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Faces of Populism in the Rhetoric of Leadership: How Conflict Talk Wears Out

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Abstract: The present paper employs conceptual tools of critical cognitive discourse studies (discourse space research, metaphor analysis, proximization) to explore patterns of legitimization discourse used by top Polish political

parties to claim state leadership in the years 2015–2023. The first part studies the discourse of Law & Justice, a far-right conservative party ruling Poland from October 2015 to October 2023. It describes L&J's strategies of leadership legitimization involving socio-ideological polarization, strategic generation of internal as well as 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 2023 parliamentary elections, in which L&J finally lost power. The aim of the paper is to compare and contrast the two discourses, L&J's and the opposition's, to speculate about the longevity of radical populist discourses such as L&J's. It is argued that a conflict-charged, polarized populist discourse can be an extremely powerful tool, able to grant long-term political leadership. At the same time, 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, which presages political change.

Keywords: leadership discourse, discursive legitimization, populist style, threat construction, conflict and crisis

Introduction: context, rationale and goals

The years 2015–2023 have been a turbulent period in Poland, defined by political and social unrest of a caliber unseen in the country since perhaps as long ago as its return to democracy back in 1989. It has seen momentous political events, mind-boggling legislative changes and radical executive policies, notoriously arising legal crises, social conflicts, manifestations of public dissent, as well as countless other socio-political bumps, twists and turns in virtually all areas and at all levels of the Polish political and social life. The October 2015 parliamentary elections brought a landslide victory of the far-right, ultra-conservative Law & Justice (L&J) party, which took over the legislative and executive powers after the eight-year rule of the Civic Platform (CP)'s liberal government. The resulting policy changes were enormous, including a fast

growth of state interventionism and central economic planning, constraints on the constitutionally sanctioned freedom and independence of the judiciary, as well as state control over the public media, among many others. Equally radical and consequential were L&J's changes in Poland's foreign policy, reflecting an essentially Eurosceptic disposition of the new government. The years 2015–2023 reveal a difficult history of conflicts between Warsaw and Brussels, symbolized by EU's activation, in November 2017, of Article 7 of the European Union treaty, in response to the democratic backsliding of state institutions in Poland¹. Indeed, since its coming to power in the fall of 2015 the L&J government set as one of its main goals defining anew Poland's position with respect to different critical issues surrounding Europe and the EU, such as the Eurozone crisis, populist movements, Brexit, climate change, or the migration crisis. In line with this goal, one of the L&J's first decisions was, for example, to refuse to honor the EU refugee relocation agenda agreed on by the former CP government, on the grounds of its 'realizing a German plan' at the expense of Poland's national interests (cf. Cap, 2022).

To communicate their policies to the people, L&J leaders developed their own kind of populist style, merging the standard populist discourse strategies (anti-elitism, strong ideological polarization, de-legitimization of political opponents, etc; cf. Norris & Inglehart, 2018) with some new and typically more coercive strategies. Such strategies involved the construction of L&J adversaries, both home and abroad, as enemies rather than rivals, and thus the conceptualization of the arising conflict as a source of clear and gathering threat. Positioning themselves as staunch opponents of 'unpatriotic elites' and cosmopolitan liberalism together with its globalist economic policies, L&J politicians claimed to remain on guard of the 'ordinary people,' their national identity and Christian traditions. The use of an existing ideological conflict in the service of political legitimization was thus an important feature of L&J's

¹ The Article (Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union) involves a procedure under which membership rights of a state can be suspended, as punishment for breaching EU's founding values, which include, among others, a consistent commitment to the rule of law.

policy and L&J's discourse, though still not the most distinctive one. The genuine uniqueness of Law & Justice's leadership style was its essentially *strategic*, not to say ostentatious character of conflict construction and crisis management. Unlike in Hungary, Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, and other countries where social or political crises were exploited in recent years by certain groups and parties to further their political goals (cf. e.g. Schmölz, 2019), Law & Justice made conflict and crisis, intentionally, an integral part of political agenda and policymaking (Cap, 2022). This can be best seen from the very number of conflict domains in which the L&J government was involved (both locally and internationally) in the past couple of years and which I look at more closely later in this article. Undoubtedly, the coercive powers of L&J's discourse should never be underestimated, given the success of the party not only in the 2015 elections but also four years later. Despite the first signs of recession and dwindling economic figures, the year 2019 saw another convincing parliamentary win of the party, which only endorsed and cemented the hitherto developed discourse strategies.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and, later, Russia's invasion on Ukraine saw Jarosław Kaczyński's² party initially in a good shape and it was not until mid-2022 that opinion polls started to indicate a decline in the support for the L&J government. The moment the decline began, the trend being particularly salient among the party's 2015/2019 voters, was found by many just as surprising as inexplicable. The majority of experts, including top Polish sociologists, social psychologists, and other researchers and media commentators, maintained it was completely inconsistent with the established, broadly recognized rules of people's behavior in periods of national (or global) crisis. It is generally held that in difficult, turbulent times, characterized by the presence of concrete geopolitical, environmental, military or other threats, people tend to follow their current leaders, rather than looking for political alternatives (Ansell et al., 2014). Apparently, however, neither the long period of the pandemic nor the ongoing warfare behind Poland's eastern border were able to provide conditions upholding the support for L&J's leadership. Thus, between July

² The Chairman of Law & Justice, since 2003.

2022 and March 2023 the party suffered a painful 10% drop in the polls, making the results of the upcoming elections increasingly hard to predict (even if L&J was still considered a favorite). And indeed, as the trend continued, on October 15, 2023 Law & Justice lost both the Parliament's lower house, the Sejm, and the Senate to the opposition, a self-proclaimed 'coalition for democracy'³, comprising the Civic Platform (CP), Third Way (TW), and The Left (L). Having achieved a combined Sejm vote of 54%, the three parties managed to form a coalition government, sworn by the President in December 2023. Notably, in the lead-up to the elections, the main opposition force, Civic Platform, was led by Donald Tusk, Poland's former Prime Minister (between 2007–2014) and president of the European Council from 2014 till 2019. When the CP-TW-L coalition was formed after the elections, Donald Tusk re-assumed his PM position in the new government.

Though less than a year passed since the 2023 elections⁴, their relatively unexpected result has been subject to multiple analyses, discussions and speculations, in Poland as well as abroad (see e.g. Gardulska, 2024 for an overview of opinions). In general, L&J's loss of power tends to be attributed to a mix of economic and socio-political reasons, such as the record-high inflation rate (highest in the EU in 2022), growing tax burdens for small entrepreneurs, irresponsible investment policy generating massive losses of public funds, increasingly inefficient health service and, on the European front, the government's inability to normalize the strained relations with EU institutions at Brussels. This list could readily be lengthened by adding some more direct factors of high social sensitivity and popular appeal, such as the crawling ideologization of public life, increasingly restrictive abortion laws, politicization of the system of school education, and others. Not least, particularly the second term of L&J's rule showed the involvement of numerous party members (and their families) in different economic scandals and acts of corruption (at local as well as state levels), thus undermining the founding

³ An informal name, carrying no institutional meaning in the election campaign.

⁴ This paper is being written in July 2024.

promise of the L&J government to stand by 'the ordinary Poles' (Wylęgalski, 2019; Cap, 2022).

While not detracting from a crucial role that these factors played in the outcome of the 2023 elections, I believe that the change that happened in Poland last fall – and the reasons therefore – must also be considered from a discourse analytical perspective. As has been noted, L&J party leaders fully appreciated the power of discourse and political communication (as well as political propaganda) in earning and maintaining people's support for policies introduced by their government, both home and abroad. It is even believed (e.g. Gardulska, 2024) that it was only L&J's massive propaganda, circulated round-the-clock by the state-controlled media, that made it possible for the party and the government to remain in power for as long as eight years – two full parliamentary terms. Given the strength and consistency of L&J's leadership discourse, its nature being essentially threat-based and coercive, one might wonder how that discourse was countered by the Civic Platform, Third Way and The Left parties in the 2023 election campaign. 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 any weaknesses emerging over time in L&J's discourse that could be (and indeed were) used as main targets in the campaign.

The article is organized as follows. The brief section 2 describes the data, theoretical framework and methodology used in the study, focusing on the processes of ideological polarization, coercion, and threat construction, their conceptual representation in discourse space and their manifestation (i.e., lexicalizations) in actual language and text. Section 3 defines the principal strategies of L&J's leadership 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 both the L&J's policy and their leadership rhetoric. The concluding section 5 sums up and

assesses the main findings, postulating further research in the populist discourse that extends over time, thus running the risk of 'wearing out' and becoming less and less appealing to its principal audience.

Data, theory and methods

The study conducted in the present paper is essentially qualitative and uses two distinct text selections featuring speeches, interviews and comments made by top Polish politicians. The first selection contains texts of 100 speeches, etc., by the most prominent of the L&J party and government officials, such as the L&J chairman Jarosław Kaczyński and the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki⁵. The texts cover the entire eight-year period of L&J's uninterrupted rule of Poland following the party's coming to power in the 2015 elections. This selection is used mostly in section 3 of the paper. The other selection comprises rally speeches delivered 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 spans the period from the beginning of 2023 till the very election time in October that year. I engage with this selection in section 4. Though obviously not covering all public performances by members of the two political camps in the respective timeframes, the texts grouped in the two selections paint a fair, representative image of the conceptual, rhetorical and pragmalinguistic features of the main discourses and discourse strategies on both sides of the barricade.

Given the focus of the analysis on issues of ideological polarization, social coercion, indexing political distance, conflict construction and threat generation, the above data are approached within the framework of cognitive critical discourse studies (CCDS) (see Chilton, 2004, 2014; Hart, 2010, 2014; Cap, 2013, 2017, 2022; Musolff, 2016; etc.). As has been documented in multiple critical studies

⁵ PM between 2017 and 2023.

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. Incorporating vast amounts of research in spatial cognition and conceptualization (e.g. Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Evans & Chilton, 2010) into interdisciplinary studies of pragmatically motivated construals of meaning, it affords an excellent lens on the many persuasive, manipulative, and coercive properties of discourse. Crucially, it offers workable conceptual apparatus and tools to account, through a text-based analysis, for ways in which conflict and crisis are constructed (and often perpetuated) discursively in the service of different goals sought by political leaders.

This paper employs analytical concepts and methods proposed by three popular models in the contemporary CCDS, namely Discourse Space Theory (DST; Chilton, 2004, 2010, 2011, 2014), Political Metaphor (Musolff, 2016, 2021), and Proximization Theory (Cap, 2013, 2017, 2022). The input of DST is conceptually primary and thus DST tools make for the leading approach in the analysis. DST assumes 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 lexical and grammatical choices made by the speaker. Drawing upon 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, are 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 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).

Finally, the input of the Political Metaphor model consists, mainly, in its approach to political discourse from the CMT⁶ perspective of conceptual scenarios. Conceptual scenarios are understood as conventionalized and largely automatic patterns of understanding based upon embodied experience (Musolff, 2016, 2021). As such, 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 all kinds of social and political issues provides political master scenarios (such as PROBLEM IS ENEMY or POLITICAL CONFLICT IS WAR) with a great propagandistic value. In addition, being rhetorically attractive, conceptual scenarios make a direct emotional appeal and are thus readily shareable (Ridolfo & De Voss, 2009; Oddo, 2018), that is easily remembered and recirculated. The latter property matters obviously a lot 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 social appeal of conceptual scenarios in political discourse complements the DST and Proximization frameworks in their focus on conflict, discursive coercion and legitimization of political leadership.

The L&J discourse in 2015–2023: conflict construction and crisis management

The leadership rhetoric of Law & Justice in the years 2015–2023 is a genuinely exceptional example of modern European far-right discourse (cf. Cap, 2022). It involves a consistent use of an unprecedented variety of strategies of socio-ideological polarization, conflict construction, threat generation, and crisis management, extending over a great number of domains, from international

⁶ Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 1987; etc.).

relations to local matters of healthcare or education, among others. Crucially, it does not merely respond to objectively occurring crisis situations but is used to provoke or create these situations itself, to pave the way for ready-made 'solution policies' meant to enact and strengthen the Party leadership. The analysis below focuses first on home issues – 'decommunization,' ideological conflict, historical divisions, economic inequalities, social exclusion – emerging in national/local discourse domains such as parliamentary sessions and media interviews concerning the internal situation and policies. Afterwards, I move to the L&J discourse of foreign affairs – mainly the stance toward the European Union.

Home issues: 'post-communist elites' and 'the worst sort of Poles'

Particularly in the first term (2015–2019), the bulk of Law & Justice's home-front discourse targets the party's parliamentary opponents, focusing on ideological background and differences, and making use of pragmatic distancing strategies to situate the opposition, in conceptual terms, at the remotest end of the US/THEM spectrum. Most typically, it conflates the liberal majority of the opposition and their followers with post-communist groups and ex-leaders of the country (referred to as 'post-communist elites'), by presenting L&J's opponents as 'keepers of the Round Table order.'⁷ That way, it construes the opposition as unfaithful to 'core values' and 'vital interests' of the Polish people. The result is the strengthening of a bipolar identity framework (Van Dijk, 1998) and an othering arrangement whereby the opposition is perceived as a symbolic THEM entity threatening the well-being of the US camp ('real Poles') under L&J's leadership. This firm conceptual arrangement involves, in discursive terms, a whole spectrum of judgments and negative images, such as selling Polish property to foreign investors by the former liberal government,

⁷ 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. The Law & Justice party has always been very critical of the talks, calling them 'a deal' with communists.

inability to handle unemployment and economic migration from Poland, promoting multiculturalism at the expense of the Polish cultural and religious heritage, incorporating non-Polish liberal values into family life, and many others. In L&J's post-2015 discourse, reasons for the above invariably intertwine with the existing ideological conflict between a 'patriotic mindset' (such as L&J's) and the antagonistic 'post-communist mindset' (the stance of liberal groups and parties such as the Civic Platform), whose origins go back to the 1989 transformation. In L&J's argument, the current opposition, comprising mostly members of the former CP cabinet and the party officials, are presented as direct heirs and main beneficiaries of the 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).

Kaczyński's address in (1) realizes 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 (though the Round Table as such is not mentioned in the text). This is a stable rhetorical characteristic which pertains to L&J's discourse and its stance on the opposition in the whole 2015–2023 period. The conflation involves seeing both 'power' and 'property' as valuable commodities that can be mutually exchanged or traded. As a result, the conceptualization of Civic Platform as a liberal party supporting market economy and privatization meets the conceptualization of 'communist elites,' construing one complex image of political-economic establishment wielding their power and influence over decades, now in new capitalist, modern disguises. Given the oppression suffered by Polish people in the communist years, such a conceptualization situates the current opposition – CP members, their followers – at the very far end of the 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 socio-cultural subordination. This conceptualization lies implicit in the 'pedagogy of shame,' one of the most frequent 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 quantitative considerations are outside the direct scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the phrase in question appears as many as 128 times in the 100 texts of the L&J selection, making a highly significant contribution to ideological distinctions forced by Kaczyński and his party colleagues. In the text above, it directly 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, thus generating a crisis.

Made shortly after the October 2015 elections, Kaczyński's parliamentary address in (1) is often considered an ideological manifesto as well as a rhetorical blueprint for the kind of public discourse performed by all L&J politicians, including government officials, during the full eight years of their rule in Poland (Tomczak-Boczko et al., 2023; Gardulska, 2024). In the first parliamentary term (2015–2019), the vast majority of these performances merely reiterate Kaczyński's general observations – regarding identity, the post-communist condition, and

the existing ideological divisions. However, toward the end of the term, the main points of Kaczyński's 2015 speech turn into a coherent ideological framework for direct threat generation. This new and more coercive discourse features some new cognitive-pragmatic strategies, particularly proximization. As has been mentioned in section 2, the strategy of proximization consists in the use of linguistic and discursive means to force the conceptualization of a material or ideological adversary – THEM – as encroaching, physically or ideologically, on the 'home camp' – US – shared by the political leader and his supporters. As such, proximization is instrumental in obtaining public legitimization of actions that the leader proposes to prevent or stop the invasion. Since L&J's home-front discourse addresses their (parliamentary) opposition in essentially ideological terms, 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 above, the framework for proximization is the opposition between values associated with the 'home camp' represented by the current L&J government and the (presumably) antagonistic values associated with 'the old Poland,' denoting – presumably again – the entire post-transformation period but particularly the rule of the Civic Platform between 2007 and 2015. The two presumptions follow from the way in which the US and THEM camps are defined in the speech. 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 indicating the adversary. The key lexical item triggering this implicature is the verb 'defeat,' which indirectly marks the THEM values as conceptual opposites of 'dignity,' 'justice,' and so on. Emerging from this specific characterization is a generalized

flashback vision of 'the old Poland' as a country of injustice, social inequality, and ruthless, anti-family ideology.

Building on thus constructed conceptual opposition, the strategy of proximization involves construal of the antagonistic ideology as a 'persisting threat' that is dormant yet able to (re-)appear, coming in the way of L&J's reforms to build 'a new Poland.' As one of the objectives of Morawiecki's interview is to evaluate, from a four-year perspective, the results of multiple social programs passed by the L&J majority right after the 2015 elections, this threat can be read further – in material terms – as an encroachment on the continuation of these programs in case the CP opposition returns to power. The caliber of the threat, and the emerging momentousness of the situation, are communicated via construals involving different pragmatolinguistic ploys, particularly indefinite descriptions⁸. The role of indefinite descriptions in threat generation consists, generally, in construing uncertainty of the future, conceptualized as a period that extends from the moment of speaking to an indefinite future point on the time axis (Dunmire, 2011). The threat element of such a conceptualization lies in the vagueness of the construed vision: it is impossible to determine the moment when the threat *could* materialize. The result is that anxiety levels rise, as the absence of clear outlines of the threat means that no specific countermeasures can be prescribed (Dunmire, 2005, 2011; Cap, 2022). In Morawiecki's 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.' The latter judgment counts, in political terms, as a call to maintain support for the ruling party.

In the second term (2019–2023), the conflictual stance of L&J's home-front discourse becomes increasingly salient, 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 change begins in the context of momentous political events happening around the time of the 2019 elections.

⁸ See Cap (2022) for an account of the role of other pragma-rhetorical elements in Morawiecki's interview, such as nominalizations (viz. 'persisting *threat*') and presuppositions ('lest we wake up').

On December 6, 2019, over 250,000 people take to the streets of Warsaw, protesting against a raft of changes introduced by the L&J government to all levels of the Polish judicial system, encroaching upon the constitutionally guaranteed 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 a clear and 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-Boczek et al., 2023; Gardulska, 2024) – a macro-temporal conceptual and discursive strategy of instilling social divisions and deliberately provoking social conflicts and crises in the country, in order to create conditions for the enactment of strong leadership and effective policy legitimization. In contrast with the 2015–2019 discourse, the ‘worst sort’ narrative applies far beyond the L&J parliamentary opposition – it targets virtually all social groups identified by the Party as more or less open opponents to L&J’s ‘reformatory’ policies introduced after the 2015 elections. Included in these groups (or rather one common out-group) are in turn all those, viz. (3), 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 truly heterogeneous category: from legal activists and

defenders of the constitutional order, to feminist groups, to the LGBT community ('an imported movement that threatens our identity'⁹), to environmentalists urging a decrease in coal production (a '*national treasure*' of Poland, in L&J's discourse) to curb pollution, among many others. On L&J's view, reflected in the majority of the 2019–2023 discourse, the activity of these groups is inspired by foreign interests and/or foreign ideologies and thus must 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 (3).

Foreign issues: inside or outside the EU?

As has been mentioned, the eight-year rule of the L&J government reveals a rich history of crises and conflicts in Poland's international relations, particularly between Warsaw and Brussels. These conflicts, largely created and then perpetuated by L&J's discourse, involve principally two domains. One is L&J's complete overhaul of the Polish judiciary, which was addressed (undeservedly briefly, because of space limitations) in the previous section¹⁰. The other, even more critical, is the issue of migration and the stance of Law & Justice on the EU immigration policy to handle the unprecedented migration crisis in Europe continuing since 2015. I have noted in the Introduction that immediately after assuming power in October 2015, the L&J government openly refused to honor the EU refugee relocation agenda agreed on by the former government only a few months earlier.

The analysis of L&J texts demonstrates that in its entire ruling period, the L&J government draws on the migration conflict domain to construct a specific kind of discourse, which can be termed the discourse of 'national sovereignty' (Tomczak-Boczek et al., 2023; Gardulska, 2024; etc.). While the sovereignty discourse is developed in relation to international issues, its principal target group remains the Polish political audience and L&J voters in particular. Raising questions of

⁹ PM Mateusz Morawiecki in the Sejm, February 10, 2021.

¹⁰ See Cap (2022, ch. 5) for a full picture.

political, economic and, not least, personal security, the sovereignty discourse of L&J has the primary goal of enacting strong and effective leadership, which guarantees people's safety notwithstanding the ominous presence of an external threat. The threat is constructed as less or more direct and tangible, extending over Poland seen as a sovereign state (a political kind of threat) and simultaneously as a free nation (an ideological threat). In other words, the threat to the country resulting from the migration crisis and abiding by the relocation plan proposed by the EU comprises, in L&J's sovereignty discourse, a direct threat to security caused by the influx of foreigners representing different cultures, ideologies, and religions, as well as the threat of a growing political subordination to Brussels.

Whichever kind of threat is considered, national identity and state security emerge as the two fundamental concepts shaping the anti-migration stance of L&J's sovereignty discourse, providing it with all necessary elements to construct argument that delegitimizes and rejects scenarios such as the European relocation schema. The identity-based argument serves to establish a firm and lasting US-vs.-THEM distinction, signaling issues and areas of possible political conflict (with the EU) as well as direct sociocultural clash (involving immigrants as such). The distinction is thus multidimensional; it subsumes a heterogeneous THEM, which includes migrants construed as a direct 'invader,' but also EU institutions as promoters of the relocation agenda. This means that EU is constructed, ironically, as a *foreign* entity, contrary to political facts. To draw up such a distinction, L&J leaders often appeal to the Polish Christian heritage, from which they derive distinctive national values such as freedom, tolerance, independence and, crucially, 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 (the WWII, fall of communism, etc.). It is construed as a precious commodity that must be safeguarded from any external danger or 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).

Made during a parliamentary debate on immigration, Morawiecki's statement in (4) includes the very central identity claims characterizing L&J's (anti-) immigration 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. At the heart of the message lies a strong appeal to the sense of 'independence,' which invokes, retrospectively, core elements of the national heritage in order to define and legitimize the current and future responsibilities¹¹. The historical flashbacks foster the spirit of exceptionalism, endorsing further claims of national uniqueness and implying particular rights that go with it, 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 the relocation proposal. Rhetorically attractive and thus highly shareable (Musolff, 2016), the metaphor functions, first of all, as a trigger of positive emotions (consolidating US on a positive plane) but, indirectly, also as a coercive, threat-based device. The latter follows from a possible conceptualization of HOUSE as a 'rupturable container,' which can get damaged – or destroyed – because of external pressure (Hart, 2014), i.e. the impact of immigration.

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, potentially physical threat, L&J's rhetoric uses the US-vs.-THEM differences and distinctions

¹¹ See Koller et al. (2019) on analogies to Farage's Brexit discourse.

drawn previously in other domains (such as the cultural domain addressed by Morawiecki) to present them as growing, irreconcilable and, eventually, directly threatening. This entails the application of structured argumentation patterns, involving fixed lexical, grammatical, and text organization choices. The most salient of these patterns¹² is a text-level schema comprising an interplay of ideological and physical meanings in the process of discursive (axiological and spatial) proximization (cf. Cap, 2013). 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 material 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 example (5) Jarosław Kaczyński sets up an explicit 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 THEM's anticipated impact. Generally, the argument involves a discursive transition from a starting scenario of 'remote possibility' to a redefined

¹² Particularly in the 2015–2019 texts.

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.

The discourse of the 'coalition for democracy' in the 2023 election campaign

As evidenced in 3., the leadership discourse of Law & Justice in the years 2015–2023 can be described as essentially threat-based and coercive, involving a mix of established as well innovative populist and propagandistic strategies, from ideological polarization, to prompt identification and delegitimization of the (political) opponent, to the swift and efficient management of thus generated conflict and the following crisis. The consistency, effectiveness, and undisputed success of L&J's political narrative over the years begs an intriguing question of how the impact of L&J's discourse was finally neutralized in the 2023 campaign – what weaknesses were identified and targeted, and what alternatives were proposed. The discussion in this section focuses on 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. I call the first one the 'security narrative' – an essentially geopolitical argument constructing Poland's safety as directly dependent on the status of its international relations, particularly the condition of Poland's partner relations (with)in the EU and NATO. The other narrative, largely socio-psychological in character, is referred to as the 'smiling Poland narrative.' It brings together a host of domestic issues involving the relations Polish people have with their state, and links personal well-being to a number of social freedoms which the state institutions must guarantee.

The security narrative

Performed consistently by the leaders of the three opposition parties, the security narrative can be considered, from a pragmatic standpoint, a future-oriented original proposal, and simultaneously an interdiscursive response to L&J's stance on foreign policy demonstrated in its entire ruling period:

- 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) 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) assumes 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. In making this argument, the CP/TW/L leaders draw upon the unfaltering support of Poles for their state's membership in the EU, which has never gone below the 75% threshold since the year of the accession (2004), only slightly declining in the eight years

of the L&J rule (Gardulska, 2024). The pro-European and pro-NATO argument is then contrasted with L&J's openly Eurosceptic stance and policies, which have not changed notwithstanding a dramatic change in geopolitical context triggered by the Russian invasion on Ukraine. This 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. 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.

Interestingly – and unlike their L&J opponents – the coalition leaders avoid highly radical claims in regard to the present (a time when L&J's policies are manifestly 'embarrassing' and open to foreign 'ridicule,' but have not yet produced irreversible effects), inviting the addressee to imagine and consider themselves the dire consequences of L&J's further rule. Neither Tusk nor his coalition colleagues aim to 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 (cf. Dunmire, 2005), associating the threatening future anticipations with the current L&J rule and thus performing an accusatory role. At the same time, the 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 (cf. Dunmire, 2005, 2011).

The rational, balanced management of radical claims concerning L&J's policies accords with a balanced stance the coalition leaders demonstrate, here and in other texts in the selection, in their own concept of foreign policy. This concept is particularly salient in Tusk's argument in example (6). 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,'¹³

¹³ Emphasis mine.

Tusk makes an intertextual reference to claims used in the entire 2015–2023 period to enact the key features of L&J's ideological stance (see section 3). Revealing a conciliatory posture toward these messages, he defines his essentially pragmatic policy mind-set and simultaneously acknowledges a space for dialogue with his L&J adversaries. In the latter, he makes an indirect appeal to L&J voters, acting as a representative of some of their core beliefs and expectations, notwithstanding his different political affiliation. This move not only creates a chance to broaden Tusk's electorate in the short run, but also contributes to his general image as a responsible and rational leader possessing substantial geopolitical awareness. The judgement in the final part of the argument ('it is wrong, in these critical times, to continue to confuse pride with arrogance, to seek adversaries rather than partners') further underscores these qualities, while simultaneously detracting from the leadership potential of the L&J camp.

Taken together, examples (6–7–8) represent what Dunmire (2005, 2011, etc.) calls the rhetoric of 'alternative futures.' Alternative futures can be described as conceptual 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 mechanisms and forms, including specific evidential, modality and mood configurations derived from general premises such as factual 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, on the other hand, what they deem *oppositional future* (a future of unpredictable and usually threatening outlines). I have already mentioned the role of modality in drawing up this distinction, but in fact there are further relevant lexical and grammatical devices in the texts, and even in example (7) above one can identify another such ploy – a strategically embedded interrogative ('Why, some might ask') whose function is to strengthen a contrast between the privileged future of (international) cooperation and the oppositional future of alienation. Overall, construing the future in alternative, black-and-white ways brings, according to Dunmire (2005, 2011), substantial discursive and, what follows, political benefits. Well-argued anticipations of the future play a key role in political leadership based on 'rational consideration

of options,' and can be viewed as a type of legitimization device 'to shore up calls for particular policies and actions' (Dunmire, 2005, p. 481).

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 right after the victorious 2015 elections (cf. section 3). The continuing 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:

- 9) 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!¹⁴ This means that unofficial Poxit 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).

In this address Tusk draws a well-grounded, appealing connection between L&J's politically motivated reform 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 consequences such a situation holds for Poland's further membership in the Union. His argument, unfolding in a linear manner, earns its plausibility not only from the kind of content it communicates, but also – if not mainly – from the simple, easy-to-follow form facilitating the uptake in the service of fast, direct persuasion. First, drawing upon socio-psychological tenets of persuasion (Mann & Thompson, 1988; Cosmides, 1989), a relational proposition of cause-and-effect is established

¹⁴ 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.

between the second and the third sentence, the effect part ('Polexit is already under way') being shorter and easier to process and understand than the longer cause part ('A pseudo-Court of Justice, a group of...'). In the interest of prompt uptake and credibility, the target effect part starts with an explicit demonstrative ('This means that'), which sets up the principal, explicit causative link defining the main point of the argument – the gathering threat of 'Polexit.' This point is immediately endorsed by factual reference and analogy¹⁵ ('What happened in the UK is starting here'), paving the way for the rest of the argument, which involves appeals for mobilization in the face of the growing threat. In that final part, Tusk makes use of 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 pre-emptive action is taken ('We need to stop it before...'), and centralization of the 'here and now' timeframe as the only (and short) moment to act ('It's time ...'). In fact, notwithstanding a great number of other rhetorical differences, the use of proximization by Donald Tusk and other coalition leaders does not seem radically distinctive compared to L&J politicians.

The smiling Poland narrative

Getting increasingly salient in the lead-up to the October 2023 elections, the 'smiling Poland narrative' outlines a forward-looking vision of a 'new Poland,' 'reborn' after a dark, gloomy period of the L&J rule. In its discursive dimension it involves a host of axiologically positive values, such as freedom, courage, energy, 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, 'happy' Poland. Similar to the security narrative, the smiling Poland narrative is both an original discursive framework and a response to certain themes in the L&J discourse. Specifically, it targets L&J's instrumental handling of the past, involving countless references to the most difficult and

¹⁵ For credibility and persuasion effects of analogy see Musolff (2016), Cap (2022).

usually saddest periods in the country's history which the L&J government and their media propagandists used consistently to claim Poland's national uniqueness and moral superiority over other European states (Gardulska, 2024). 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. Still, it seems to recognize correctly people's expectations for a new kind of public discourse that offers a fresh alternative to the notoriously somber and bombastic stance of L&J leaders:

10) 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 towards the future, towards 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).

Delivered merely two weeks before the elections, this address by Tusk essentializes the main lexical features of the 'smiling Poland narrative.' Including a staggering number of items depicting an inner renewal of the country and its return to being a place of 'happy,' 'smiling,' 'tolerant,' 'diverse' 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, serves Tusk to enhance the aura of solidarity with the people, pave the way for the promise of mutually friendly and understanding relations between the people and the state, and thus claim for his future government the right to speak on true behalf of the nation. While this sort of rhetoric appears, somewhat ironically, similar to L&J's 2015 discourse, Tusk's address possesses an important distinctive element that is present, in fact, also in his other speeches of the late campaign period. Making use of appealing, sophisticated word choices and phraseological links, 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'). There is no space to get deeper in the sociological underpinnings of this projection here, but given the fact that since early 2023 Kaczyński's personal popularity was on a steady decline (getting in the fall markedly lower than the approval ratings of his party; Gardulska, 2024), such a ploy seems another not-to-be-missed element in considering the possible reasons for the October 15 election results.

Concluding remarks

The unprecedented dynamics of the Polish political scene in the past 8 years follows from a multitude of social, sociopsychological, geopolitical, cultural and other factors, involving both domestic affairs and international developments/crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. This paper has tried to show that discourse and discourse strategies – such as state-level strategies of communication with mass audience – clearly count among these factors, construing the particular events and contexts as different building blocks of political leadership. The analysis in the paper has demonstrated that radical populist discourse, involving ultra-strong socio-ideological polarization, strategic generation of internal as well as external conflict, threat construction

and crisis management can be an extremely powerful tool, able to grant long-term political leadership. At the same time, it follows from the analysis that, in a yet longer perspective, such a leadership runs a considerable risk of 'wearing out' and becoming less appealing, which presages political change. This is arguably 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) tend to dominate the leadership rhetoric, often at the expense of forward-looking, less bombastic but more pragmatic policy proposals. Interestingly, as suggested by Tomczak-Boczko et al. (2023) and Gardulska (2024), the same Eurosceptic strategies that helped the L&J party in constructing its stance of 'national sovereignty,' became a communication problem later on, when the invasion of Russia on Ukraine created an urgent need for the intensification of EU cooperation. This means that a 'hardcore' populist discourse involving conflict construction and crisis management could, in the course of time, turn counterproductive on not just the local but also international plane. The two narratives of the coalition for democracy ('security narrative' and 'smiling Poland narrative') analyzed in 4. are an illustration of how such a problem can be swiftly exploited by the opposing political force.

These points need, of course, further verification. Given the post-2000 rise of populist forces throughout Europe – the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, the National Front in France, Bepe 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, etc. – there is plenty of material to study 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 socio-cultural settings. The Polish example discussed in this paper is hopefully an inspiring case – 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 not easy to explain.

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