

Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts

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The rhetoric of anger: A case study of Polish farmers' protests against the import of grain from Ukraine

Retoryka gniewu: studium przypadku protestów polskich rolników przeciwko importowaniu zboża z Ukrainy

Abstract

This article examines various dimensions of persuasive communication during protest actions undertaken by Polish farmers in public spaces in 2023 and 2024, thereby disrupting social order. The source of information regarding the strikes is the popular general news portal rmf24.pl, which prepared a special report dedicated to these events. The analysis draws on the paradigm of the rhetoric of anger, which is conceptualised at the beginning of the article and compared to hate speech, rhetoric of violence, and similar concepts. The study employs several methodological approaches from the intersection of social sciences and humanities, including discourse analysis, semiotic analysis, and action analysis. The last section summarises how the Polish farmers' protests can be situated within the rhetoric of anger and point out fields for further research.

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę różnych wymiarów komunikacji perswazyjnej podczas akcji protestacyjnych, które polscy rolnicy podejmowali w przestrzeni publicznej w latach 2023 i 2024, zakłócając tym samym porządek społeczny. Źródłem informacji na temat strajków jest popularny, ogólnoinformacyjny portal rmf24.pl, który przygotował specjalny raport poświęcony tym wydarzeniom. Analiza opiera się na paradygmacie retoryki gniewu, która jest omówiona na początku artykułu przez porównanie z mową nienawiści, retoryką przemocy i pokrewnymi pojęciami. W badaniu wykorzystano kilka podejść metodologicznych z pogranicza nauk społecznych i humanistycznych, w tym analizę dyskursu, analizę semiotyczną oraz analizę działań. Ostatnia sekcja podsumowuje, w jaki sposób protesty polskich rolników można umiejscowić w retoryce gniewu i wskazuje obszary dalszych badań.

Key words

rhetoric of anger, farmers' protest, slogan, mediated political communication
retoryka gniewu, protest rolników, slogan, medialna komunikacja polityczna

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1. Introduction

The research undertaken for this article extends beyond the classical understanding of rhetoric, that is, the art of beautiful and correct elocution and oration. It encompasses communication phenomena with the power to compel states and events desired by the sender (Rawski et al. 2024, 28), including not only speaking but also actions (Ornatowski 2021, 17). This study of the rhetoric concerns protests that Polish farmers repeatedly undertook in 2023 and 2024, both locally and nationally, opposing government policies, the EU's Green Deal, and the activities of companies involved in importing and processing grain from Ukraine. Some slogans they used during the protests were aggressive towards Ukrainians.

Securing group interests and negotiating with decision-makers seems justified, primarily due to media attention. The media tend to be interested in strikes and other forms of protests, which stems from the inherent drama and disruption they cause; hence, one might speak of the overrepresentation of news about strikes on the media agenda (Flynn 2000, 141). Several factors influence media interest in strikes: (1) the scope of the strike, (2) government interest in the strike, (3) the involvement of well-known trade unions and organisations in the strike, and (4) the industry whose representatives are striking (Flynn 2000, 145). The leaders of the farmers' movement were likely aware of the above conditions and carefully designed their message. Their rhetoric aroused the interest of traditional and social media outlets, with the public expressing support, and the politicians showing concern so as not to further enrage the protesters.

This study focuses on the selected aspects of the rhetoric of anger employed by protesting farmers as reported by journalists from the rmf24.pl portal. Prior research has examined the communication aspects of strikes organised in Poland by various groups, including trade unions of nurses and miners (Kubisa 2016), and individuals protesting the infringement of women's rights, who gathered in numerous Polish cities as part of the Black Protest movement (Kiełbiewska 2018).

The farmers' strikes of 2023 and 2024 have been analysed from an economic and political science perspective (Czubak et al. 2024). While Nowakowska et al. (2025, 173–175) have discussed the forms of farmers' protests from the 1990s to 2023, from a sociological perspective, an article dedicated to the rhetorical dimension of farmers' protests, particularly a confrontational mode of communication employed by a professional group in their interactions with authorities (Ziętek 2020, 161), fills a notable gap in the research.

In addressing the research problem, the rhetoric of anger is first conceptualised, identifying its various elements in the context of related models (e.g., rhetoric of hate, rhetoric of violence). Subsequently, the results of analysis of the multimodal communication of protesting farmers are presented, considering the rhetoric of anger as an analytical paradigm and acknowledging that information about the protest is reflective of the affordances of a specific mass medium.

To achieve the research objectives the article is divided into several sections, the first of which is theoretical. Initially, the model of the rhetoric of anger is outlined, based on publications by Polish and international experts on the subject, both classic and contemporary researchers of persuasive communication. The structural features and functions of the protest as a political message involving confrontation are also indicated. The methodological section presents the method of constructing the data corpus for analysis and discusses the research methods used. The following section presents the analysis results, which begin with a focus on slogans and phrases, both written and visual, as encapsulations of angry rhetoric, before moving on to metaphorical and symbolic references used by protesters. This segment culminates in a rhetorical analysis of the actions undertaken by the protesting farmers. In conclusion, the article provides a summary of how the Polish farmers' protests can be situated within the rhetoric of anger.

2. Rhetoric of anger: An attempt at conceptualization

To date, researchers have successfully defined various types of rhetoric that consider hostility an axiological basis for the communicator and simultaneously a foundation for persuasive communication. From the presented concepts, a set of standard features emerges regardless of the names researchers have used to distinguish the rhetorics they define. Some of these features also characterise the rhetoric of anger.

Michał Głowiński (2007, 19–27) outlined the perspective of the rhetoric of hate when he observed that public discourse is dominated by rhetoric saturated with aggression. In certain situations, hate rhetoric is synonymous with the language of authorities and their acolytes. The rhetoric of empathy can be regarded as the

antithesis of the rhetoric of hate. In the hate rhetoric, the opponent is understood as an enemy, someone devoid of all reason, who must be discredited, neutralised, or even destroyed, by all means. In rhetoric with even a minimal degree of empathy, the person with whom the subject argues, against whom he directs his statement, is not treated as an enemy, but as an opponent. The rhetoric of hate is a rhetoric of absolute truths that are always on the side of the sender, and it does not allow for understanding the opponent's views, ideas, or attitudes. The rhetoric of hate does not address those who have become its object; rather, it vilifies them, incites hatred towards them, without addressing them directly. The thought of "enemies" is meant to arouse fear in the intended recipients (Głowiński 2007, 19–26).

Głowiński's concept is similar to othering rhetoric (Ivić and Petrović 2020, 421–433), which also resembles the rhetoric of exclusion (Witosz 2010, 14–16). Othering rhetoric is a practice that seeks to designate groups or individuals as different from oneself (or to mark them as the "other"). Consequently, marking others as different from oneself or hegemonic ideals can often reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination. Additionally, the "other" is often subject to marginalisation, discrimination, and exclusion (Cameron 2022, 1–2). Similar to the rhetoric of hate, communication here is unilateral: the senders are focused on promoting their vision of the world, their specific axiological order, and their particular attitude, driven by the conviction of the superiority of their beliefs over the beliefs, attitudes, and voices of others. The complexity of the dynamics of xenophobia and discrimination, and tendencies of othering and drawing boundaries, has become more intense and evident in times of crisis. The crisis situation usually amplifies divisions in various societies, often enabling us to pay attention to those division patterns and think more critically about them (Ivić and Petrović 2020, 422).

In defining the rhetoric of violence, Marek Kochan (2019, 54) emphasised that rhetoric can serve as a surrogate for physical force and armed combat by wielding words. On the one hand, freedom and dialogicity are prerequisites for a persuasive communication situation. On the other hand, the wielding of words can be associated with physical violence, and even constitute an act of violence in itself (cf. Childers 2022, 18). The fuzzy concept of the rhetoric of violence may entail several forms of persuasion: (1) rhetoric inciting violence; (2) rhetoric accompanying acts of violence (e.g., reports of events); (3) violent rhetoric (e.g., labeling, "hate speech"); (4) rhetoric as a way of presenting violence (e.g., in the media); (5) rhetoric of legitimising violence (justifying and excusing acts of violence, e.g., by appealing to human nature, principles, ethos, historical analogies, or excluding the victim) (Kochan 2019, 56). Some rhetorical statements can mobilize aggressive behaviours when the "word transforms into action."

Examples include the relationship between aggressive rhetoric preceding acts of violence, such as attacks on politicians and journalists, or public institutions, and even terrorist attacks (Kochan 2019, 54).

Theorists of the rhetoric of physical violence, which encompasses the use of force to inflict bodily harm or damage material objects, argue that the act of violence itself is persuasive (Childers 2024, 55). Childers (2022, 13–14) asserts that while milder, weaker, gentler, less salient ways of regulating relationships are adequate for most everyday purposes, there are situations where people use violence to grab attention and demonstrate how high the stakes are. Virtuous violence theory posits that people use violence as a human inducement when they feel that other means of communication will not work. The situation requires that the message get through. In summary, physical violence that was taking place within historical social movements might be considered rhetorical (e.g., the rhetoric of confrontation, of the streets, of the riots). By examining the specific details of physical violence, we can potentially interpret the messages that violent actors are attempting to send (Childers 2022, 16; Ornatowski 2021, 21).

concepts	unilateral communication (no dialogue)	division into “us” and “them”	overt verbal aggression	nonverbal aggression/ physical violence
Othering rhetoric	+	+	+/-	—
Rhetoric of hate	+	+/-	+	+/-
Rhetoric of (physical) violence	+	+	+	+
Rhetoric of anger	+	+	+	+/-

Table 1. A comparative overview of the key distinguishing features of rhetorics rooted in hostility. Own source.

The rhetoric of anger, the conceptualisation of which is one of the aims of this article, partially draws upon the properties and means mentioned in the rhetorics above, such as the rejection of dialogue and the demonstration of aggression and violence. At the same time, the rhetoric of anger is distinguished by hitherto unmentioned features. The rhetoric of anger refers to using anger as a communicative and persuasive tool, often employed to express grievances, mobilise individuals, or challenge societal norms. In classical thought, anger was often viewed negatively and associated with irrationality and immaturity. Contemporary researchers view anger more comprehensively, seeing it as destructive and constructive (Markiewka, 2020). Moreover, even theologians see a positive connotation in wrath, examining the concept of “anger in a just cause,” or “holy anger” (Królikowski 2018, 447–451).

2.1. *Rhetoric of anger versus anger*

In *Rhetoric* Aristotle pointed out the moral limits of anger and angry rhetoric, requiring speakers to recognise the structure of an emotion like anger, including how to strengthen and extinguish it, and to find justification for the presence of angry rhetoric in a speech. In other words, the speaker must know how to make the presence of anger in a public speech seem sensible. However, contemporary perspectives recognise anger's complexity and potential for constructive engagement when expressed effectively. Anger can be used strategically in political and cultural discourse, where it serves to rally support or highlight injustices. According to the Aristotelian view on the limits on the rhetorical expression of anger, we have a moral obligation to support order. However, sometimes the rhetoric must disrupt this order in order to maintain self-respect and avoid accusations of subservience (slavishness). Indeed, "some contemporary philosophers have gone further, suggesting that a failure to feel and express anger in public betrays an insufficient concern for justice and self-respect" (Zagacki and Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2006, 290, 305). It should be emphasised that feeling anger and the rhetoric of anger are distinct. The rhetoric of anger is demonstrated publicly in the public sphere, aiming to arouse a similar emotion in the audience. Once aroused, anger usually has a significant impact on reality.

Rhetoric is a practical discipline whose aim is to exert persuasive action on an audience through speech. Aristotle recognized the connection between rhetoric and politics, where persuasion depends on the character of the speaker (ethos), putting the audience into a particular frame of mind (pathos), and providing evidence, more precisely, the apparent evidence conveyed by the words of the speech itself (logos) (Leith 2011, 61). Persuasion is achievable when the personal character of the speaker aligns with the manner in which the speech is delivered, which, in turn, prompts the audience to grant them credibility. As many political scientists emphasise, the main problem of contemporary politics is that it has become an entirely rhetorical domain. As political action today occurs mainly within communication, predominantly concerning pathos and the audience's emotions, rather than rational arguments, attention must be paid to anger as an emotion and how it is rhetorically structured and functionalized. According to Zagacki and Boleyn-Fitzgerald (2006, 293), in some cases "the required show of resentment will be non-rhetorical, but in other cases it will be required to engage in rhetoric that shows our resentment."

Alongside anxiety (fear), curiosity, joy, surprise, sadness, aggression, guilt, and shame, anger is among the more frequently analysed emotions (Gasiul 2007, 37). Anger is intense, responding to failure, a sense of injustice, fear, lack of security, or unmet needs. Some psychologists believe that anger, disgust, and contempt

form an affective syndrome of hatred (Gasiul 2007, 375). Anger is often confused with rage, but it differs in that it can be controlled and lasts longer. It can take an aggressive form and be directed internally and externally, towards other people or events. Anger can protect one's interests and needs, fulfilling a defensive function by signalling that one's boundaries have been crossed.

2.2. *Protesting as a genre and persuasive communication*

Scholars of classical rhetoric point to speech genres that can be used to formulate angry rhetoric, including the apocalypse, jeremiads, and, finally, demonizing speeches by religious and political leaders (Zagacki and Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2006, 290). It could be argued that contemporary civic protest constitutes a genre that embodies the features that are characteristic of a rhetoric of anger.

A protest is a demonstration, an appearance in a public space that has always carried with it an extrajudicial and performative imperative of putting things to right. Protests not only take many forms and have multiple components, but clearly signal the breakdown of the social contract between the ruled and the rulers. In many ways the aesthetics of protest in terms of its immediate visual, aural and formal characteristics have not changed a great deal since the description of a demonstration in Trafalgar Square in London in 1887, with the location, protestors, organizational structures, police, media, the historical record and its interpretation. Yet, “the smell, the taste, the noise, the spectacle, the sheer existential experience that once mediatized, is always just out of reach” (Aulich 2019, 269–270). Performativity and consistent physical presence over a period of time are essential for protests. From the aesthetic perspective, protests in here are the crowd, banners, posters, speeches, chants, songs, and actions of protesters and police. Then there are the aesthetics of the trace of the demonstrations in analogue and digital media, in the imagination and memory, and in their systems of distribution and wider cultural contexts. The activist, interpretant, and participant share in the production of knowledge surrounding the protest, at the time and subsequently (Aulich 2019, 272). Recently, smartphones started to play a vital part in analysed protests and, to a large extent new media platforms, have replaced print media. They are capable of recording the users' immediate experience aurally and visually and providing instantaneous access to the Internet and potential worldwide audiences (Aulich 2019, 285–286).

Within the spectrum of protest typologies, the strike merits specific consideration. A strike is a message that expresses opposition, disagreement, anger, disappointment, frustration, and other emotions and attitudes. It is a genre of political communication which encompasses the complex process of exchanging information and ideas between various political actors, aimed at influencing public opinion, gaining

power, or legitimising political decisions (Hart and Kelsey 2019). Striking is a means of collective action consisting of interrupting work, sometimes blocking a specific space, manifesting discontent, demanding changes, or drawing attention to a specific political, social, or economic problem. This action is described in Article 57 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, and is also regulated by the Act of July 24, 2015, the Law on Assemblies.¹ Through collective action, strikers exert pressure on decision-makers, such as governments, public institutions, or employers, and induce them to take specific actions or change policies. Strikes, demonstrations, and protests can be a tool for articulating demands in a visible and widely commented manner in the public sphere, making them an essential element in negotiation and democratic processes. “As rhetoric, the riots did more than amplify the message of anger and rage and frustration that people were feeling at the time; they also helped (re)constitute communities of people” (Childers 2022, 15).

Strikes usually have a collective communicator, e.g., representatives of an organisation (political party or trade union), a professional group (in Poland, most often nurses, miners, entrepreneurs, farmers), or a social class/stratum (the working class). Creating an appealing collective identity is crucial for effective communication (Wouters 2019, 405). Therefore, protest organisers must strive to ensure that the public recognises and appreciates their efforts in the group’s self-presentation. Not only the leaders of the protesters, but every citizen involved in the protest can become a rhetor. They do not even have to engage in verbal communication; it is enough that they manifest specific values and postulates through clothing, gestures, and props (Ornatowski 2021, 22). The attractiveness of the presentation depends on the dramaturgy, and an orientation towards conflict, controversy, and discrepancies guarantees this. Indeed, the participants in Polish farmers’ protests have been using a repertoire of proven actions for over 30 years: “they burn tires, spill grain on roads, block roads, and organise demonstrations in front of voivodeship offices”² (Nowakowska et al. 2025, 174).

The addressee of the content expressed during civic protests, and at the same time the adversary, is most often the authorities, as evidenced by the workers’ strikes in Poland in the 1980 coordinated by the free independent trade union “Solidarity.” During the inauguration of President Donald Trump on January 21, 2017, millions of Americans took to the streets as part of the Women’s March 2017, which at that time constituted the largest single-day protest in the history

1. *Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 2 kwietnia 1997 r.* Dz.U. 1997 nr 78 poz. 483; *Ustawa z 24 lipca 2015 Prawo o zgromadzeniach.* Dz.U. 2015 poz. 1485

2. A survey (Danielewski 2024) revealed a high level of acceptance for forms of farmers’ protests. According to respondents, the most approved ways of expressing opposition included demonstrations in front of public buildings (87%), road blockades (69%), and blockades at border crossings with Ukraine (64%). Only the destruction of grain from Ukraine aroused the concern of most Poles (73% of respondents were against such acts, compared to 23% supporting them).

of the United States (Felmlee et al. 2017, 2). However, a protest, as a comprehensive message, may have multiple addressees, and the overt adversary against whom the protest is directed – the party expected to fulfil the demands – is not always the most essential addressee from the protesters’ perspective. It should be emphasised that the audience constitutes a significant element within the communication model during a protest. Audience reactions, particularly support for the objectives of the striking parties, may be of utmost importance from the perspective of protest organisers. Protest actions are communicative acts that demand that observers choose sides. In staging a protest, organisers seek to establish a distinct “us” versus “them” boundary between themselves and their intended target, with the audience's response to this demarcation being the critical factor. This perspective on protest impact can be classified as the “persuasion” type of action-reaction models. By staging dramatic events, protesters aim to mobilize other publics – like the general public – to exert influence on political targets (Wouters 2019, 407). The issue of the goals that the participants in the strikes want to achieve is similar (Cameron 2022, 8); some of them are overt and declarative, while others result indirectly from the content of the slogans, the nature of the props used during the protests, and the conventions of the event.

THE PROCESS OF PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION DURING A PROTEST

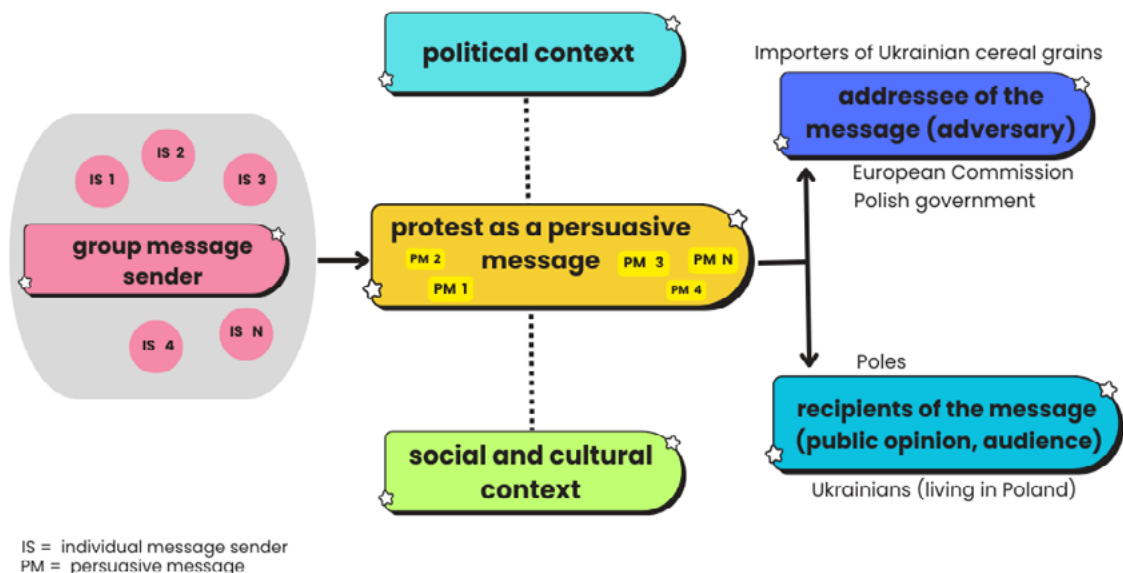


Figure 1. Diagram showing the persuasive communication process elements during the farmers’ protests in 2023 and 2024. Own source.

Considering the codes and genres that make up a protest, it is necessary to point out verbal messages (shouts of participants, inscriptions on banners and clothing, texts of patriotic songs) and nonverbal ones, including the body language of participants, their appearance, props they use during protests, aspects of proxemics, chronemics (Głazewska and Kusio 2012, 31–40, 54–55), choreographic arrangements, and sounds. The sounds produced by demonstrators, such as expressions of anger, allow protests to be classified as either “subdued and non-aggressive” or “loud, aggressive, and confrontation-oriented.” The division is determined by a range of factors, including the social structure of the protesting group and the objective of the protest itself. As an example, the study has shown that nurses engaged in strike action tend to avoid both noise and physical violence. At the same time, miners (and those representing other masculinized industries) exhibited loud and aggressive behaviours, including the use of physical violence (Kubisa 2016, 341–343). As an alternative to a binary division, we may consider the framework proposed by Karcher (2019, 31), whose research examines the modes of expressing dissent within feminist protests. She advances the concept of a spectrum that ranges from conventional, non-confrontational protest methods, such as petitioning, to extreme acts of property destruction, including bombings.

Ornatowski (2021, 17) notes that nowadays not only is language used to exert influence, but also other symbolic means, images, or actions, because these more easily omit critical reflection. The image seems to be the most effective means of shaping attitudes and influencing consciousness and emotions; the image is easy to remember and share. Actions and behaviours also shape our attitudes; importantly, action (as well as the image of action) motivates action. The place and time of an action or deed can hold both material and symbolic significance. The mode of performance is yet another aspect that can imbue the action or deed with meaning (Ornatowski 2021, 22).

3. Materials and methods

Purposive sampling was employed to compile a corpus of media materials that consists of journalists’ publications presented on the popular Polish-language general news portal [rmfm24.pl](https://www.rmfm24.pl) (special report on farmers’ protests taking place from December 18, 2023, to May 14, 2024, comprising 13 subpages, totalling 146 news items, <https://www.rmfm24.pl/raporty/raport-protesty-rolnikow/fakty>). These news items were multimodal, containing, in addition to text, photographs and short video clips. As a result of such sampling, the media image of the strikes could be obtained, and analyzing it allowed to at least partially determine the course of the protests and the specifics of the communication processes. According to the

agenda-setting theory, each medium selects events that deserve publicity and then assigns them a specific hierarchy, thus influencing how the public perceives them (McCombs and Ghanem 2008, 68).

The study is qualitative, analysing media publications to describe the mechanisms of the rhetoric of anger that occurred during the farmers' protests in Poland. In a multimodal message, the global sense depends not only on the verbal code but is also created by other sign systems. The essence of multimodal texts is the accumulation of diverse semiotic codes and communication techniques, which can mutually reinforce, complement, or be ordered hierarchically (Dawidziak-Kładoczna 2021, 26). Given the multimodal nature of the messages analysed, the study employed discourse analysis as a methodological approach. Discourse is understood here as a communicative occurrence in which language is used to express a range of ideas, beliefs or emotions (van Dijk 2001, 10).

Accordingly, the qualitative discourse analysis focused on various linguistic features, particularly vocabulary in slogans (e.g., evaluative meanings and the labeling of message protagonists). Additionally, the analysis explored mechanisms for establishing relationships between the sender and receiver (Mautner 2011, 71). Beyond linguistic features, the discourse analysis incorporated elements expressed through other codes, such as photographs, graphics, typographic designs and videos.

The second method employed in the research was semiotic analysis, applied to examine visual messages. As Kampka (2020, 97) observes, "the proximity of semiotics, rhetoric, and discourse analysis is a natural aspect of communication practice and is frequently encountered in research practice." One could note that propaganda is deliberately crafted as persuasive pictorial communication, which is typically one-sided, not necessarily grounded in factual accuracy, and designed to provoke immediate emotional responses (Ornatowski 2021, 25; Waszkiewicz-Raviv 2023, 281). When analyzing these materials in terms of semiotics (Berger 2019), attention was paid to the compositional elements, their functions and the relationships between them. The analysis sought to identify the literal meanings of the messages (denotation), but most significantly, it focused on exploring the network of associations and impressions evoked through the perception of these messages (connotation).

The third method allows for examining action as a tool of influence. As Ornatowski (2021, 23) argues, a modified version of Kenneth Burke's pentad is helpful in this case, hence the questions posed when approaching the analysis of journalists' publications, photographs, and video clips were: (1) who (agent) does, (2) what (act), (3) to whom, when, where (scene), (4) how, in what way (agency), (5) why (purpose: aim) (cf. Burke 1977).

4. Analyzing rhetorical techniques in farmers' protests

The rhetorical technique to be first analysed as an instantiation of protesters' rhetoric of anger is related to their slogans. The slogan, as a genre, is characterised by a "concise, precise, and emphatic verbal formula directed at a mass audience, usually anonymous, primarily appealing to emotions" (Benedikt 2004, 14). Slogans function dually: firstly, they attract attention, whether to a problem, an idea, a product, or a service; secondly, they create a need, for instance, for a change in attitude. Kochan (2003, 20) observed that a slogan aims to guide its recipients toward specific actions and that the mere use of a slogan constitutes an action. The role of manifestation slogans within the discourse of civic demonstrations is particularly significant. They represent the primary means of communicating reasons and arguments and often serve as the sole form of expressing individual and collective viewpoints in the public sphere (Kiełbiewska 2018, 3). Protest slogans frequently contain explicitly negative judgments of opponents (e.g., authorities), disapproval of particular actions, and explicit demands. For protesting farmers, slogans have become an instrument of expressing anger and frustration caused by the declining quality of their lives.

	Slogans documented by photojournalists – Polish originals	Slogans translated into English
1.	Sex jedyne co się oplaca uprawiać na wsi. Stop Zielony Ład!!!	In the countryside, it's better to plough the woman, not the land. Stop the European Green Deal!!!
2.	Nie chcemy dopłat, chcemy godnie pracować i żyć	We don't want subsidies; we want to work and live with dignity.
3.	Protest rolników. Obronimy polską wieś	Farmers' protest. We will defend Polish agriculture.
4.	To już jest koniec polskiej wsi!!!	This is the end of Polish agriculture!!!
5.	Stop dystrybucji skażonego materiału genetycznego	Stop the distribution of soiled genetic material.
6.	Żywność to broń Zielonego Ładu	Food is the weapon of the European Green Deal.
7.	Chcemy godnie żyć i dobrze was żywić!	We want to live with dignity and feed you properly!
8.	Nie ma państwa polskiego? Przegliście politycy	Is there no Polish state? You've gone too far, politicians.
9.	Zielony Ład = polski rozkład	European Green Deal = Poland killed.
10.	Życie rolnika to nie bajka tylko ciągła walka!	A farmer's life is not an idyll but a constant battle!
11.	Braun ma gaśnicę a my obornik i gnojowicę!	Braun has a fire extinguisher, we have manure and slurry!
12.	Stop Zielony Ład!!!	Stop the European Green Deal!!!
13.	Zielony zgon. Ursula von...	The European Green Deal is our downfall. Ursula must go.
14.	Nie rzucim ziemi skąd nasz ród	We shall not abandon the land from which we come.
15.	Putin zrób porządek z Ukrainą i Brukselą i z naszymi rządzącymi	Putin, be tough on Ukraine, the EU, and our rulers.

Table 2. Slogans presented during farmers' protests in 2024 (rfm24.pl).

The slogans' addresses include: Polish politicians (3, 8, 11), the European Commission (1, 2, 6, 9, 12), Ukrainian grain importers (5), and even fellow citizens (7). A slogan appealing directly to Putin (15) was an element of overt provocation, conveying an intentionally aggressive and even unlawful message and it elicited immediate, critical responses from Polish authorities expressed through the media: police officers identified the farmer involved and informed the prosecutor's office of the findings. The name "Putin" and the phrase "and with our rulers" were painted in red, while the remaining words were written in uppercase black letters, creating a visually compelling contrast. Behind the banner, the farmer displayed the flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, appealing not only to the current Russian leader, an authoritarian state, but also invoking Soviet symbolism, which is perceived negatively in Poland. The vivid, xenophobic composition immediately drew attention from addresses and the general public, primarily through institutional media outlets. The farmer's act was initially classified as a criminal offense under Article 256 of the Penal Code, which pertains to the public promotion of totalitarian regimes or incitement to hatred based on differences in nationality, ethnicity, race, or religion, and is punishable by imprisonment (rmf24.pl).

The formal properties of some slogans (1, 4, 13) are noteworthy, as the intensity of the expressed anger is conveyed through exclamation marks, sometimes multiple (*exclamatio*). Several slogans utilise rhythm and rhyme (7, 9, 10, 11, 13), enhancing their appeal and reinforcing the message's persuasive impact, making it more memorable and easier to chant (*repetition*). One slogan (14) features a quotation from the popular patriotic song *Rota* (1908), authored by Maria Konopnicka. It originally functioned as an anthem expressing rebellion against the partitioning powers and their Germanization policies. In other words, it is a protest song, still imbued with a significant degree of patriotism and pathos. Some slogans reflect considerations of the protesters' dignity (2, 3, 7, 10, 14), containing promises, declarations, and assurances ("we want," "we will defend," "we will not abandon"). This tactic aims to evoke emotional responses (*movere*) and gain audience sympathy (*delectare*). One of the slogans (11) contains a threat of property damage (exhortation). It includes a reference to a Polish far-right politician known for expressing hostility toward ethnic and religious minorities and for employing physical violence to advance his political aims. Examples of his actions include damaging property during a public lecture by Professor Grabowski and assaulting an attendee at a commemorative gathering in the parliament using a fire extinguisher. The combination of an allusion to a violence-prone politician and a symbol of violent action creates a veiled threat.

As the rhetoric of anger is based on distinctions between “us” and “them,” the use of the pronoun “we” in a portion of the quoted slogans serves to create a positive portrayal of the protesters while simultaneously expressing their solidarity and shared objectives. This construction of polarized group identity was further reinforced through nonverbal means. The consistent use of reflective vests by participating farmers not only enhanced their visibility but also visually amplified the number of protesters present in the public space.

The rhetoric of anger can take advantage of figurative representations and draw on symbolic and metaphorical meanings. For example, in some slogans, military metaphors were employed: references to defending someone or something (3), combat (10), and weaponry (6). With its emphasis on mobilisation and determination in pursuing objectives, this framing is typical of confrontation-oriented protests (cf. Karcher 2019, 33). Several slogans also feature the noun “stop” (5, 12) instead of verbs or other parts of the language. This stylistic choice results in concise, punchy expressions that are grammatically incorrect (*anakolut*), attracting additional attention from the audience. The term “stop” is colloquially used to denote the road sign commanding vehicles to halt before a crossroad or a railway crossing. Its graphical representation often completed or amplified the slogans. Another road sign often used as a symbol was the no-entry sign, which has a circular shape and a horizontal white stripe contrasting with a red background. Farmers expressed demands concerning grain imports from Ukraine through these symbols, explicitly calling for a ban on certain goods entering Poland. Using the signs primarily belonging to the traffic regulation system, combined with blockades of roads and border crossings as methods of persuasion, can be interpreted as an instance of parallelism in communication.

A common symbol in many demonstrations is the national flag, prominently present during farmers’ protests. Numerous white-and-red flags appeared during convoys and road blockades involving agricultural machinery, with flagpoles attached to protesters’ vehicles. The flags also featured extensively in protests involving passers-by, such as city demonstrations where tractors are legally barred from entry. The national flag symbolises patriotism and the Polish identity; however, under specific contexts, it can also convey nationalist ideologies expressed by the flag bearer. During the 2024 farmers’ protests, flags and banners exposing slogans such as “We, farmers, want to leave the European Union” and “Independence = Polesxit” underscored their assertion of Poland’s distinctiveness and scepticism toward European integration.

The less conventional symbols used during the protests included funeral motifs, notably coffins, crosses composed of candles, and a giant effigy representing death with a scythe, which was employed during the star-shaped march. Several slogans

resonated with this symbolism, referring to Polish agriculture's death, decay, or end (notably slogans 4, 9, and 13). In the imagery and slogans that complement and reinforce each other, frequently utilised by farmers, one can discern features of *commoratio*. These rhetorical devices are characterised by emotional appeal, capable of invoking both fear and empathy. Such symbols and expressions serve as potent emotional stimuli, aiming to elicit strong reactions from viewers.



Figure 2. The composition depicts a fragment of a coffin inscribed with “Polish farmer. Rest in peace”. Attention should also be drawn to the smartphones in the farmers’ hands and the numerous national flags. In the background, a tractor equipped with a lift is visible (rmf24.pl).

This is not to claim that the rhetoric of anger is purely expressive and performative; in fact, it can draw on argumentation schemes and include justifications. The 2024 protests were justified by the need for: (1) simplifying and limiting the requirements of the European Green Deal, (2) reducing the influx of agri-food commodities from Ukraine, and (3) improving the profitability of agricultural production. Consequently, the arguments had an economic rather than political character. Farmers acted in such a way as to prevent any political party from instrumentalizing the protests. This objective was successfully achieved, as evidenced by surveys asking Poles to assess the strikes. According to the results, in February 2024, 78% of citizens expressed support for the farmers, and by March 2024, the farmers’ demands had garnered approval from as many as 81% of the population (Danielewski 2024).

The protest discourse also includes arguments justifying a negative evaluation of opponents, particularly Polish and EU politicians, and the protesters’ claims. In 2024, farmers articulated the following demands: a change in the Polish government’s policy regarding the importation of cereals from Ukraine and the methods of their utilisation; a revision of EU agricultural policy; the rejection of the European Green Deal; and authorities’ intervention in farming profitability (subsidies for fuels, stimulation of the development of specific sectors within

the food industry). Implicitly, there were also objectives related to the continued presence of Ukrainians in Poland and public assistance provided to them by the government.

In terms of protest action analysis, the coverage of the strikes primarily showed farmers obstructing border crossings and roads of varying classifications and functions, ranging from provincial routes to highways, by vehicles and machinery for farming (private cars were rarely used for protest purposes). Roundabouts and other types of crossroads were also blockaded. The tractors and other mechanical equipment used in the blockades inspired respect among adversaries and observers. Through these modern giant vehicles, farmers expressed strength while simultaneously emphasising their identity. On February 27, 2024, a “star-shaped march” was organised in the capital city, where animal waste and manure were dumped before the parliament members’ offices. The deployment of excretory materials derived from livestock, including urine and feces characterized by a potent and disagreeable odor, constitutes a form of olfactory violence (Głazewska and Kusio 2012, 73). Adding to the issue, the consistency of these substances makes their removal from the contaminated location problematic, thus extending the action towards vandalism.

One of the covered protests involved the occupation of a ministry, while another consisted of a hunger strike by farmers in the Polish Parliament. The meaning of a hunger strike as a self-aggression may range from self-immolation to example setting, and from suffering, to moral blackmail. By denouncing the persecutor – the state, the justice system, or the employer – hunger strikes provide a public testimony of injustice. They not only mobilise the victim against the perpetrator, but they also count on having an audience. The protesters seek to inflict shame and then social reprobation on the figure targeted by the strike. They seek the recognition of social responsibility. The suffering of the protester renders indifference impossible for the public or the target, and it calls on the public to get involved. The hunger striker emphasises that the authorities are accountable for the fate of the protesters (cf. Siméant and Traïni 2016, 39–40). Threats were made against the Deputy Minister of Agriculture, and a false bomb threat was reported at the Ministry of Agriculture. These actions were aggressive, expressing anger and provoking it in others.

The farmers’ strikes began in January 2023 and lasted over two years. Their most intense actions occurred during the first and last quarters of each year, which is related to the seasonality of farming. The temporal aspect of the strikes was significant, as farmers organised protests during political and economic summits, gaining media attention. They occupied or blockaded locations continuously for several days; the blockade of the border crossing in Medyka lasted for as long as a month and was suspended only for Christmas. The spillage of Ukrainian grain

in Dorohusk took place precisely on the second anniversary of Russia's attack on Ukraine, which Ukrainian authorities interpreted as sabotage.

One important facet of the rhetoric of anger is its capacity to mobilize others in solidarity with the protesters. The persuasive messages and actions were primarily executed by farmers, who were occasionally joined by foresters, hunters, union representatives from other sectors, and even politicians from opposition parties. Depending on the strike's date, location, and form, the protesting group ranged in size from a few dozen to over thirty thousand individuals. Even more individuals could protest simultaneously in numerous locations: "Over half a thousand official demonstrations were reported, involving over 70,000 farmers" (rmf24.pl). In summary, farmers from all regions participated in the 2024 strikes; the impression of mass action stemmed from the large number of protests, both diachronically and synchronically (Figure 3).

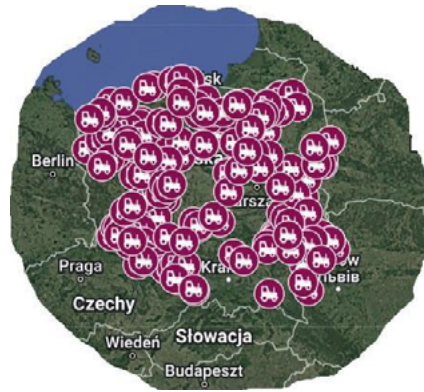


Figure 3. A digital map of Poland with numerous tractor symbols illustrating the locations of the farmers' strike on January 24, 2024 (rmf24.pl).

The rhetoric of anger can entail various levels of politicization. In this case, the striking farmers directed their demands towards those in power, irrespective of the political party currently in office. Similarly, dumping manure in front of parliament members' offices affected politicians from various factions. This characteristic of the protests suggests the strikers' non-political nature, confirming their economic concerns. Analysts attribute the high level of public support for the farmers' demands, despite the inconveniences the strikes caused, to the farmers' distancing themselves from politicians and their emphasis on ensuring food security. They also interpret the support as a safe way for the general public to express frustration and fears about the prolonged war in Ukraine and, on the other hand, about social changes and possible future sacrifices associated with the European Union's struggle against the climate crisis (Danielewski 2024).

While the farmers' adversaries were the national and EU governments, the negative aspect of their rhetoric of anger affected all Polish citizens and Ukrainians. Public and private transportation was hindered during the protests, and free movement was restricted in many cities, especially in Warsaw. The blockades of border crossings aimed against producers, exporters, and grain importers, who gained the status of community enemies (as indicated by slogans on banners). They were assigned responsibility for the crisis, and even the "death" of the Polish farming branch.

Police officers who secured the sites of farmers' blockades, demonstrations, and marches and maintained order during convoys were sometimes physically attacked. Acts of violence included throwing paving stones at police officers, setting off flares, and using stun grenades in public spaces, which was illegal and resulted in sanctions. The police also received reports "from residents of nearby apartment buildings whose private residences were pelted with eggs and firecrackers, and protesters entered their balconies" (rmf24.pl). The strikers' aggression directed towards Ukrainians who were not involved in food imports took only symbolic forms, such as slogans and performances. As it occurred later, a police officer had responded to the throwing of paving stones with brutality, for which his superiors punished him. In turn, aggressive farmers who were subdued by policemen with batons, attacked the Speaker of the Parliament by leaving manure and tires, as well as banners hung on the fence [saying] *Farmers thank you for gassing and beating in Warsaw* and *Traitor of Polish farmers!* (rmf24.pl) in front of his property.

5. Conclusions

The protests in 2023-2024 erupted from the anger and frustration of a social group that sustains itself through cultivation, animal husbandry, and the processing of farming products. Farmers expressed their discontent verbally and nonverbally, including specific, intentional actions. The protest discourse was directed at antagonists (authorities, decision-makers), potential allies, and neutral observers, thereby increasing its effectiveness. Indeed, the expression of anger framed within a rhetorical context became an effective instrument of influence, and the Polish society did not immediately condemn the protesters, despite the numerous inconveniences to which they were subjected.

For the most part, the striking farmers exercised restraint, remaining within the bounds of civil, albeit angry, discourse and refraining from outright physical violence. According to media reports, protest leaders tried to control their groups' emotions and not provoke addressees with overt aggression. Journalists from rmf24.pl reported that "the organisers agreed to place tractors only on designated

streets,” “[after] the firing of flares and stun grenades in Warsaw, the organisers dissolved the assembly immediately to avoid escalating anger.” At the same time, such prolonged and extensive protest actions could not do without some actions that fall into the category of violence, both literal and symbolic. An analysis of persuasive communication during the farmers’ protests proves that the boundary between the rhetoric of anger and impulsive actions devoid of symbolic meaning, can be easily crossed. Rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by directly applying energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action (Cameron 2022, 10).

The analysis of the rhetoric of farmers’ protests deserves continuation, if only because farmers have announced further actions in 2025. A comparison analysis could be made between farmers’ protests and, for example, Polish teachers’ strike (Ziółkowski 2020) in how those two groups persuaded others of their claims (teachers’ actions included refusing to work during pupils’ final exams). Further research could explore the rhetorical similarities and differences between the Polish farmers’ protests and those undertaken by farmers in other EU countries (Tomczyk 2024). Lastly, the research approach adopted in this article is a case study that considers publications from only one information portal. However, focusing on media interpretations of farmers’ protests would be worthwhile in demonstrating similarities and differences in how the topic was approached due to the medium’s ideology and identity. While public opinion was kind to farmers, some mass media were critical of the protests and their means of expression, especially in 2024.

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