

Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts

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ISSUE EDITORS: KATARZYNA MOLEK-KOZAKOWSKA, ECATERINA ILIS

PIOTR CAP

UNIVERSITY OF ŁÓDŹ, POLAND

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7685-4112>

strus_pl@yahoo.com

Constructing alternative futures of Poland: (de)legitimizing conflict, populist stance and liberal politics in leadership and campaign discourse

Konstrukcja alternatywnych wizji Polski: (de)legitymizacja konfliktu, populizmu i polityki liberalnej w dyskursie przywódczym i kampanii wyborczych

Abstract

Building on a critical study in Cap (2024), the present paper broadens the framework of critical cognitive discourse research with tools drawn from rhetorical theory to explore patterns of conflict-charged communication and legitimization discourse used by Polish political parties to claim and enact state leadership. The first part studies the discourse of Law and Justice, a far-right party ruling Poland in the years 2015-2023. It examines its strategies of leadership legitimization involving ideological polarization, strategic generation of internal and external conflict, threat construction and crisis management. The second part analyzes the more moderate and cooperation oriented discourse strategies implemented by three opposition parties in the lead-up to the October 2023 elections, in which the party lost power. The aim of the paper is to apply the broadened discursive-rhetorical apparatus to compare and contrast the two kinds of discourse to speculate about the longevity of an essentially conflict-charged rhetoric. It is argued that radical populist discourse can be an extremely powerful tool, able to grant long-term political leadership. However, in a yet longer perspective, such a discourse runs a considerable risk of “wearing out” and becoming vulnerable to more forward-looking and pragmatic leadership rhetoric.

Wychodząc od krytycznej analizy i wniosków zawartych w pracy (Cap 2024), artykuł poszerza aparat krytyczno-kognitywnych badań nad dyskursem o narzędzia teorii retoryki, na rzecz zintegrowanego, kompleksowego studium dyskursu legitymizacji przywództwa czołowych polskich partii politycznych w latach 2015-2023. Pierwsza część bierze pod lupę konserwatywno-prawicowy dyskurs partii rządowej PiS, analizując takie zjawiska jak polaryzacja ideologiczna, dyskursywny populizm, strategia tworzenia konfliktu oraz zarządzanie wywołanym kryzysem. Druga część tekstu bada liberalno-lewicowy dyskurs trzech partii opozycyjnych w zwycięskiej kampanii parlamentarnej 2023. Artykuł porównuje oba typy dyskursów, stawiając tezy dotyczące zakresu efektywności nacechowanego ideologią konfliktu dyskursu populistycznego. Autor dowodzi, że ultraradykalny dyskurs populistyczny oparty o strategię tworzenia zagrożenia i podziałów społecznych jest niezwykle efektywnym i silnym narzędziem politycznym, zdolnym trwale wspierać przywództwo w długim okresie czasu. Jednak w jeszcze dalszej perspektywie, dyskurs ten podlega wielu nieuchronnym ograniczeniom, wynikającym z braku elastyczności w adresowaniu zarówno przeszłych, jak i przyszłych zdarzeń i zjawisk historyczno-politycznych.

Key words

conflict discourse, political legitimization discourse, populist rhetoric, polarization, discursive-rhetorical analysis
dyskurs konfliktu, dyskurs legitymizacji politycznej, retoryka populizmu, polaryzacja, Polska, analiza dyskursywno-retoryczna

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PIOTR CAP

UNIVERSITY OF ŁÓDŹ, POLAND

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7685-4112>

strus_pl@yahoo.com

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1. Introduction

This article deals with the past 9 years of Polish state politics, studying, from a discursive and rhetorical perspective, how conflict and conflict-based rhetoric were employed in the service of strong political leadership and policy legitimization, and how these conflict-charged policies and their communicative patterns were later neutralized, leading to the change in power in the country that took place in the fall of 2023. We begin with a brief overview of the context (see Cap 2024 for details). The October 2015 parliamentary elections brought a victory of the far-right Law and Justice (L&J) party, triggering a number of radical policy changes, such as the growth of central planning, an encroachment upon the freedom and independence of the judiciary, introduction of state control over the public media, and the emergence of an explicitly Eurosceptic mindset in international relations (Cap 2022; 2024). To communicate their policies to the people, L&J leaders developed their own kind of populist rhetoric, merging the well-known discourse strategies (i.e. anti-elitism, ideological polarization, delegitimization of political opponents) (Norris and Inglehart 2018) with some new and typically more coercive ploys. The latter involved the construction of L&J home and international adversaries as enemies rather than rivals and thus the conceptualization of the arising conflict as the source of a gathering threat. The most distinctive feature of these strategies was their ostentatious character: unlike in Hungary, Italy, Romania, and other countries where political crises were exploited in the 2010s by certain groups and parties to further random political goals (Schmölz 2019), L&J made conflict and crisis, intentionally, an integral part of their political agenda and policymaking. I provide a comprehensive account of this unique political and discursive mechanism in Cap (2022; 2024).

The L&J government enjoyed broad popular support until mid-2022, successfully defending its position during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Cap 2024

for details). However, the fall of 2022 saw the first indications of decline in the popularity of Jarosław Kaczyński's¹ party and the government. The fact that the decline began just a few months after Russia's invasion on Ukraine in February 2022 was found by many quite surprising and difficult to explain (Cap 2024). Indeed, it is generally believed (e.g., Ansell, Boin, and Hart 2014) that in times of crisis and amidst looming geopolitical, military or other threats, people tend to follow their current leaders, rather than looking for political alternatives. This tendency is exploited in such times by the leaders themselves, in their enactment of "collective intentionality," a rhetorical schema promoting the "we-thinking" and "we-reasoning" (e.g., Tuomela 2013). Still, between September 2022 and May 2023 the L&J party suffered a ten percent drop in the polls, followed by the actual loss of power in the October 2023 elections. The winners, a self-proclaimed "coalition for democracy"² comprising the Civic Platform (CP), Third Way (TW), and The Left (L) parties, achieved a combined parliamentary vote of fifty-four percent, which allowed them to form a coalition government led by Donald Tusk, Poland's former Prime Minister and the president of the European Council from 2014 to 2019 (see Cap 2024 for details).

L&J's loss of power tends to be attributed to a mix of economic and socio-political reasons (see Gardulska 2024³ for an overview of opinions), such as the record-high inflation rate (highest in the EU in 2022), growing tax burdens, irresponsible investment policy, inefficient health service, and, on the European front, the government's inability to normalize the strained relations with EU institutions at Brussels. I believe this socio-political explanation is however incomplete without the consideration of the communicative underpinnings of the L&J rule, including their long-term weaknesses and how the latter became the target of the opposition in the 2023 campaign. As has been noted, L&J party leaders understood very well the power of discourse and political communication in earning and maintaining people's support for their policies. Given the strength and consistency of L&J's leadership discourse, one might wonder how that discourse was countered and its impact neutralized by the Civic Platform, Third Way, and The Left parties. The aim of this article is therefore to compare the key discourse and rhetorical strategies used by the L&J government in different policy domains in the years 2015-2023, against the main strategies implemented by the three opposition parties in the lead-up to the 2023 elections. This means looking for new effective rhetorical ploys developed by the CP, TW and L leaders, as well as identifying weaknesses emerging over time in L&J's discourse that became the main targets in the campaign.

1. The Chairman of Law and Justice, since 2003.

2. An informal name, carrying no institutional meaning in the election campaign.

3. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,30598401,wybory-wolne-ale-nieuczciwe-wnioski-z-obywatelskiej-kontroli.html>

Content-wise, the present article is a follow-up on an earlier study (Cap 2024), which looks at the above issues from a critical cognitive perspective. The current discussion re-approaches the data and several of the analyses in Cap (2024) within an enriched framework, combining the original critical cognitive paradigm with insights from rhetorical and argumentation studies. This combination not only acknowledges the natural relation between discourse and rhetorical analysis (often considered two sides of the same coin; Johnstone and Eisenhart 2008), but also does justice to the richness and variety of the data, which—as the former study has shown—encourages adoption of a broader, eclectic approach. The structure of the article is as follows. Section 2 describes the data, theoretical frameworks, and the interdisciplinary methodology applied in the study, focusing on the processes of ideological polarization, coercion⁴, and threat construction, their conceptual representation in discourse space and their manifestation (i.e., lexicalizations, rhetorical and argumentative schemas) in actual language and text. Section 3 describes the principal strategies of L&J’s leadership, agency, and policy legitimization rhetoric, outlining their functions across different (geo)political, social, and discourse domains. Section 4 investigates the most salient features of the opposition’s 2023 election discourse, focusing on the strategies designed to counter and delegitimize L&J’s policies and neutralize their leadership rhetoric. The concluding section 5 sums up and assesses the main findings, postulating further interdisciplinary research in populist discourses that extend over time, running the risk of “wearing out” and becoming less and less appealing to their audiences.

2. Theoretical framework

The study in the present article is essentially qualitative and uses two distinct text corpora including speeches, interviews, and comments made by top Polish politicians. The first corpus contains 100 texts by the most prominent party officials, such as the L&J chairman Jarosław Kaczyński and the PM Mateusz Morawiecki.⁵ The texts extend over the eight-year period of L&J’s uninterrupted rule of Poland following the 2015 elections. This corpus is addressed in Section 3 of the paper. The other corpus is a collection of rally speeches made by leaders of the opposition parties – the “coalition for democracy” – in the course of the 2023 election campaign. Containing 50 addresses, by such politicians as Donald Tusk (later to become the Prime Minister) and Szymon Hołownia (later the Sejm Speaker), it covers the period from the beginning of 2023 to the election time

4. In this article coercion is understood, following Ingram (2014), in the arguably most popular, general sense of threat- and fear- based manipulative persuasion.

5. PM between 2017 and 2023.

in October that year. I refer to this corpus in Section 4. Though not covering all public performances by members of the two political camps in the respective time frames, the texts grouped in the two corpora paint a fair picture of the conceptual, rhetorical, and pragmatolinguistic features of the main discourses on both sides of the barricade.⁶

The analysis follows up on the study in Cap (2024), which has engaged with the same corpus from the perspective of cognitive critical discourse studies (CCDS) (Chilton 2004; 2014; Hart 2010; 2014; Cap 2013; 2017; 2022; Musolff 2016). As has been documented in multiple critical studies in different discourse domains (see Hart 2018 and Cap 2022 for discussions), CCDS offers a disciplined theoretical view of the conceptual import of pragmatic and linguistic choices identified as potentially ideological. Doing so, it affords an excellent lens on the many persuasive, manipulative, and coercive properties of discourse. Most notably, it offers workable conceptual apparatus and tools to account, through a text-based analysis, for ways in which conflict and crisis are constructed discursively in the service of different goals sought by political leaders. However, as the study in Cap (2024) has shown, the CCDS approach to political discourse can still be enriched with insights from other disciplines, such as rhetorical theory and argumentation. In fact, such an alliance has already been postulated, on the grounds that critical discourse research and rhetorical analysis involve two complementary research procedures. While rhetorical studies often proceed “downward” from a pre-chosen theoretical core, critical studies tend to work “upward” from situated instances of text and talk (Simons 2003; Johnstone and Eisenhart 2008). Further connections and prospects are pointed out by Tracy (2001), who observes that as the focus of rhetoric widens from the planned to the spontaneous and from the public to the private, rhetoricians acknowledge the need for new methods. At the same time, discourse analysts can readily draw on the rhetorical categories of agency, style (e.g., metaphor), argument, etc., accounting for their pragmatic, constitutive, knowledge-making force in text-based analysis (Johnstone and Eisenhart 2008).⁷

In response to these opportunities and research prospects, the present paper uses analytical concepts and methods proposed by the three popular models in the modern CCDS—Discourse Space Theory (Chilton 2004; 2010; 2011; 2014), Political Metaphor (Musolff 2016, 2021), and Proximization Theory (Cap 2013; 2017; 2022) – complemented by relevant rhetorical categories, such as speaker’s agency, *topoi*, invention and style, argumentation, and the ethos of leadership

6. For space reasons, the analysis in sections (3-4) includes a limited number of examples from the two corpora. However, the examples selected are highly representative of the discursive, pragmatic and rhetorical strategies discussed. Interested readers are referred for more text examples to a book publication by the author (Cap 2022).

7. A great example of such an interdisciplinary project is Cordova’s (2004) rhetorical-discursive study of a Puerto Rican populist campaign of the mid-twentieth century.

(Hoff-Clausen 2018). The input of DST is still primary; it involves the core assumption that in performing any discourse people open up a particular kind of mental space in which the “world” (social, political, etc.) described in the discourse is conceptually represented. In political communication, this space holds the leader and his ideological and political supporters and allies (a symbolic “US”), as well as the adversary or antagonist (a symbolic “THEM”), “located” at a relative distance from the US camp. The location of the US and THEM camps, and the distance that extends between them, are symbolically represented through discourse—the specific lexico-grammatical choices made by the speaker (see Cap 2024 for details). Drawing on this default arrangement, Proximization Theory works mostly with the concept of distance, showing that strategically enforced changes in the construal of distance along the close-remote axis, become instrumental in threat and fear generation. In their performance of proximization, political speakers use lexical and textual means to present the THEM entities (physically distant social groups, events, states of affairs, and “distant,” i.e., adversarial, ideologies) as getting increasingly closer and eventually threatening to the entities located in the US camp. As a forced construal operation, proximization demonstrates substantial coercive powers that can be applied in the service of central leadership goals, such as legitimization of policies proposed to the people to protect them against the impending threat (this mechanism will be analyzed in detail in Section 3 devoted to the L&J leadership discourse).

The input of the Political Metaphor model is arguably the most explicit acknowledgement of the discursive-rhetorical interface underlying the study in the present paper. It consists in the approach to political discourse and political rhetoric from the CMT⁸ perspective of conceptual scenarios, enriched with the focus upon intentionality and agency of the speaker. Conceptual scenarios are understood as conventionalized and largely automatic patterns of understanding based upon embodied experience (Musolff 2016; 2021). As a rhetorical device, they endorse apparently self-evident default conclusions and further some “natural” and “obvious” behaviors, actions, or solutions. The ability to force simplistic patterns of reasoning with regard to different political issues provides political master scenarios (such as PROBLEM IS ENEMY or POLITICAL CONFLICT IS WAR) with a great propagandistic value. This value is further enhanced by the discursive environment in which many conceptual scenarios tend to function, such as specific narrative forms and discourse structures expressing the so-called “alternative futures” (Dunmire 2005; 2011). I present cases of this interplay in section 4.1. Being rhetorically attractive, conceptual scenarios make a direct emotional appeal and are thus readily shareable (Ridolfo and De Voss 2009; Oddo 2018),

8. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987; etc.).

that is easily remembered and recirculated. As a result, they delegate some of the speaker's rhetorical agency to members of the audience (Campbell 2005; Hoff-Clausen 2018), thus further consolidating the US camp. These characteristics matter particularly much in public discourse domains such as campaign discourse (see Section 4). Overall, the interest of Political Metaphor in the inherent pragmatic force and a broad rhetorical appeal of conceptual scenarios in political discourse complements the DST and Proximity frameworks, as well as the related rhetorical categories, in their joint focus on conflict, discursive coercion, and legitimization of political leadership.

3. Conflict management in the L&J discourse

The leadership rhetoric of Law and Justice in the years 2015-2023 represents an exceptional instance of contemporary European far-right discourse, involving an unprecedented variety of strategies of socio-ideological polarization, conflict construction, threat generation, and crisis management (Cap 2022). It does not simply respond to objectively occurring crisis situations; it provokes these situations itself, to pave the way for proposals of “solution policies” meant to enact and strengthen the Party leadership. Following the study in Cap (2024), the analysis below focuses first on the home issues—ideological conflict, historical divisions, “decommunization”, economic inequalities, social exclusion—emerging in national settings such as parliamentary sessions and media interviews concerning the internal situation of Poland. Then, in Section 3.2, we turn our attention to the L&J discourse of foreign affairs, including its stance toward the EU.

3.1. The “true patriots” against “post-communist elites” and “the worst sort of Poles”

The L&J home-front discourse in 2015-2023 targets, first of all, the party's parliamentary opponents, focusing upon ideological differences, and making use of pragmatic distancing strategies to place the opposition at the remotest end of the US/THEM spectrum. As demonstrated in detail in Cap (2024), it conflates the liberal majority of the opposition with post-communist groups and ex-leaders of the country (the “post-communist elites”), by presenting L&J's opponents as “keepers of the Round Table order.”⁹ L&J construes the opposition as unfaithful to “core values” and “vital interests” of the Polish people, thus forcing an othering arrangement whereby the opposition is perceived as a symbolic THEM entity encroaching on the well-being of the US camp (the “real Poles”). This conceptual

9. The “Round Table order” [“układ Okrągłego Stołu”] refers to the political result of negotiations that took place in Poland between the ruling communist party and the opposition in February-April 1989. The talks were a key element in the collapse of the communist regime and a smooth transition to democracy. L&J has always been very critical of the talks, calling them “a disgraceful deal” with communists.

arrangement involves, in discursive terms, a spectrum of negative images, such as selling Polish property to foreign investors by the former liberal government, inability to handle unemployment and economic migration from Poland, or promoting multiculturalism at the expense of the Polish cultural and religious heritage. In rhetorical terms, it can be described as a dyadic framework that plays host to the interplay of positive and negative “ethotic argumentation” – the self- and other-oriented argumentation schemas derived from the core concept of *ethos* (Koszowy et al. 2022). The positive ethotic argument involves the moral superiority of the L&J camp and their “patriotic mindset” over the opposition camp, dictating continuing loyalty to the former. The negative ethotic argument strengthens that imperative in its amassment of direct ad hominem claims associating the opponents with negatively charged ideologies and entities (“communism,” “communist regimes”) detracting from the opponents’ veracity. As a rule, L&J’s argument frames their parliamentary opposition – including the members of the former CP cabinet and the party officials—as direct heirs and beneficiaries of the “disgraceful” Round Table compromise:

- (1) If you look at the past 8 years, and in fact the past 27 years we had to deal with the overwhelming predominance of one group. In the area of ownership, media, and also in the public life for the vast majority of the time, in these 27 years. The establishment in this country said that everything was OK. But everything was not OK. Conditions to develop the rule of law arose only today, as we are able to rebuild it, or actually create it, because in Poland for a very long time there was no right balance. The elites of the old communist regime switched into the new system, maintaining their advantage, and exchanging power for property. The prevalence of that group continues to be felt in the realm of the mass media, in the economy, and in various state institutions like the judiciary, which was so favorable to the previous government. And this is what we want to fix, to change, step by step. We must try to consolidate Polish society at large along the lines of positive Polish traditions and values, to oppose what I call the “pedagogy of shame,” the tendency that has dominated Poland over the past 8 years. We need new policy in terms of education, in terms of culture. This is not a revolution but reform. But, by the very nature of change, it will result in conflict. (Jarosław Kaczyński, parliamentary speech, January 21, 2016)

I argue in Cap (2024) that texts such as Kaczyński’s address in (1) realize a pattern of conceptual conflation, whereby the political camp of the Civic Platform is linked to “the old communist regime” through their participation in the Round Table arrangements (even if the Round Table as such is not mentioned in the majority of texts). This is a common rhetorical feature that typifies L&J’s discourse and its stance on the opposition in the entire 2015-2023 period. The conflation involves seeing both “power” and “property” as valuable commodities that can be traded for one another. As a result, the conceptualization of Civic Platform as a liberal party supporting market economy fits the category of “communist elites,” construing one complex image of political-economic establishment wielding their power and influence over decades, now in capitalist disguise. This image serves as a premise

for further negative ethotic claims, underscoring the cynicism and opportunism of the “post-communist camp.” Such an argument aims to place the opposition – CP members, their followers – at the far end of the symbolic US and THEM spectrum. The positioning of CP as an ideological THEM involves, further, the construal of the former CP rule as a period of Poland’s political dependency and cultural subordination (see Cap 2024 for details). This conceptualization lies implicit in the “pedagogy of shame,” one of the most conspicuous phrases in L&J’s discourse. Originally coined by Kaczyński in 2007, it has been used on numerous occasions to denote a kind of sociopolitical inferiority complex characterizing, on L&J’s view, the foreign policy mindset of the pre-2015 liberal government (Hayden 2020; Cap 2022). Though this paper does not aim at a quantitative analysis, it is worth noting that the phrase in question appears 128 times in the 100 texts of the L&J corpus, making a significant contribution to ideological distinctions forced by Kaczyński and his colleagues. In the text above, it legitimates the firm assertion of “conflict” in the final line—a concluding judgment emerging from what Kaczyński wishes to present as rational consideration of two opposing ideological positions that cannot be reconciled. Interestingly, in the course of time, the “pedagogy of shame” has become one of those accusation phrases which L&J politicians would repeat unreflectively and without further proof, as if relying endlessly on the ethos and credibility of their party chairman.

Following closely the October 2015 elections, Kaczyński’s parliamentary address in (1) is often considered an ideological manifesto as well as a blueprint for the kind of public discourse performed by L&J politicians during the full eight years of their rule in Poland (Tomczak-Boczko et al. 2023; Gardulska 2024; Cap 2024). In the first parliamentary term (2015-2019), the vast majority of these performances merely reiterate Kaczyński’s general points on identity, the post-communist condition, and the existing ideological divisions. Doing so, they reveal a relatively balanced focus on L&J’s political adversaries and the L&J camp. The L&J-oriented discourse resonates with essentially moral overtones, strengthening the rhetorical agency of the party. However, toward the end of the term, the argument in (1) becomes an ideological framework for threat and fear generation. This new kind of discourse involves new cognitive-pragmatic strategies, particularly proximization. As has been noted in Section 2, proximization consists in the use of linguistic and discursive means to force the conceptualization of a material or ideological adversary – THEM – as invading the “home camp” – US – shared by the political leader and his supporters. Given this capacity, proximization is instrumental in obtaining legitimization of actions that the leader proposes to prevent or stop the invasion. Since L&J’s home-front discourse targets the opposition on mostly ideological grounds, the proximization strategy used reveals a strong axiological element:

- (2) We have to redouble our efforts in the face of a threat that persists. We draw strength from the values that we hold dear: our families, our homes, our Christian faith. We must keep our eye fixed on the Poland we want to build—one that defeats our adversaries by promoting dignity, equal opportunity, and justice. We must remain alert – lest we wake up, one day, in the old Poland. (PM Mateusz Morawiecki, interview for state TV channel TVP Info, June 21, 2019)

In Morawiecki's interview, the basic framework for proximization is the opposition between values of the "home camp" represented by the L&J government and the antagonistic values associated with "the old Poland," denoting the entire post-transformation period but particularly the rule of the CP party in 2007-2015.¹⁰ Elements of this framework are indexed in the speech by different lexical markers as well as more complex pragmlinguistic configurations. While US is marked explicitly in terms of values such as "dignity," "opportunity," "justice," as well as religious and family values, THEM is defined implicitly by the implicature of contrary values marking the adversary. The key lexical item triggering this implicature is "defeat," which indirectly marks the THEM values as conceptual opposites of "dignity," "justice," and so on. Emerging from this characterization is a flashback vision of "the old Poland" as a country of injustice, social inequality, and ruthless, anti-family ideology (see Cap 2024 for details).

Drawing on this bipolar arrangement, the strategy of proximization involves construal of the antagonistic ideology as a "persisting threat," which is dormant yet able to (re)appear, hindering L&J's reforms to build "a new Poland." The size of the threat and the momentousness of the situation are communicated through different pragmlinguistic devices, particularly indefinite descriptions.¹¹ It is argued in Dunmire (2011) and Cap (2024) that indefinite descriptions enact the aura of uncertainty: they construct the future as a period that extends from the moment of speaking to an indefinite future point on the time axis. As argued in many rhetorical studies (see Johnstone and Eisenhart 2008 for an overview), this capacity should be viewed as a generic feature of virtually all epideictic-deliberative rhetoric performing coercive goals. The threat element it carries consists in the inherent vagueness of the projection—it is impossible to determine the moment when the threat *could* materialize. The result is that anxiety of the audience rises, as the absence of clear outlines of the threat means that no specific countermeasures can be prescribed (Dunmire 2005; 2011; Cap 2022; 2024). In the quoted interview, this mechanism is exploited in the closing sentence of the text. The threat is described as ominous yet unpredictable; it can happen "one day," but there is no remedy other than staying "alert."

10. From the perspective of rhetorical studies, the mechanism of the CP-(post)communist conceptual conflation could be described as a "guilt by association" schema (Koszowy et al. 2022).

11. See Cap (2022) for an account of the role of other pragma-rhetorical elements in Morawiecki's interview, such as nominalizations ("persisting threat") and presuppositions ("lest we wake up").

As documented in Cap (2024), in the second term, the conflictual stance of L&J's home-front discourse strengthens, as more and more adversarial groups are identified and targeted, often beyond the parliamentary arena or beyond the domain of state politics in general. This radicalization begins amidst momentous political events taking place around the time of the 2019 elections. On December 6, 2019, over 250,000 people demonstrate in Warsaw, protesting against a raft of changes introduced by the L&J government to the Polish judicial system, encroaching upon independence of judges and prosecutors. Accusing the government of undermining the rule of law and flouting the constitution, the protesters call upon EU institutions to review the new laws. A few days later, in his interview for a far-right daily *Gazeta Polska*, Jarosław Kaczyński makes an unequivocal response to these calls:

- (3) This is a return to the old methods. This habit of denouncing Poland to foreigners. In Poland, there is a fatal tradition of national treason. And this is precisely tied to that. It is sort of in the genes of some people, the worst sort of Poles. And that worst sort is precisely now extraordinarily active, because they feel threatened. They are afraid today that the times are changing, that the time is coming when things will be as they are supposed to be, and another type of person – that means, those having loftier, patriotic motivations – will be placed in the lead, and that will apply to every aspect of social life, including economic life. (Jarosław Kaczyński, December 11, 2019)

This memorable comment by the L&J leader initiates what is often described as the “worst sort of Poles” narrative (Cap 2022; Tomczak-Boczko et al. 2023; Gardulska 2024) – a rhetorical and discursive strategy of instilling social divisions and provoking social conflicts and crises in the country, in order to create conditions for the enactment of strong leadership and policy legitimization. In contrast with the 2015-2019 discourse, the “worst sort” narrative applies far beyond the L&J parliamentary opposition – it targets practically all social groups identified by the Party as more or less open opponents to L&J's policies introduced after the 2015 elections. Included in these groups are in turn all those, as in (3) and Cap (2024), whose “motivations” are not “patriotic enough” and whose ideologies stand in conflict with the “traditionally conservative” values of the Polish nation. This makes the “worst sort” a uniquely heterogeneous category: from the defenders of the constitutional order, to feminist groups, to the LGBT community – “an imported movement that threatens our identity”¹² – among many others. On L&J's view, the activity of these groups is inspired by foreign interests and thus should be considered anti-Polish. This conclusion is used in turn as a premise for a logical shortcut to call the followers “national traitors,” as Kaczyński does in his press interview in Section 3. Clearly, in developing an argument of that caliber, the L&J leader presupposes his boundless rhetorical agency and the right to use a whole

12. PM Mateusz Morawiecki in the Sejm, February 10, 2021.

spectrum of positive and negative ethotic claims to label elements of virtually all political contexts, present or past.

3.2. *International arena: inside or outside the EU?*

The years 2015-2023 reveal a massive record of crises and conflicts in Poland's international relations, particularly between Warsaw and Brussels. These conflicts, strategically created and perpetuated by L&J's discourse, occur mostly in two domains. One is L&J's sweeping "reform" of the Polish judiciary, which I discussed in the previous section (and more extensively in Cap 2024). The other is the issue of migration and the stance of Law and Justice on the EU immigration policy to manage the post-2015 migration crisis in Europe. The analysis of the L&J corpus, here and in Cap (2024), shows that the L&J government handles the migration conflict instrumentally, to construct a specific kind of legitimization discourse, the discourse of "national sovereignty" (Tomczak-Boczko et al. 2023; Gardulska 2024). Though this discourse draws on international issues, its main target is the Polish audience. Raising questions of political and, crucially, personal security, it has the primary goal of enacting strong and effective leadership and, consequently, ensuring people's safety in the face of an external threat. In its rhetorical composition, the sovereignty discourse relies mostly on endoxical messages, carrying views that are plausible and even reputable, and whose persuasion potential is clear and obvious (Rubinelli 2022).

The two domains where endoxical claims are most commonly found are national identity and state security. The claims and argument schemas (including, as below, argumentative topoi of *burden* and *abuse*) in these domains shape the entire anti-migration stance of L&J's sovereignty discourse. The identity-based argument serves to establish a firm and lasting US-vs.-THEM distinction, signaling issues of possible political conflict (with the EU) or direct sociocultural clash (involving immigrants as such). The distinction is thus multidimensional; it subsumes a heterogeneous THEM, which includes migrants perceived as a direct "invader," but also EU institutions as promoters of migrants' relocation agenda. This means that EU is constructed, ironically, as a *foreign* entity, contrary to political facts. I argue in Cap (2024) that to force such a distinction, L&J leaders often appeal to the Polish Christian heritage, from which they derive distinctive national values such as freedom, independence and, most of all, national pride. The concept of national pride is discursively related to the Polish historical legacy such as being at the heart of momentous developments in the history of Europe and the world (WWII, fall of communism, etc.). It is construed as a precious commodity that must be safeguarded from any external influence:

- (4) We are a proud, independent nation of free people whose character has been shaped in the most difficult and tragic moments of European history. We stand firm by our Christian heritage, the values to which our nation has been committed for centuries and to which we are committed today. As Christians, we are raised to be tolerant and respectful of other cultures. But we ask the same kind of respect from others. It is our right to decide whom we welcome to our own house. Because there are cultures, there are values, which simply cannot coexist. (PM Mateusz Morawiecki, September 5, 2018)

Morawiecki's argument in (4) includes the central identity claims characterizing L&J's (anti)migration discourse. Its goal is to consolidate the home camp in its commitment to common values – freedom, sovereignty, tolerance – which stem from a common cultural and religious background. First and foremost, Morawiecki appeals to the sense of “independence,” which invokes the core elements of the national heritage to describe and legitimize current responsibilities.¹³ The historical flashbacks foster the spirit of exceptionalism, endorsing further endoxical claims of national uniqueness and implying the accompanying inalienable rights, such as “the right to decide whom we welcome to our own house.” The HOUSE metaphor, echoing the CONTAINER schema often invoked in political isolationist discourse (Hart 2014; Koller et al. 2019), adds to the aura of national solidarity, cementing the in-group and mobilizing it against possible negative scenarios, such as implementation of proposals for migrants' relocation into Central European countries. Rhetorically attractive and thus shareable (Musolff 2016), the metaphor functions as a trigger of positive emotions but also as a coercive, threat-based ploy. The latter function follows from a possible conceptualization of HOUSE as a “rupturable container,” which can get destroyed because of mounting external pressure (Hart 2014), i.e., the impact of immigration. In this conceptual scenario, the metaphor serves to delegate some of the speaker's agency to members of the audience (Campbell 2005; Hoff-Clausen 2018), thus further consolidating the US camp in its anti-migration stance.

In the formal rhetorical and argumentative terms, (4) draws heavily upon the *topos of abuse*, a powerful argument scheme apprehended in many European right-wing discourses calling for more restrictive immigration policy based on the premise that immigrants not only disrespect but actually exploit social and cultural tolerance salient in EU immigration and asylum laws. This kind of argument proceeds in “As Christians, we are raised to be tolerant and respectful of other cultures. But we ask the same kind of respect from others,” inviting the conclusion that the current EU immigration policy should be changed. As is generally the case with *topos*-based argumentation (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2001), the above conclusion need not be made explicit in the argument; it is presupposed to emerge as a rational inference, given the “common-sense” nature of reasoning activated by the *topos*.

13. See Koller et al. (2019) on analogies to Farage's Brexit discourse.

The interpretation of the HOUSE metaphor as a trigger of threatening conceptualizations brings me to the key security pillar of L&J's "sovereignty discourse." Developing the vision of immigration as a tangible threat, L&J's discourse uses the US-vs.-THEM distinctions drawn previously in other domains (such as the cultural domain addressed by Morawiecki) to present them as growing, irreconcilable and, eventually, directly threatening. As demonstrated in detail in Cap (2024), this entails the application of structured argumentation patterns, involving fixed lexical, grammatical, and structural choices. The most salient of these patterns¹⁴ is a text-level schema involving interplay of ideological and physical meanings in the process of discursive (axiological and spatial) proximization (Cap 2013, 2024). Axiological proximization is applied first to establish an abstract distant vision and spatial proximization is used subsequently to redefine that vision in terms of a physical threat:

- (5) Our position has been clear from the beginning. The issue of immigration from the Middle East should be resolved where it has originated. By advancing freedom and democracy in Syria and Iraq, we help end a cycle of *dictatorship and radicalism_{NP}* that *brings millions of people to misery and frustration_{VP}*, and *brings danger and, one day, tragedy to_{VP} our own people_{NP}*. (Jarosław Kaczyński, May 13, 2019)

In the above argument, Kaczyński sets up a conspicuous link between the social and political conditions of immigrants' lives in their home countries ("Syria and Iraq"), and their social and psychological effects ("misery and frustration"), which can trigger disastrous consequences in the long run, once immigrants arrive in Poland ("one day, tragedy, to our own people"). Such a logic is meant to support L&J's rationale for handling the immigration issue far away from European borders. Kaczyński's argument unfolds in a linear manner, connecting apparently remote visions with, eventually, closely happening events. At the lexical level, nominal phrases are used to mark the US-vs.-THEM opposition in ideological terms ("our people" vs. people living in "dictatorship and radicalism"), and verbal phrases ("brings millions of people", "brings danger") are applied to proximize the anticipated impact of THEM. Generally, the argument involves a discursive transition from a starting scenario of "remote possibility" to a redefined scenario of "actual occurrence." Each of the scenarios is enacted linguistically by the combination of a nominal phrase (NP) with a verb phrase (VP) – as indicated by the subscript in (5). The effect is a highly coercive fear appeal, invoking a material threat from mass migration into Poland, but also a threat of political subordination to EU institutions as promoters of the relocation schema. The perpetuation of the latter threat defines the essentially populist function of L&J's "sovereignty discourse," aimed at the home audience rather than international partners.

14. Particularly in the 2015-2019 part of the corpus.

4. The response of the opposition in the 2023 election campaign

As shown in Section 3, and in Cap (2024), the leadership discourse of L&J in the years 2015-2023 can be described as essentially coercive, involving a mix of established as well innovative populist and propagandistic strategies, from ideological polarization, to prompt identification and delegitimization of the opponent, to the swift management of the thus generated conflict. The success of L&J's political narrative over the years begs a question of how the impact of L&J's discourse was neutralized in the 2023 campaign—what weaknesses were identified and targeted, and what alternatives were proposed. The present section uses discursive as well as rhetorical tools to analyze two narratives developed by the "coalition for democracy" – the Civic Platform (CP), Third Way (TW) and The Left (L) parties – to delegitimize the L&J rule and win support for their own program. Following the study in Cap (2024), I refer to the first one as the "security narrative" – a geopolitical argument constructing Poland's safety as dependent on the condition of its international relations, particularly Poland's status within the EU and NATO. The other narrative, largely sociopsychological in character, is referred to as the "smiling Poland narrative." It concerns domestic issues involving the relations Polish people have with their state. I start with the security narrative, for it underlies most of the discourse of the coalition for democracy in the 2023 election campaign and its performance appears crucial to the result of the elections.

4.1. *A land forlorn: the security narrative*

The security narrative can be viewed, from a pragma-rhetorical standpoint, as a future-oriented original proposal, and simultaneously an interdiscursive response to L&J's stance on foreign policy:

- (6) There is nothing wrong in being a proud state. There is nothing wrong in asserting the right to speak loudly on matters that concern us all. But it is wrong, in these critical times, to continue to confuse pride with arrogance, to seek adversaries rather than partners. (CP's Chairman Donald Tusk at an election rally in Rzeszów, April 23, 2023)
- (7) For the first time since 1945, war in Europe is becoming real again: we might currently be sliding into a pre-war era. At the same time, because of their incompetence and often sheer stupidity, this government is leading Poland out of the EU. This madness, this embarrassment of ourselves, could eventually cost us more than ridicule. Why, some might ask. Because an alienated Poland is a Poland exposed to the greatest risks. But I can guarantee you that we will make Poland return to its rightful place, to the mainstream of EU and NATO politics. (TW's Chairman Szymon Hołownia at a rally in Gdańsk, May 8, 2023)
- (8) This government does not represent real Poles. Polish people are true Europeans. Over the past 20 years, they have been steadfast in supporting our EU membership. (L's Chairman Włodzimierz Czarzasty at a rally in Łódź, June 6, 2023)

- (9) Even those skeptical about EU and EU policies must accept a simple truth: we cannot afford conflict with Brussels when real danger is lurking around the corner. Anyone who does not understand it is playing into Putin's hands. (L's Chairman Włodzimierz Czarzasty at a rally in Łódź, June 6, 2023)

The argument developed in (6-7-8-9) takes the rhetorical form of *modus ponendo ponens*, engaging two sociopolitical premises to reach a policy-minded conclusion. The first premise has a conditional nature: it involves an assumption that Poland's security as a state derives directly from its EU and NATO membership and thus it is the country's *raison d'état* to keep its international relations strong and active. The other premise is an endorsement of the first part of the assumption (that Poland's security derives from its EU and NATO membership) by reference, in (8), to the unfaltering support of Poles for their state's membership in the EU.¹⁵ In conjunction, the two premises generate a logical conclusion which legitimizes the opposition's pro-NATO and pro-European stance. That stance is then contrasted with L&J's Eurosceptic disposition and policies, which have not changed despite a dramatic change in the political context triggered by Russia's invasion on Ukraine. The arising contrast is used to produce a final vision, which is the vision of political as well as military alienation that carries a tangible, material threat to Poland.¹⁶ Such a vision delegitimizes L&J's foreign policy and thus the entire government, on the grounds of favoring its party line over the interest of the state.

It is worth noting (see Cap 2024 for details) that the coalition leaders avoid highly radical claims in regard to the present, inviting the addressee to imagine themselves the sad consequences of L&J's further rule. Neither Tusk nor his colleagues denote these consequences precisely, but phrases such as "real danger is lurking around the corner," "could eventually cost us more," "sliding into a pre-war era," or "playing into Putin's hands" do enough to outline an ominous, *radically* threatening future. The progressive used in the phrases reveals a specific function; it links the future with the present (Dunmire 2005), associating the threatening future anticipations with the current L&J rule and thus performing an accusatory role. At the same time, combination of the progressive and the patterns of "probabilistic modality" ("might currently be sliding," "could eventually cost us") adds to the caliber of the gathering threat, by making its particular elements largely undefined (Dunmire 2005; 2011). It is interesting to observe, on a theoretical plane, that these discourse analytical conclusions fully agree with principles of rhetorical theory with regard to the interplay of epideictic (present) and deliberative (future) claims, that is, how the latter draw on factual evidence from the former to strengthen their accusatory function (Rubinelli 2022).

15. As a matter of fact, that support has never gone below the 75% threshold, only slightly declining under the L&J rule (Gardulska 2024).

16. This is where the discourse of the coalition for democracy reaches coercion levels comparable to the L&J discourse, even though – as follows in the discussion – the coalition's threat-based persuasion is usually less explicit.

The restrained and rational use of assessment claims concerning L&J's policies accords with a balanced stance the coalition leaders demonstrate in their own concept of foreign policy. This concept is particularly salient in Tusk's argument in (6), an example demonstrating a combination of rhetorical *logos* (an appeal to reason) and *pathos* (an appeal to emotions) (Rubinelli 2022). Stating that "there is nothing wrong in being *a proud state*" and that "there is nothing wrong in *asserting the right to speak loudly* on matters that concern us all,"¹⁷ Tusk makes an intertextual reference to claims circulated in the 2015-2023 period to enact the key features of L&J's ideological stance (see Section 3 and Cap 2024). Revealing a conciliatory posture toward these messages, he defines his essentially pragmatic policy mindset and simultaneously acknowledges a space for dialogue with his L&J adversaries. Doing so, Tusk makes an indirect appeal to L&J voters, acting as a representative of many of their core beliefs and expectations. This move is supposed, in *pathos* terms, to arouse positive emotions in L&J supporters, providing them, in *logos* terms, with a "reasonable premise" to accept him in time as their own leader. Continuing in that vein, the judgment in the final part of the argument ("it is wrong, in these critical times...") has the function to underscore Tusk's rationality, responsibility and, above all, his resolve to "seek [partners] rather than [adversaries]."

From a rhetorical-generic theoretical perspective, examples (6-7-8-9) represent what Dunmire (2005, 2011) refers to as "alternative futures," semantic-structural formulas applied to increase coercive powers of conceptual scenarios. Involving set groups of lexico-grammatical markers, alternative futures can be described (and analyzed in, essentially, a top-down fashion) as projections of alternative policy visions defined by political actor to identify with one and reject the other. Construing the future in alternative ways involves a variety of linguistic forms, including specific evidential, modality, and mood configurations derived from general argumentation premises such as fact-based evidence, history and reason (Dunmire 2005). Through all these means, political leaders define what they consider *privileged future* (a controllable future they subscribe to) and what they deem *oppositional future* (a future of unpredictable and threatening outlines). In (7), for example, an embedded interrogative ("Why, some might ask") is used to strengthen a contrast between the privileged future of cooperation and the oppositional future of alienation. Construing the future in alternative, black-and-white ways brings, according to both discursive and rhetorical models (Dunmire 2005; 2011; Johnstone and Eisenhart 2008), substantial political benefits. Well-argued anticipations of the future play a key role in the enactment of political leadership based on the "rational consideration of options," and can be viewed

17. emphasis mine.

as a type of legitimization device “to shore up calls for particular policies and actions” (Dunmire 2005, 481).

As evidenced in Cap (2024), the security narrative is also used to delegitimize some of L&J’s policies on the home front, such as the radical changes in the judiciary, initiated by the L&J government after the 2015 elections (see Section 3). The massive criticism of these changes by top EU institutions is a premise to construct visions of growing international isolation leading to increased geopolitical and thus also military vulnerability of the state:

- (10) What is it that brought us all here today? A pseudo-Court of Justice, a group of masqueraders in judicial robes, by order of the party’s leader, in violation of the constitution, decided to take Poland out of the EU.¹⁸ This means that unofficial Polesxit is already under way. What happened in the UK is starting here. We need to stop it before we wake up and see that our eastern border is no longer an EU border, that we have just moved hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away from our safety. It’s time to sound the alarm. (Donald Tusk at an anti-government demonstration in Warsaw on March 10, 2023)

Example (10) establishes a connection between L&J’s complete overhaul of the judiciary, the way the “reform” has encroached on EU law in rulings of the highest judicial bodies such as the Constitutional Tribunal, and the effects such a situation produces for Poland’s (further) membership in the Union. Meticulously grounded in rhetorical and discursive credibility rules, Tusk’s argument earns plausibility not only from the kind of content it communicates but also from a linear, easy-to-follow form facilitating the uptake of the content (Cap 2024). Namely, a relational proposition (Mann and Thompson 1988) of cause-and-effect is set up between the second and the third sentence, the effect part (“Polesxit is already under way”) being shorter and thus easier to process than the obviously longer cause part (“A pseudo-Court of Justice”). The target effect part starts with an explicit demonstrative (“This means that”), setting up the principal causative link defining the main point of the argument—the gathering threat of “Polesxit.” This point is endorsed by factual reference and analogy (“What happened in the UK is starting here”).¹⁹ In the final part, Donald Tusk uses some typical discourse of proximization, including spatial/physical imagery (“wake up and see,” “we have just moved hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away”), presupposition of catastrophic future which unfolds unless a preemptive action is taken (“We need to stop it before...”), and centralization of the “here and now” timeframe as the only moment to act (“It’s time ...”). In fact, the use of proximization by Tusk, here and on other occasions, does not seem much different compared to L&J politicians.

18. On March 3, 2023 Poland’s Constitutional Tribunal, composed of judges appointed by the L&J parliamentary majority, ruled that the national constitution had always primacy over EU law, thus undermining the EU founding legal agreements.

19. For credibility and persuasion effects of analogy see Musolff (2016) and Cap (2022).

At the same time, interesting differences can be found in Tusk's use of *topos*-based argument, inviting people to envisage for themselves increasingly negative consequences of L&J's further rule. I have noted in Section 3.2 that conclusions forced by argumentative *topoi* need not be made explicit in the argument; they emerge as rational inferences since *topoi* rely, as a rule, upon straightforward, commonsensical reasoning. Thus in Tusk's argument such as "We need to stop it before we wake up and see that our eastern border is no longer an EU border, that we have just moved hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away from our safety" in (10), the *topos of danger* (e.g., Žagar 2010) involves a threat whose precise outlines (that is, the precise consequences of "[Poland's] eastern border [being] no longer an EU border") are not communicated explicitly, they are left to be determined by the addressee. This, actually, only broadens the perceived caliber of the threat (Dunmire 2011). I first made this observation in the study of L&J's discourse in 3.1-3.2 above, but it needs adding that the strategy in question appears far more frequently in Donald Tusk's discourse and the rhetoric of his coalition as a whole.

4.2. *Reborn to be strong and happy: the smiling Poland narrative*

As has been documented in Cap (2024), the "smiling Poland narrative" becomes salient in the lead-up to the October 2023 elections, outlining a forward-looking vision of a "new Poland" "reborn" after a dark period of the L&J rule. In its discursive dimension, it involves a host of axiologically positive values, such as freedom, courage, strength, diversity, openness, tolerance, and empathy, which are construed as fundamentals of social life, as well as the institutional organization of that life in the new, dynamically developing, "happy" Poland. In rhetorical terms, its goal is to force the *topos of invention*, so to say – to encourage people to accept and support the new visions, by instilling trust in their attainability (Žagar 2010). Similar to the security narrative, the smiling Poland narrative is both an original discursive setup and a response to certain themes in the L&J discourse, including the recurring theme of migration (see example (12) below). Specifically, it targets L&J's instrumental handling of the past, involving countless references to the most difficult and usually saddest periods in the country's history which the L&J government and their media propagandists used to claim Poland's uniqueness and superiority over other European states (Cap 2022). Considering examples such as (6) above, it would be a mistake to say that the coalition discourse completely breaks with the legacy of the past. In fact, Tusk and his colleagues continue to use historical flashbacks in their ethotic, argumentative groundwork for policy proposals (see Section 3.1). At the same time, however, they recognize people's

expectations for a new kind of public discourse that makes for a fresh and dynamic alternative to the notoriously somber and bombastic stance of L&J leaders:

- (11) No one can stop this force, this giant has awakened. Let no one among the ruling team have any illusions: change for the better is inevitable. This is a sign of Poland's rebirth. A peaceful rebellion for freedom and democracy. When I see these hundreds of thousands of smiling faces, I feel that this breakthrough moment is coming in the history of our homeland. (...) Millions have woken up. We are moving full of courage, vigor, and determination toward the future, toward a Poland that is tolerant, diverse, European and smiling. The time has come for Poland to be happy. (...) The time has come to end "the Polish-Polish war" – the naming as traitors of those who think differently, who feel differently, who look to Europe for help against discrimination and dictatorship. (...) Trust me: a great majority of Polish people are fed up with the corrupt, petty, backward-looking, obscurantist rule of the party led by a 74-year-old tired man, a kind of one-man walking anthology of resentment. The time has come to show this at the polls. Because we deserve to be a happy nation. (Donald Tusk at the "March of a Million Hearts" in Warsaw on October 1, 2023)
- (12) The time has come, also, to appreciate the hard work of humanitarians in eastern Poland. And to appreciate the situation of those fooled by Lukashenko. We cannot be a happy nation as long as there are innocent people dying in our woods. Standing for border security and territorial integrity must not mean the lack of empathy. These are two different things. (Donald Tusk at the "March of a Million Hearts" in Warsaw on October 1, 2023)

The March of the Million Hearts speech by Tusk essentializes the main rhetorical patterns and lexical features of the "smiling Poland narrative." Including multiple phrases and items depicting the "rebirth" of Poland as a place of "happy," "smiling," "tolerant," "diverse" (11), "emphatic," and "humanitarian" (12) people, the speech construes these values as a precious commodity that has been recaptured in a historic battle, where the "courage, vigor, and determination" of the Polish people have ultimately prevailed. This flattering declaration, wrapped up with a bold "we deserve to be a happy nation" in the concluding line of (11), serves Tusk to enact the *topos of invention* – to convince the audience to the attainability of his future visions. It enhances the aura of solidarity with the people and, crucially, makes a promise of friendly and understanding relations between the state and the people, thus claiming for Tusk the right to speak on behalf of the nation. While this sort of rhetoric seems similar to L&J's 2015 discourse, Tusk's address reveals an important distinctive element. Namely, making use of appealing, sophisticated word choices and phraseological connections (see Cap 2024 for details), he seeks to establish a synecdochic "part-for-the-whole" relation between L&J's collective ideology and values, and Jarosław Kaczyński's individual characteristics ("the corrupt, petty, backward-looking, obscurantist rule of the party led by a 74-year-old tired man, a kind of one-man walking anthology of resentment"). This clever move endorses an important aspect of Tusk's rhetorical agency – he is clearly able, as a rhetor, to correctly anticipate the audience's (favorable) response (Miller 2007).

5. Concluding remarks

The unprecedented dynamics of the Polish political scene in the past nine years follows from a multitude of social, sociopsychological, geopolitical, cultural, and other factors, involving both domestic affairs and international crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. This paper has been my second in line to demonstrate that *linguistically-based* strategies – such as the state-level strategies of communication with mass audience – count among these factors, construing the particular events and contexts as different building blocks of political leadership. Drawing on a discursive study in Cap (2024) and combining its many discourse analytical tools with rhetorical and argumentation theory, the present analysis has endorsed the former findings regarding the power and durability of conflict and crisis discourse. In particular, further evidence has been collected in rhetorical analysis showing that conflict-charged populist discourse, involving strong socio-ideological polarization, threat construction, and strategic generation of crisis can be an extremely powerful tool, able to grant long-term political leadership. In a yet longer perspective, however, such a leadership runs the risk of “wearing out” and becoming less appealing. This is because ideological distinctions invoked in populist conflict-charged discourse naturally have their roots in the past; thus, past conceptualizations (notably those of national exceptionalism and sacrifice) dominate the leadership rhetoric, at the expense of forward-looking, less bombastic but more pragmatic policy proposals. Moreover, a “hardcore” populist discourse (such as the Eurosceptic rhetoric) involving conflict construction and crisis management could well turn counterproductive in the long run.

The vistas for further study are broad. Given the post-2000 rise of populist forces throughout Europe – the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, the National Front in France, Beppe Grillo’s *Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy, Nigel Farage’s United Kingdom Independence Party in Britain, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in Austria, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands – there is plenty of material to analyze in order to establish, with more evidence and precision, the longevity potential of populist leadership discourse, as well as its limitations in different geographical, geopolitical and sociocultural settings. The analysis in the present paper shows that such future studies will benefit from a complex methodological apparatus, combining data-driven approaches (such as in most CDS research) with theory-driven methods (such as rhetorical theory). The Polish example discussed in Cap (2024) and in the present paper seems an inspiring case, as in no other EU country in this century had such a radical discourse kept its practitioners in power for a full eight years, the end of the rule being so abrupt and still hard to explain.

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