of populist discourse in the tickers (%), N=212

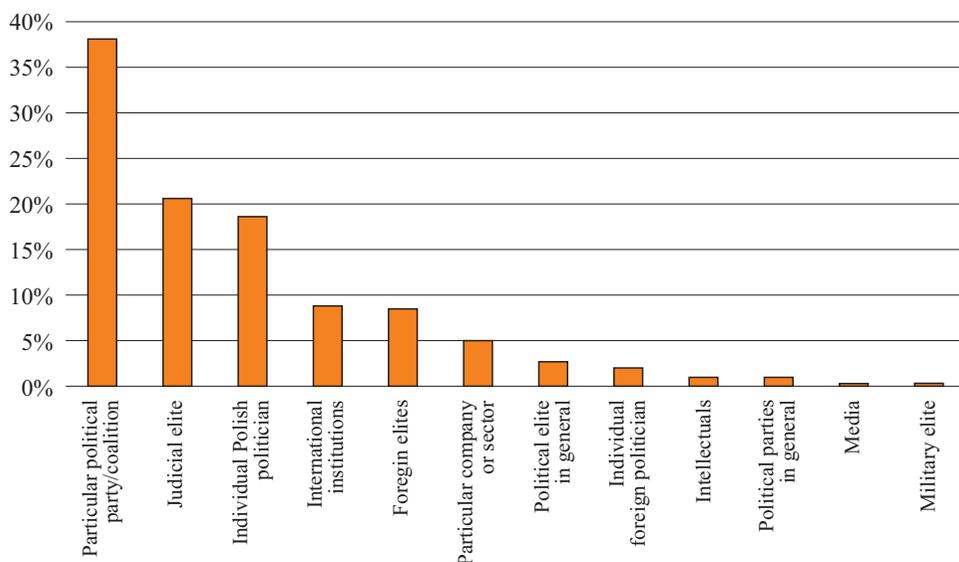
Source: Own elaboration.

to the farmers’ problems” (21.09.2018), “Opposition wants a political revolution” (02.07.2018), “False insinuations of the opposition” (30.07.2018), “Common front: judges, opposition, Brussels” (28.06.2018), “Civic Platform against large investments” (02.06.2018), “Who doesn’t like the program of affordable housing?” (26.09.2018), “The opposition hopes to profit from the difficult situation of farmers” (06.09.2018), “The Civic Platform is against freedom and democracy” (13.09.2018), “The Civic Platform longs for censorship” (12.09.2018), “The Civic Platform and the judges defend relics of the PRL” (29.05.2018), “Troublemakers from the total opposition” (23.05.2018, 22.05.2018), “Opposition militia disturbs talks with Poles” (21.05.2018), “The opposition politicians want to gag journalists” (15.05.2018), “The opposition is plunged into a political crisis” (11.05.2018), “Opposition’s campaign of fails and mistakes” (09.05.2018), “Contemporary face of Targowica” (03.05.2018),² “Opposition is frustrated and aggressive” (21.07.2018), “Helplessness and aggression of the opposition” (23.07.2018), “Who allowed plunder during the rule of the PO-PSL coalition?” (24.07.2018).

The aforementioned examples show that *Wiadomości* TVP1’s tickers played other roles beyond just announcing the news, introducing the subject, or complementing the program’s narration. In fact, they offered a particular framing of ‘the elite’: they either blamed certain political elites – i.e. political opposition to PiS – or praised the ruling political party (PiS). In order to distinguish between political actors that are criticized and those that are supported, sometimes the tickers form a specific two-line sequence. For example, the ticker “Unfulfilled promises of Civic Platform” (08.09.2018) preceded the ticker “The Law and Justice’s offer for the local governments.” By contrasting two political parties in one ticker, *Wiadomości* was clearly aiming to discredit the opposition while favourably framing PiS.

² Targowica is a synonym for national treason in Poland. It was a confederation established by magnates in the XVIII century, that opposed the Constitution of 3 May. Magnates were backed by Russia. The term carries a strong, negative connotation.

Graph 5.4. Types of ‘the elite’ (%) N=174



Source: Own elaboration.

Some tickers targeted more than one type of elite. For example, the ticker “PO politician bets on Berlin, instead of Warsaw” (01.06.2018) includes direct critique of an oppositional politician (namely, Rafał Trzaskowski – a PO candidate for mayor of Warsaw at that time) and of Germany, a country that is often portrayed in PiS discourse as a threat and enemy (Przyłęcki, 2012, pp. 119, 214–215). The same strategy can be found in a following ticker regarding Małgorzata Gersdorf, the President of the Supreme Court: “Małgorzata Gersdorf complains to Germans” (21.07.2018).

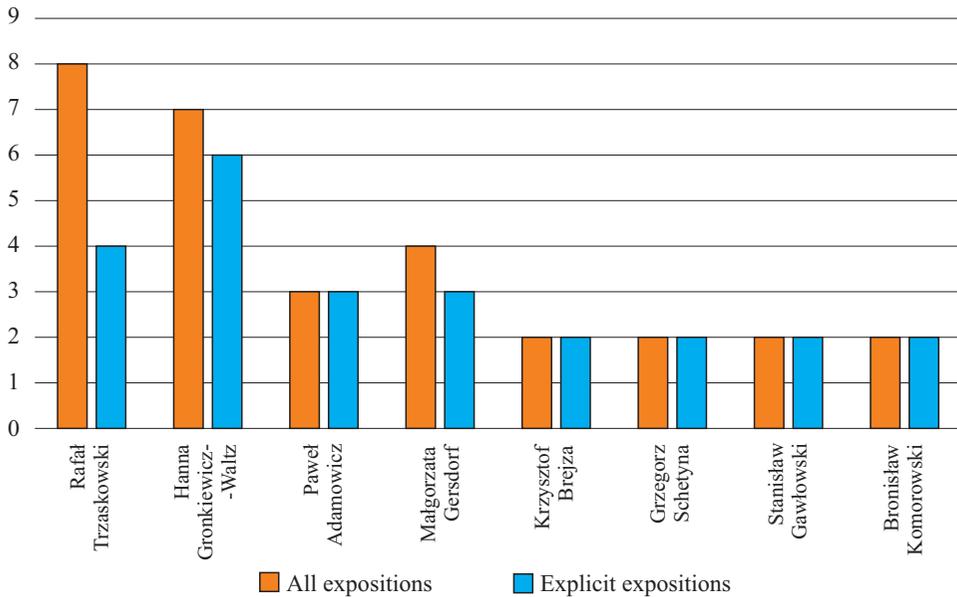
Graph 5.5 shows ‘the elites’ most often explicitly targeted by name in *Wiadomości* (TVP1). They either belong to the political opposition (such as Bronisław Komorowski – a former President of Poland, or Grzegorz Schetyna – a leader of PO), or are other types of officials criticizing PiS or disagreeing with the PiS government. For example, some tickers discredited leaders of opposition parties: “BREJZO-LAND³ under investigation” (17.05.2018), “Poles do not trust Grzegorz Schetyna” (24.09.2018), “Manual control by Grzegorz Schetyna” (22.09.2018), “Komorowski’s mutiny” (15.07.2018). One example of the latter category of targeted elites is the aforementioned prof. Małgorzata Gersdorf, the President of the Supreme Court, who opposed the government’s attempt to alter the composition of the Polish Supreme Court by lowering judges’ retirement age. The ticker reads: “Prof. Gersdorf calls for help from Brussels” (16.08.2018).

One can also find critical attitudes towards local politicians in the tickers (due to the local elections set for October 21st, 2018). The most frequently mentioned characters were the city mayors (Warsaw – Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Gdańsk – Paweł

³ This refers to Krzysztof Brejza, a Civic Platform MP who is known for uncovering PiS misdeeds. His father is the mayor of Inowrocław. Naming this city Brejzo-land, *Wiadomości* (TVP1) suggests he is above the law there.

Adamowicz), or candidates for this office (Warsaw – Rafał Trzaskowski): “Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz did not do anything” (20.09.2018),” “PO politician [Rafał Trzaskowski] chooses Berlin over Warsaw” (01.06.2018), “Gronkiewicz-Waltz blocked compensations” (29.06.2018), “Gronkiewicz-Waltz puts herself above the law” (12.07.2018), “Gdańsk in times of Adamowicz – developers’ republic” (04.09.2018), “Adamowicz does not want Polish soldiers,” or “Gdańsk connivances of president Adamowicz” (11.05.2018).

Graph 5.5. Elite by names mentioned in the news tickers



Source: Own elaboration.

It is worth mentioning that the content and style of tickers devoted to Paweł Adamowicz (and other oppositional politicians) have been heavily discussed after the attack on Adamowicz on January 13th, 2019. The mayor of Gdańsk was stabbed by a recently released inmate during the final event of The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity and died in the hospital the following day. The event ignited a discussion about standards of political debate in Poland and beyond (ft, 2019). Certain voices attributed the violent attack to the “atmosphere of hatred” created by TVP1 and others (zma, 2019).

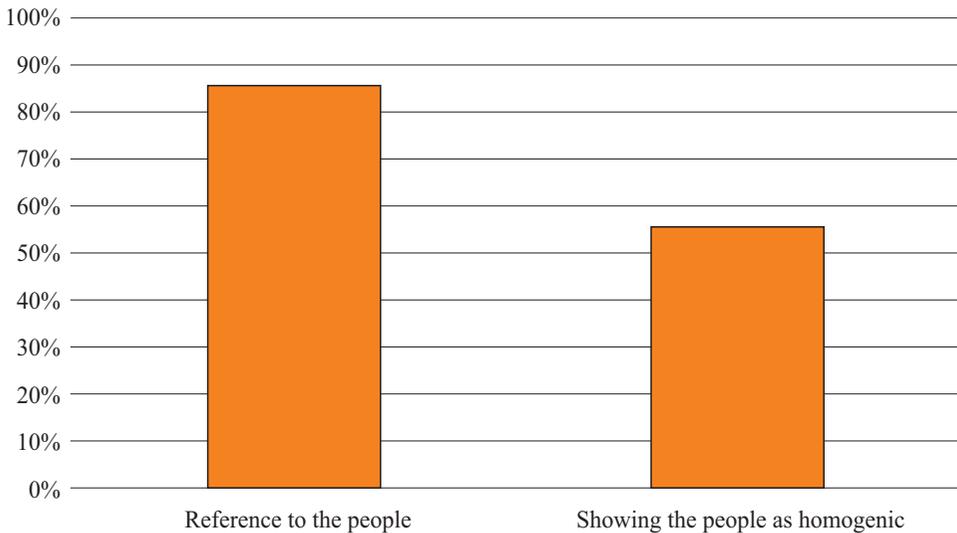
As was mentioned above, international institutions and other foreign elites were also targeted in the tickers. Each of these categories appeared in 9% of anti-elitist tickers. In particular, the tickers referred to the EU, Russian Federation, and Germany. These findings support previous observations of the significant attention paid by *Wiadomości* TVP1 to these three foreign entities (Piechocki and Wyszyński, 2018; Piechocki and Wyszyński, forthcoming), as well as the TV station’s critical attitude toward them. Most of the tickers referring to the EU included indicators of Euroscepticism, such as denying the EU institutions the right to interfere in the internal affairs of Poland (for example – judicial reform or the rule of law).

Previous studies (Piechocki and Wyszynski, 2018; Piechocki and Wyszynski, 2019) have also shown that the Russian Federation and Germany have been referenced in a predominantly negative way on TVP1 since 2015. Our study of the tickers revealed that negative connotations based on historical relations between Poland and its neighbours have been used either to directly criticize these two foreign countries or to discredit politicians by making a connection between them and Poland's 'long-time enemies'. In other words, Russia and Germany served as a reference point to sustain a fear of losing independence among Poles, and to create a negative image of the political opposition at the same time.

The People

As mentioned above, the category of 'the people' was less frequently mentioned in the tickers (17%) than 'the elite'. Hence, following J. Jagers and S. Walgrave's (2007) concept, we should clarify that many of the examples mentioned in the previous subsection illustrated rather a critique of political opponents than clear cases of anti-elitist discourse (see chapter 2).

Graph 5.6. References to 'the people' (%), N=36



Source: Own elaboration.

References to 'the people' in the tickers of *Wiadomości TVP1* usually accompanied a description of the government's performance. In most cases, they expressed the nation's support for the government's decisions and activities. For example: "Poles are opting for Law and Justice" (12.05.2018, 10.06.2018, 12.08.2018, 21.08.2018, 23.09.2018), "Poles choose Law and Justice" (27.09.2018), "Poles are awaiting the judicial reform" (23.09.2018), "Poles are definitely in favour of judicial reform" (11.08.2018), "Poles appreciate government social programs" (06.08.2018), "Poles trust the leaders of the

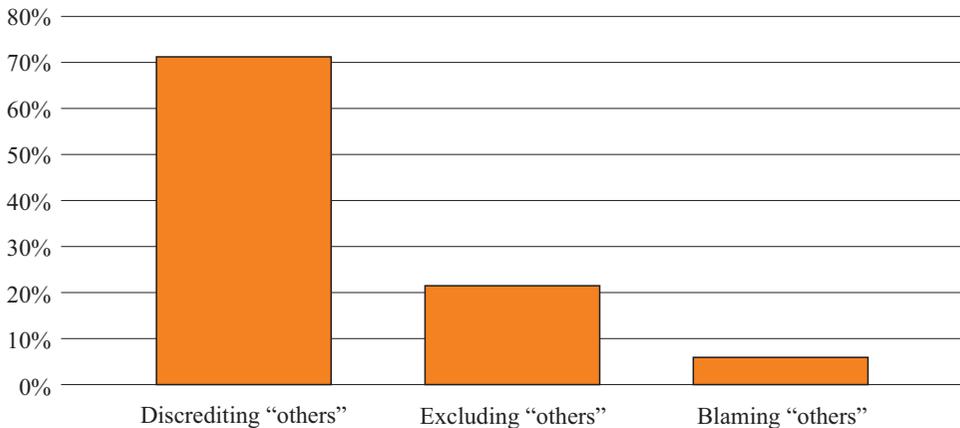
United Right” (23.06.2018), “Poles benefit from economic growth” (30.05.2018), “Poles in favour of the end of parliamentary protest” (18.05.2018), “Poles value the government for fighting with the pathologies of politics” (12.05.2018). The general implication being that *Wiadomości* builds a dichotomy between PiS that is with ‘the people’, and its opponents, who are against ‘the people’.

According to M. Głowiński (1993, pp. 358–359), the enemy may have many names. This allows for a large margin of freedom in applying this category, that can be observed in varied situations in references to unspecified persons or groups that are critical of current government or state institutions, thus harming Poland: e.g. “Who wants to take away the EU funds from Poland?” (06.05.2018), “Who wants to take away the black gold⁴ from Poles?” (08.07.2018), “Who doesn’t like the success of TVP?” (17.06.2018).

The Others/Out-groups

The category of ‘the others’ was present in 8% of the tickers under study. In these quite rare cases, two main categories were mentioned: immigrants and Germans. The tickers portrayed immigrants as a political and cultural threat, for example: “Migration wave creates political upheaval” (12.05.2018), “Islamization of Europe” (19.05.2018). Germany, on the other hand, was presented as either an enemy or unreliable country. For example, while covering a story concerning a rail accident in Germany (two people were killed and 14 injured), *Wiadomości* TVP1 focused on the alleged low quality of German railways, emphasizing “German unreliability” (08.05.2018).

Graph 5.7. Tickers referring to ‘the others’ (%), N=18



Source: Own elaboration.

The aforementioned strategy of constructing a multidimensional narrative that connects various opponents manifested itself, yet again, in the ticker “Brussels against Po-

⁴ Polish term for coal.

land, under German dictate” (26.09.2018). This referred to the EU immigration policy, contested by the Polish Government, thus presenting Brussels as being ‘against Poland’. And, to add insult to injury, the policy was supported by Germany. In one ticker, there are two types of elites and a type of ‘the others’ being targeted.

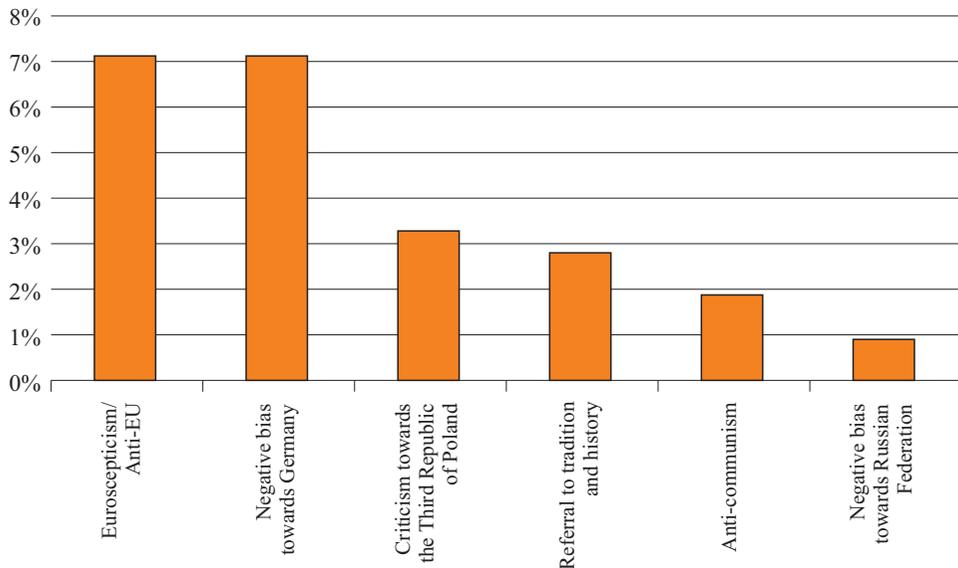
Most (72%) of the ‘anti-others’ category tickers used the discrediting strategy. There were only a few examples of tickers suggesting exclusion of ‘the others’, all of them referring to immigrants, as in these examples: “Illegal immigration threatens Europe” (19.06.2018) or “Italy doesn’t want immigrants” (14.07.2018). There was only one instance where Muslims were blamed – for trying to forcefully introduce Islam lessons at school “Islam at school without parents’ consent” (10.08.2018). Due to the small number of ‘anti-others’ tickers, it is not possible to draw any further conclusions.

Specifically Polish Indicators of Populist Discourse

The specific Polish indicators of populist discourse, as suggested by P. Przyłęcki (2012, pp. 119–122) and described in chapter 1 of this book, were quite rarely used in the tickers of *Wiadomości TVP1* (see Graph 5.8). Still, 7% of items included some direct anti-EU statement and 7% expressed a negative attitude towards Germany. This seems to confirm the findings of P. Przyłęcki, who recognized these elements in PiS discourse (2012, pp. 209–220).

At the same time, anti-communism or critique of the post-communist period (including the political transformation period and two decades afterwards) were hardly ever mentioned in the tickers.

Graph 5.8. Polish-specific indicators of populism (%), N=212



Source: Own elaboration. The indicators introduced by P. Przyłęcki (2012).

Conclusions

The findings of our study revealed a presence of populist discourse in tickers of *Wiadomości* (TVP1): almost 13% of the analysed news included at least one element of populist discourse. The majority of these referred to ‘the elite’ (174 occurrences, 82%). Reference to ‘the people’ were present in 17% and ‘the others’ were present in 8% of the analysed news. When looking deeper into ‘the elite’ category, one can see that the tickers were mostly aimed at the political opposition of the PiS government. It shows that TVP’s narration was strictly aligned with the government’s rhetoric (international institutions and other foreign elites were also targeted in the tickers – each of them appeared in 9% of ‘anti-elitist’ tickers).

Wiadomości’s reporting was clearly biased, with no visible attempts to conceal it. One may even say that the tickers served as a weapon in political fighting, extremely distant from the impartial journalism that is expected from a public broadcaster. References to ‘the people’ present in the tickers usually referred to the government’s decisions and actions – they mostly alleged nationwide support for PiS’ agenda. The category of ‘the others’ mostly included references to immigrants (they were presented as a threat to the European/Polish identity and culture) and Germans, who played the role of enemy or negative point of reference.

Such tickers represent the rhetoric of TVP, in supporting the government (often implying ‘the people’’s support) or discrediting political forces (not necessarily domestic) that Law & Justice disapprove of. As *Wiadomości* is the flagship of news programs, this may suggest that such biased presentation of news will manifest in TVP in general, and, less likely, in other TV stations in Poland, but further research is required.

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