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***THE VIRUS ON THE LEASH OF POLITICS? THE MEDIA IMAGE OF THE SARS-COV-2 VIRUS DURING THE FIRST WAVE OF THE PANDEMIC IN POLAND (PRELIMINARY REMARKS)<sup>1</sup>***

‘Some phenomena are, as it were, “political” by their very nature, regardless of what people think about them and whether they have any intentions or calculations in this regard, while others are, or rather become, “political” as a result of political instrumentalisation. This applies to many social and even natural events (such as cataclysms), situations, values, works.’

(Karwat 2015b, 35)

Key words: media image of the SARS-CoV-2, politicisation, first wave of the pandemic in Poland, coronavirus.

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this work was to present the media portrayal of the pandemic and its politicisation, including how it served as a tool of political communication. This study aimed to determine the ways in which the pandemic was profiled, as well as to indicate which thematic fields, in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, appeared both in television news programmes (*Wiadomości* TVP1, *Wydarzenia* Polsat, *Fakty* TVN) and in the press (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Super Express*, *Fakt*) from the periods March 4, 2020 to April 1, 2020, and from May 20, 2020 to June 24, 2020, referred to as ‘the first wave of the epidemic’ in Poland. In order to decipher the ways in which the coronavirus was conceptualized, we will use a method developed by Polish ethnolinguists from Lublin – the linguistic image of the world.

The image of the coronavirus that emerged from the analysed material was created by two distinct profiles: medical, and socio-political. The similarities between them were based on the negative valorisation of the virus’s activity, its negative influence on people and the environment. They also shared the metaphor of

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a struggle with the enemy – a strange and unknown opponent whose actions are difficult to predict. Finally, they contained the metaphor of fighting an opponent that is difficult to overcome.

In the very first week that a case of COVID-19 was reported in Poland, it became clear that the spread of the coronavirus was influencing the image of the virus itself and its relationship to politics. This fits into the concept of secondary politicisation proposed by Mirosław Karwat. The example of the coronavirus clearly shows that secondary politicisation does not mean the creation of a totally new image, but rather an emphasis on the political and social profile of the virus.

The production of a political and social profile of the virus contributed to the creation of an unstable hierarchical relationship between the disease and politics in media coverage. Sometimes it was the epidemic that influenced policy and regulations; sometimes it was politicians and journalists who used the epidemiological situation as a weapon in their political struggle.

### I. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The coronavirus pandemic has already become a generational experience for many individuals and social groups. It will most likely have a lasting effect on education, medicine, economy, science, and politics. The current impact of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on the lives of people today is indisputable – it has connected the biological and social dimensions of reality more closely than anything before, triggering a cascade of changes<sup>2</sup> in all aspects of human life – from medical to religious.

The pandemic has also been reflected in the growing number of scientific publications<sup>3</sup> that deal with the various aspects<sup>4</sup> of this complex subject of research. ‘Phenomena,’ wrote Stanisław Ossowski (1960, 10), ‘change their aspect when they are included in different causal relations.’<sup>5</sup> Depending on the causal relationship, the SARS-CoV-2

<sup>2</sup> This type of event is what Nassim Taleb calls a ‘black swan’, where the frame of reference that breaks down under its influence is a ‘fragile system’ (Taleb 2014; cf. Kołodziejczak 2011; Taleb 2013).

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is also pointed out by the authors of a report by the Polish Academy of Sciences who wrote in September 2020: ‘The intensity of research in this area of knowledge is best evidenced by the number of scientific papers that had COVID-19 or SARS-CoV-2 in their title or abstract. From January 1 to September 7 of this year [2020], 55932 papers had been published. In July 2020 alone there were a further 12972; which means each day of July saw the publication of 418 new papers on COVID-19. This means an unprecedented intensity of research focused on a single topic. Science made significant advances in understanding the disease and the virus during this period’ (Duszyński et al. 2020).

<sup>4</sup> We adopt the understanding of an *aspect* following Stanisław Ossowski, who wrote: ‘We speak of aspects of a subject when one highlights similarities or relationships. The differences in aspects of the same object, event or process are a matter of different conceptual categories into which we put this object; or a matter of different systems into which we include it. [...] These are empirically determinable differences in the perception and characterisation of reality. [...] I could use the metaphor that it is about differences in such or other prisms through which we see the shapes and colours of the world; and not about the retina, which is the necessary condition of the seeing of shapes and colours’ (Ossowski 1960, 8–9). How a researcher understands an aspect coincides with the definitions functioning within the ethnolinguistic paradigm – something which we will discuss later.

<sup>5</sup> All translations of Polish scientific texts and fragments of media statements presented in this article were prepared by Michał Biela.

virus has been shown to have a significant impact on the sphere of economics, on social relationships, and even on sports.

This text focuses on the political aspect – i.e. the complex relationship between the coronavirus and political reality. The theoretical basis is from Mirosław Karwat's concept of *politicity* and *politicisation* (modified for the purposes of empirical operationalisation) which includes a catalogue of objective distinctions of politicity and an extensive range of various potential mechanisms of politicisation of social reality (see Karwat 2006, 2010, 2015).

This perspective is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, politics – due to the specificity of its impact (see Karwat 2009) – determines the other spheres of life of individuals and communities, and so has a primary character in relation to them. Secondly, the so-called 'first wave' of the coronavirus in Poland coincided with a politically significant period which included the 2020 presidential election. This meant that the way the coronavirus was presented in the media was strongly associated with politics.

Implementation of this approach required the adoption of two basic assumptions/hypotheses: firstly, that the pandemic is susceptible to politicisation and can resonate in the political sphere; secondly, that this politicisation is reflected in language – an indicator which can be used to show the essence of the process. In this text, emphasis is placed on showing the potential of the concept developed by Mirosław Karwat to describe media texts that refer to both political life and the epidemic situation. The use of elements of ethnolinguistic analysis shows that such a combination of political science and linguistic tools allows Karwat's conclusion, which currently functions only in political science studies, to be extended.

For this reason, the aim of this work was to present the media portrayal of the pandemic and its politicisation, including how it served as a tool of political communication. This study aimed to determine the ways in which the pandemic was profiled, as well as to indicate which thematic fields, in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, appeared both in television news programmes and in the press. In order to decipher the ways in which the coronavirus was conceptualized, we will use a method developed by Polish ethnolinguists from Lublin: the linguistic image of the world (*językowy obraz świata* – JOS) (Bartmiński 2008, 23–5). It is most often defined as 'the interpretation of reality contained in language, verbalized in various ways, which can be presented in the form of a set of judgments about the world' (Bartmiński 2006, 12). In this work, it is definitely justified to talk about the discursive image of the world present in the media discourse (see Czachur 2011)<sup>6</sup> surrounding the image of the pandemic in the political and social realm.

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<sup>6</sup> Waldemar Czachur (2011, 87) argues that the discursive image of the world should be understood as "a discursively profiled interpretation of reality; which can be expressed as a set of judgements about the world, people, things, and events. It should be emphasized that the discursive image of the world – as a representation of knowledge – is linguistically constructed; negotiated on the basis of emotional or rational arguments and distributed by the media. The linguistic and media construction of the discursive image of

Our analysis will address specific lexical ways of profiling the pandemic, and the metaphors used to build its image in the television and press materials analysed (see Czachur 2011, 90; Tabakowska 1995, 4). The limitation of the analysis to lexis, including metaphors, is due to the fact that words are one of the most important elements, allowing the image of a selected fragment of reality contained in a given language to be read. According to the concept of Jerzy Bartmiński (1991, 162), profiling denotes ‘creating concepts, putting them in a certain perspective, i.e. in a specific set of aspects, with certain communicative intentions, hierarchy of values, and point of view’. This comprises ‘the initial categorisation of the object; secondly, the selection of aspects corresponding to the applied categorisation; thirdly, the qualitative characteristics of the object within the framework of the adopted aspects’ (Bartmiński 1993, 270). Thus profiling, depending on the adopted perspective and point of view, allows variants of a concept present in a given discourse (cf. Muszyński 1998) which differ from one another in terms of the selection and arrangement of aspects, to be indicated.

This research is based on materials from the main editions of television news programmes broadcast by TVP, Polsat and TVN (the three major TV stations in Poland) in two time periods: from March 4, 2020 to April 1, 2020; and from May 20, 2020 to June 24, 2020.<sup>7</sup> The analysis also covers press materials published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Super Express* and *Fakt* (the four major daily newspapers in Poland) in the same periods, which were first filtered using the keywords: virus, COVID, SARS-CoV-2, epidemic, pandemic, coronavirus.<sup>8</sup> Extensive quantitative analysis was carried out under the grant, including the correlation of politics and coronavirus, presented in the published report (Rybka et al. 2021, 86–95), which allowed for further, more detailed qualitative analysis. This article is an attempt to develop the conclusions drawn from the quantitative analysis and is a study of the identified phenomenon of politicisation, and its mechanisms which are present in the analyzed media.

The time periods selected for the analyses coincide with the appearance of the first cases of coronavirus in Poland, and then the period of lifting restrictions and discussions on the organisation of presidential elections in Poland. This specific timespan, from March to July 2020, is now referred to as the ‘first wave’ of the epidemic in Poland. The term ‘wave’, popularized in public discourse with the rise of the ‘second wave’ (as a colloquial variant of inductive inference by analogy), comes from the language of mathematical modelling and emerged in the context of the pandemic with the first predictive models of its spread (Breteau 2020; Mandal et al. 2020; Yang et al. 2021, 203–12).

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the world means that facts are agreed upon under the banner of the struggle for truth; where truth is not an ontological phenomenon; but only a discursively negotiated one.

<sup>7</sup> The analysis covered daily main editions of news programmes, so about 100 hours of recordings (each edition lasted no less than 30 minutes). Under the aforementioned grant, this material was subject to quantitative analyses regarding the media image of the coronavirus, which were discussed in a report published in 2021 (Rybka et al. 2021).

<sup>8</sup> The materials were collected and made available for further analysis on the Inforia platform by Press Service Media Monitoring.

## II. FROM A MEDICAL PHENOMENON TO A SOCIO-POLITICAL PHENOMENON

The linguistic image of SARS-CoV-2 in the first study period (March 4 to April 1, 2020) exposes its defining feature, i.e. the medical (more precisely: epidemiological) nature of this pathogen. This 'objective' characteristic makes up the essence of the virus and builds its identity, and which remains unchanged regardless of the context and circumstances.

Accordingly, during this period, the coronavirus was portrayed as a threat to health and life, profiled as a new, unknown pathogenic virus that should be feared and against which one should protect oneself by taking certain hygienic measures. Television broadcasts frequently contained information about the health of the patient zero, and the procedures followed in his case to prevent the spread of the infection to others. As an example, the following news titles were taken from the first week (March 4–10, 2020):

*Wiadomości* TVP1: 'The procedures work'; 'What do you need to know?'; 'Mobilisation of services in the fight against coronavirus'; 'Italians are fighting the epidemic'; 'Another case of coronavirus'; 'The world is fighting the virus'; 'New cases of coronavirus in Poland'; 'Coronavirus paralyzes Italy.'

*Wydarzenia* Polsat: 'The virus in Poland'; 'Outbreak exercises'; 'Cancelled events'; 'Safety rules'; 'Chain of danger'; 'Full mobilisation'; 'Safety rules'; 'An increase in infections'; 'Fighting the outbreak'; '6th case of the coronavirus'; 'Stranded on a cruise ship'; 'Fighting the coronavirus.'

Or the issues raised, topics where news stories were not titled:<sup>9</sup>

*Fakty* TVN: the first case of coronavirus; cancellation of mass events; the viral map of the world; procedures for prophylaxis; quarantine; the first patient; cancelled performances; preparation of Polish medical services and others to fight the epidemic; new cases of coronavirus in Poland; the virus in the world.

The aforementioned news titles and headlines build a categorisation framework – a conceptual metaphor of an enemy, a stranger that must be fought, and that we must prepare for that fight. Subsequent news stories, both in their titles and in content, point to the increasing number of victims of the coronavirus and the surprisingly fast pace of pandemic spread.

The use of the word *virus* was quickly increasing in the press and television materials (Rybka et al. 2021), both in relation to the pandemic and other spheres of human activity as well as public institutions (health care, economy, sports and others), where deviations from the norm were shown to be the result of the coronavirus itself or related circumstances (e.g. lockdowns). This image was already appearing in the first days of March 2020:

We fear the contagion, but we prefer not to see how the world limps along and ceases to function because of a disease that, after all, will be dealt with sooner or later. It is the mechanism of the world that has fallen victim to the insidious virus, and quarantines, protective clothing and the despair of people who

<sup>9</sup> TVN does not use titles for individual news items.

suddenly realise they are not immortal are only secondary symptoms of the disease that began much earlier than the first deaths in Wuhan. ('Fragility of the World', *Rzeczpospolita*, March 3, 2020)

It quickly became apparent that the spreading pandemic was influencing the image of the virus itself and its relation to social reality. Both television and press coverage showed the SARS-CoV-2 virus as dangerous, attacking not only ordinary citizens but also athletes, artists, and politicians. People in the limelight were presented as models of positive or negative behaviour and then praised or criticized by journalists. The media presented a clear image of the coronavirus as an extremely dangerous, unpredictable microorganism – something we do not really know how to fight, although it should be fought. From the very beginning, the viability of the virus contributed to its anthropomorphisation, showing it as an individual enemy that can attack, change various institutions, close schools, etc. This image of the virus as an enemy attacking not only human beings, but also various spheres of social, economic, artistic, sporting, and political life, was most distinct in press materials:

- *Super Express*: 'The virus attacks the government'; 'The virus closes schools.'
- *Rzeczpospolita*: 'The virus will cancel this election'; 'The virus infects business'; 'The virus beats tourism.'
- *Gazeta Wyborcza*: 'The virus incapacitates oncology'; 'The virus disintegrates National Health Fund'; 'The virus does not bite through cloth.'
- *Fakt*: 'The plague can be anywhere'; 'Here is the profile of the enemy!'

During the first two weeks of March 2020, the linguistic image of the coronavirus reflected not only its absolute, non-relative features, but also its relative characteristics.<sup>10</sup> On one hand, the relationality of SARS-CoV-2 was increasingly exposed as an element of interaction with the many spheres of social life. At this stage, the coronavirus was definitely more often presented as a causal agent of real changes in the economy, education, culture or sports, and less often as an effect/product of some external influence (i.e. the only exception was the effect of politics on the rate of spread of the pandemic). On the other hand, the linguistic image of the coronavirus also took into account the second type of relative features – specific contextual features, which are distinguished by

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<sup>10</sup> Relative features are those whose meaning implies some type of relationship between the element about which we are judging something (subject or object) and some other element. In the modified classification of P.F. Lazarsfeld and H. Menzel cited by Stefan Nowak, relational and contextual varieties are described as follows: 'Relational properties define an individual as a member of some pattern of one- or two-way relationships and interactions. [...] An important category of relations is causal relations; [where] the states and behaviours of each member of the relation are causes of the states or behaviours of the other member. [...] In humans; we often consider causal relations [...]. A product is then a human product to which we attribute the relational characteristic of [...] causing something to happen. Being someone's product is also a relational feature. [...] We speak of the contextual features of an individual when, in fact, it is not so much his properties in comparison with other people or his entanglement in certain relations that are characterised [...], but rather the environment is characterised, attributing to a given individual merely being in contact with it or potentially being subject to its influence' (Nowak 1985, 97–99; see also Lazarsfeld and Menzel 1961; Karwat 2010).

a more or less detailed description of the environment – as a background against which SARS CoV-2 is presented. In this way, the viewer could infer the threat associated with the virus (pandemic potential), the unpredictability, and even ‘mystery’ based on the press and television reports from China or Italy, countries which had been affected by the pandemic earlier than Poland. Images of the impact of the coronavirus were showing unexpected changes and unprecedented behaviour – a substrate for fear:

How is the situation? – There is fear. It seems that serious restrictions were imposed too late there; in Poland it had been done earlier and probably more effectively. In any case, everyone is now very careful in Italy. – Are there enough goods in the stores? – There is no shortage of anything. There is a special procedure for shopping. There is a long queue outside, people stand a few metres apart. When it’s your turn, you are given disposable gloves, then you enter the store where there are almost no people. It looks like there are maybe ten or fifteen people shopping at one time in a huge supermarket. A strange atmosphere. (‘Italy is gripped by fear’, *Super Express*, March 18, 2020)

According to rumours, in northern Kano State a mysterious disease has killed hundreds of people. But those victims are not included in the official Covid statistics. Concerned President Muhammadu Buhari spoke to the nation on Monday that the matter was being investigated. He imposed a total isolation of the state for two weeks. (‘Coronavirus spreads easier than ebola and lassa’, *Rzeczpospolita*, April 30, 2020)

News of a mysterious new disease that children are contracting has electrified parents around the world. Important institutions claim that it may be related to coronavirus. In fact, some young patients have been confirmed to be simultaneously infected with the plague from China. Doctors call it Pediatric Inflammatory Multisystem Syndrome (PIMS). Children from Great Britain, the United States (New York), Italy, Spain and France are already suffering. Can it really be caused by the coronavirus? – We do not know this. The case requires urgent investigation – stated the World Health Organisation, recommending doctors to maintain increased vigilance. (‘New disease in children’, *Fakt*, May 20, 2020)

The sense of mystery and strangeness gave the coronavirus an unknown and thus dangerous air, a disturbing and hard-to-defeat microorganism that causes *alarming symptoms*, a *strange atmosphere* or a *mysterious disease*. In media coverage, the virus required swift action to protect the population, even though no one could be sure how effective that would be.

### III. MECHANISMS OF CORONAVIRUS POLITICISATION

An exceptionally interesting example of the coronavirus in social reality is the situation in which SARS-CoV-2 appeared in politicised reality. Politicisation, understood as making something political, taking on a political character,<sup>11</sup> comes from the verb *politicise*,

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the phrase *to politicise (upolitycznić)* in the Polish Language Dictionary <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/2533090> (accessed June 15, 2021). This meaning corresponds to the characterisation of *politicity* presented by Karwat (2015a, 148–9): ‘Politicity is an abstract name which does not have classically understood designators. In order to determine the scope of this name the proprietary model of a set is applied, not a material one. That is to say: the object reference for the term “politicity” is a set of phenomena possessing the feature of politicity; but none of them is simply “politicity” or even an embodiment or carrier of politicity.

which, when used in the syntactic schema, requires not only a complement – the object that is being politicised, but also an agent – that is, someone or something that is capable of causing politicisation. One may wonder whether the politicisation was a result of the changing image of the virus itself and its profiles, which increasingly often are not medical, or whether the virus has become an object of politicisation, a tool which has become one of the elements of the political struggle in the electoral campaign, where every issue may help to build a positive image of oneself and/or a negative image of the political opponent. The answer to this question could be reduced to the headline cited in the news title published in the first days of March 2020 in *Rzeczpospolita*: ‘The virus on the leash of politics’. The metaphor of a master and a subject points to a strong asymmetric relationship between these elements, as well as to the instrumentalisation of the virus – its use in the concurrent electoral struggle.

The political (politicised) reality is not some separate autonomous and homogeneous sphere of public life (cf. Karwat 2015b, 34–8), but a certain fragment of broader social reality related to the realisation of the needs and interests of various groups: (1) the public articulation of group needs; (2) the mobilisation of collectivities for their realisation; (3) cooperation or struggle with other groups when they have the same or different interests; and (4) decision-making by those in power that determine the distribution of socially desirable goods. This particular correlation of the four properties gives political meaning to various elements of social reality – it determines their objective politicisation.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, the coronavirus was objectively politicised, as evidenced by three key premises. First, the operation of SARS-CoV-2 affected the realisation of the needs and interests of various social groups (Sroka 2020). Second, it forced those in power to

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Contrary to appearances; the status of the name “politicity” is quite similar to the terms “freedom”, “equality” and “justice”. Neither freedom, nor equality, nor justice are embodied or personified, i.e. they can’t be someone or something. We can only say that certain situations, decisions or solutions are, or are not, just [...]’.

<sup>12</sup> ‘The secondary political meaning of the phenomenon is that while it did not originate as an element or product of “pure politics”;

– it either has political significance (it produces certain effects in political life and its consequences are politically significant);

– or it fulfils certain political functions (responds to the demand of a political force; becomes a link in the service of someone’s political interests, or plays a role in political life as a form of coexistence of various interests and views; it fulfils certain tasks in the functioning of the political system as a whole); or acquires a certain political context (is related to the manifestation and implementation of interests; aspirations and views that constitute politics; is a cause, effect or correlate of certain tendencies, events, transformations or political actions);

– or it is given a political meaning by certain subjects–senders and receivers in the processes of social communication; it is given a certain subjective sense (connected with certain views and intentions; i.e. with the desire to express one’s own views; with one’s own evaluation; and also with an attempt to impose it on others; with one’s own aspirations for something);

– or it becomes the subject of a dispute; a political fight;

– or becomes a tool, a means, an opportunity, or a pretext for someone else’s political action’ (Karwat 2010, 74–5).

‘respond structurally’, that is, to make decisions of macro-social scope and significance (Spadaro 2020). Third, it significantly altered the ‘architecture’ (norms, values, and practices) of institutions and authorities.

Almost from the beginning of the pandemic in Poland, press and television materials included the aforementioned correlations. They displayed representatives of various social groups, reporting on how SARS-CoV-2 was affecting their situations (the possibility of realizing their needs and interests) directly and indirectly through the decisions of the government and parliament (the first premise of objective politicisation).

Experts diagnosed how the global cancellation of sporting events could affect the businesses of companies supporting sports, and predicted what the future holds for sports sponsorship. [...] The pandemic has caused huge problems for sport and the entire sport-related industry. Events around the world have suffered, including league games and the Olympics. Advertising and media contracts had been renegotiated, and the reduced demand for equipment, clothing and other services affected the entire sports-related industry. (‘The world of sport will be different’, *Rzeczpospolita*, June 3, 2020)

The changes forced by the coronavirus panic, along with widespread isolation and remote working, have affected the media. Newspaper publishers, due to limited distribution options for paper editions, for example, had to focus their operations on e-commerce overnight.

Recent months have made it clear to companies in many industries that digital technology is not a fad but rather a necessary part of business, not just in providing a competitive advantage but even the ability to survive in difficult times. The way many people and businesses have operated as a result of the pandemic has changed so much that without increased digitisation efforts, it will be difficult to respond to new trends in this altered world. Participants in the conference ‘Digital Economy – Evolution or Revolution after Covid-19’ spoke about the significant challenges and threats, and also the unique opportunities that have emerged for many companies as a result of the pandemic. (*Rzeczpospolita*, July 3, 2020).

With the coronavirus outbreak, things are happening in the economy that no one could have predicted just a few weeks ago. And the epidemic is still developing, at least in Poland and Europe. The Warsaw Stock Exchange is in decline – on Monday the WIG index fell to 46 thousand points. This has been the lowest level in more than four years. Suspended flights to Italy. Tourists cancelling trips to the Apennine Peninsula or to Asia. And also the Polish tourist offices, which face the prospect of bankruptcy, are asking the government for help. Mass events, fairs, shows, conferences are cancelled or moved to another date. Empty cinema halls. The event industry is terrified. The coronavirus means huge losses for the economy and for entrepreneurs. Losses that may grow as the epidemic unfolds. Of course, there are those taking advantage of the economic boom – manufacturers of masks and antibacterial gels. But for most entrepreneurs and the state, the coronavirus outbreak means huge losses and uncertainty. mBank has revised this year’s GDP growth from 2.8 percent to 1.6 percent. (‘Coronavirus may demolish our economy’, *Super Express*, March 10, 2020).

These examples indicate how strongly the image of the coronavirus was related to the perceived changes (usually unfavourable) affecting selected social groups. It turned out, however, that the virus itself, despite its anthropomorphisation, did not change reality, but rather it was the politicians, the ruling elite, who changed it under the threat

of SARS-CoV-2, and the introduced changes had a direct impact on the activities of individual stakeholder groups.

Television news concerning the coronavirus was quickly dominated<sup>13</sup> by statements made by representatives of the authorities (government and local government), either in the form of appeals to citizens, residents or believers, or in the form of announcements concerning the instruction of changes to norms (the second premise of politicisation). The vice-president of Poznań, Jędrzej Stolarski: *Dear friends, please watch masses on TV, do not come to church on Sunday, really nothing bad will happen if you don't* (*Wydarzenia* Polsat, March 11, 2020), Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski announced the *signing of a regulation on the state of the epidemic in Poland* (*Fakty TVN*, March 20, 2020), while in turn, Minister Jadwiga Emilewicz announced the *introduction of a special act on financial support, i.e. an act on special solutions to support the implementation of operational programmes in connection with the outbreak of coronavirus* (*Wiadomości TVP1*, April 07, 2020). On one hand, the presented remedies fit into the basic medical profile of the virus – they can be considered as a kind of medicine to overcome the disease, but on the other hand, they include elements of a politicised image of the coronavirus, changing both the life of an individual and a social group, as well as influencing politically important decisions.

With regard to the first and second premises of politicisation of the virus, they took place through a cause-and-effect relationship in which the virus directly affected the interests and needs of different social groups, indirectly via legislation enacted by those in power under the influence of the growing pandemic, or as a consequence of actions taken by those in power. In the latter case, policymakers most often attributed to their actions (e.g. legislation) the power to limit the spread of the disease: *The virus, proclaimed UK Prime Minister Boris Jonson, is a sneaky robber who attacked us suddenly and has just been by chance caught by us* (*Fakty TVN*, April 27, 2020). A peculiar variation of objective relational politicisation is a situation in which those in power feel compelled to take a stand not so much on the virus or epidemic itself, but on the opinions of unidentified individuals circulating about it. For example, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said: *I'm getting all sorts of rumours, unverified information, such as those about closing stores, closing cities, please, this is absolutely fake news!* (*Wydarzenia* Polsat, March 12, 2020). President Andrzej Duda spoke in a similar tone: *I am hearing rumours that a state of emergency is to be introduced, but at the moment there is no such proposal* (*Wiadomości TVP1*, March 13, 2020). In this material, we can see the co-occurrence of aspects characteristic of the medical profile (the virus is a microorganism that takes away human health and often life, and therefore it must be fought) and a socio-political profile (the virus is an enemy, robber, criminal, which insidiously, in an unexpected way, and most often adversely, affects the social and political functioning of the individual and social group, and the fight against it is carried

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<sup>13</sup> The dominance of coronavirus-related TV statements by politicians over statements by medical experts is also confirmed by quantitative statistical data – see Rybka et al. 2021.

out using political tools). As we can see, both profiles share the aspect of an enemy threatening the existing way of life, against which the fight is undertaken. What differs, however, is the area of struggle.

The realisation of the third premise of objective politicisation of the coronavirus, i.e. the impact of SARS-CoV-2 on institutions associated with power (i.e. politics *par excellence*), is a separate case and different from those described above. Similar to the previous premises it shows the serious impact that the coronavirus had on the shape (normative) and functioning of the electoral campaign and the presidential elections in Poland (planned before the pandemic for May 10) (Flis and Ciszewski 2020). The sanitary regulations on functioning in public places introduced by those in power from March 31, 2020 (Pecyna 2020; cf. Florczak-Wątor 2020) and the concept of postal elections (pushed for a long time, although to no avail), significantly changed the practice of the election campaign and brought the main axis of the dispute down to the question of effectiveness and efficiency of the state's handling of the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences.

Some reassuring voices in the news – Adam (resident of Kozy): *We can't treat this as a plague or some other disease. If we survive the month of March [2020], it will be OK.* (*Wydarzenia Polsat*, March 12, 2020) – were followed by concerns about sanitary safety: Gizela Jagielska (deputy director for medical affairs at the Hospital in Oleśnica): *My answer [regarding installing ballot boxes in the Covid ward] was a bit sarcastic, that yes, I can install ballot boxes in them but we will attach greetings from our Covid patients* (*Wydarzenia Polsat*, April 25, 2020). Similar voices will be reflected in the statements of politicians involved in the election campaign: PM Mateusz Morawiecki: *The pandemic is not quite behind us yet, but the fact that we have it under control makes me optimistic* (*Wydarzenia Polsat*, June 22, 2020), while opposition politician Robert Biedroń asked rhetorically two days later: *What price will we all pay so that they can save their political skins?* (*Wydarzenia Polsat*, June 24, 2020). It should be noted here that in terms of politicisation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the statement of PM Morawiecki quoted above may be considered ambiguous – ‘we have it [the pandemic] under control’ may, on one hand, be read contextually as controlling the situation in a manner equivalent to a fight, the outcome of which tilts in favour of the Polish government. On the other hand, in Polish, *to have something under control* also means to direct something, which can be read as the ability to control a pandemic, to use it according to one's own plans.

The instrumental use of the pandemic was noticeable in a variety of media messages, and viewers could often witness the co-occurrence of coronavirus with the ongoing election campaign. The same editions of news broadcasts included information on the coronavirus, the first and subsequent infections, the procedures being put in place, the rules of conduct, the recommendations for maintaining hygiene and social distancing, as well as campaign events involving presidential candidates. These issues overlapped, especially in terms of the discussion on the format of elections that would be most adequate for the epidemic situation in the country, where the numbers of infected and dead, as well as positive tests performed, were shown as variables influencing the format of the election. On the other hand, in press materials, a search combining the words *virus*

and *campaign* returned as many as 192 pieces of information. Most of them indicated a correlation: a co-interaction between the coronavirus and the election campaign, as exemplified by the following news articles: ‘Coronavirus time politics’; ‘Campaigning in the shadow of the virus’; ‘The virus will change the election?’; ‘The virus and the political medicine’; ‘The virus will elect the president’ (*Rzeczpospolita*); ‘The virus and its shadow in the campaign’; ‘Politics in the time of a plague’ (*Fakt*). They confirm the image of a coronavirus that decides everything, and which *de facto* rules Polish politics. The strong connections between the two notions even allowed for the appearance of the terms: *political coronavirus* or *political virus*, which more strongly exposes the political profile of the SARS-CoV-2 virus – one which infects, causes illness, and even leads to the death (elimination from political life) of selected elements that make up the colloquial understanding of politics. This can be confirmed by excerpts from two newspapers addressed to an educated reader, the first of which enumerates the aberrations in Polish politics; and the second, closer to the date of the elections, directly points to the virus affecting Polish politics:

Only showing the counter-candidates on public television on equal terms with Andrzej Duda would be compatible with the government’s appeals to the opposition to cooperate with the government in the times of danger. Any other practice would be gross electoral fraud. Maintaining the public illusion that the elections will be held on time is harmful, although it arguably serves those in power who have unprecedented media exposure of their actions. At a time when everything is politics, it is hard for the ruling party’s fight against coronavirus not to be. Łukasz Szumowski, a relative newcomer to politics, quickly gained recognition as the Minister of Health. [...] No less prominent a face of the fight against the epidemic is Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. If the Polish fight against the pandemic is successful, both politicians will rise to the top of the public credibility ranking. [...] Many epidemiologists predict that the wave of disease and related deaths is yet to come. So the mission of the two politicians, the face of Poland fighting the pandemic, is like riding a rearing horse – quite risky. President Andrzej Duda does not want to postpone the election. [...] His chances are still the best. This, however, may change when the elections are postponed. Jarosław Kaczyński will no longer be a hostage of Andrzej Duda’s party nomination, he will have time to withdraw his support for him and to indicate another nominee again. It seems logical to reach for one of the two heroes of the national struggle against the coronavirus. (‘The Campaign Virus in TVP’, *Rzeczpospolita*, March 16, 2020).

POLITICAL CORONAVIRUS International studies on the weaknesses of our constitutional democracies indicate that they cannot be defended when they exist only “on paper”, without being rooted in our politicians’ and citizens’ attitudes and motivations to defend it. Unfortunately, the Polish constitution is still not rooted in this behavioural pattern. Secondly, we have not been able to fortify ourselves against those to whom we give power in elections. They in turn later carry out a so-called self-coup, that is, they destroy or deform the institutions that are supposed to control them or cooperate with them. It is like letting a Texas chainsaw murderer into your home and handing him his favorite tool. Such individuals should be eliminated from political life before they stand for election [...]. Thirdly, and most importantly, the old enemy number one of democracy has returned, namely the accumulation and concentration of power, mainly in the executive branch (supported by a parliamentary majority). This political virus has now mutated into a coronavirus, perhaps less virulent (by a full 20 percent) than the one before World War II, but affecting us longer when democracy becomes infected. (‘Zakażona demokracja’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 20, 2020)

At the beginning of March 2020, press materials combined the images of the pandemic and the election campaign in the same texts – far more often than TV news programmes. They provided data on the state of the fight against the virus, where the image of the virus was built using not only the metaphor of the fight and the enemy but also the image of an element that intensifies or subsides like a wave. On the other hand, journalists pointed out the correlation between the image of the coronavirus shown by politicians (attacking vs retreating, threatening vs defeated) and the political interests regarding the date and manner of the presidential election:

The increasing number of detected infections may again affect the campaign. [...] In practice, the Polish Electoral Committee [*the Polish institution responsible for organizing elections*] may face very difficult decisions, especially as the Minister of Health uses epidemiological arguments and there are no experts in this field in the Committee that could verify them. Therefore, it can be expected that the Ministry of Health's proposals will be implemented, especially with the looming threat of infection for so many people. The Ministry has so far been sparing with information about whether such applications will be submitted. 'I think that in one or two districts in Poland I could recommend postal voting today', said the head of the Ministry of Health, Łukasz Szumowski, at the beginning of June. In the meantime, presidential candidates started mentioning the importance of observing sanitary rules during the election meetings. For example, the campaign of Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz appealed to all people taking part in presidential race to remember about the rules. ('The virus will change the elections?', *Rzeczpospolita*, June 9, 2020)

This particular technique carried out by journalists (and politicians) reflects the second mechanism of politicisation – contextual politicisation, whereby the SARS-CoV-2 virus becomes entangled in the frame of reference, i.e. the upcoming Presidential elections. In this case, its 'additional' subjective politicisation was determined by 'the circumstances of its appearance, public perception [...] the political use that someone makes of it [...], someone's gaining or deliberately giving it a political meaning, as it were, "in the second instalment"' (Karwat 2010, 74). Thus, the coronavirus in the presidential campaign functioned not only as an object of concern for the health and epidemiological safety of Poles, but also as a tool to attack political opponents, an instrument to evoke negative connotations. Andrzej Duda (at an election rally about unemployment during the PO-PSL governments) used the phrase: *unemployment has risen to 6% and it is still lower than when they ruled. They were a worse virus, ladies and gentlemen, than the coronavirus itself!* (June 2, *Fakty TVN*; *Wydarzenia Polsat*; *Wiadomości TVP1*), which evoked media resonance and met with many comments, both negative – *Comparing anyone to a disease with such a deadly toll is simply shameful* (Katarzyna Lubnauer, *Fakty TVN*, June 22, 2020) – as well as positive: *I am wholeheartedly behind our President* (anonymous statement, *Wiadomości TVP1*, June 22, 2020).

Sometimes, the emotional connotations were evoked not by a direct attack on the political competitor, but by creating a specific aura, a subjective description of the circumstances. This is evidenced by Mateusz Morawiecki's rallying speeches, cited in various media, in which he paints the picture of a storm – *Is this a good time to change*

*the captain on the raging sea?* (*Wydarzenia* Polsat, June 21, 2020) – to convince those gathered at the rally a few days later that: *in the summer, flu viruses and the coronavirus are also weaker, much weaker. This can already be seen from the situation in Poland today. You can go and vote without any problems* (*Fakty TVN*, June 30, 2020).

#### IV. SUMMARY

The image of the coronavirus that emerged from the analysed material was created by two distinct profiles: medical and socio-political. The similarities between them were based on the negative valorisation of the virus's activity, its negative influence on people and the environment. They also shared the metaphor of a struggle with the enemy – a strange and unknown opponent whose actions are difficult to predict. Finally, they contained the metaphor of fighting an opponent that is difficult to overcome (cf. Świerkowska et al. 2021).

In the very first week that a COVID-19 patient was reported in Poland, it became clear that the spread of the coronavirus was influencing the image of the virus itself and its relationship to politics. This fits into the concept of secondary politicisation proposed by Karwat. The example of the coronavirus clearly shows that secondary politicisation does not mean the creation of a totally new image, but rather an emphasis on the political and social profile of the virus.

The production of a political and social profile of the virus contributed to the creation of an unstable hierarchical relationship between the disease and politics in media coverage. Sometimes it was the epidemic that influenced policy and regulations; sometimes it was politicians and journalists who used the epidemiological situation as a weapon in their political struggle.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus and the pandemic surrounding it revealed the fragility of both the human condition and the socio-political solutions, not always approved by the Poles. The crisis observed in various aspects of human life can be, however, a Taleb-*esque antifrangility* – an opportunity for change.

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**Wirus na smyczy polityki? – medialny obraz wirusa SARS-CoV-2 w czasie pierwszej fali pandemii w Polsce (uwagi wstępne)**

Słowa kluczowe: przekaz medialny SARS-CoV-2, upolitycznienie, pierwsza fala pandemii w Polsce, koronawirus.

**STRESZCZENIE**

Celem niniejszego tekstu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie o obecny w mediach obraz wirusa SARS-CoV-2, a także o zmiany w obrazowaniu koronawirusa w aspekcie upolitycznienia go, w tym – uczynienia z niego narzędzia politycznej komunikacji. Istotne dla niniejszego badania stały się zatem próba odpowiedzi na pytanie o sposoby profilowania wirusa wywołującego COVID-19 oraz wskazanie, które pola tematyczne w kontekście epidemii koronawirusa pojawiają się zarówno w informacyjnych programach telewizyjnych (*Wiadomości TVP1, Wydarzenia Polsat, Fakty TVN*), jak i w analizowanej prasie (*Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, Super Express, Fakt*) z okresu od 4 marca 2020 roku do 1 kwietnia 2020 roku oraz od 20 maja 2020 roku do 24 czerwca 2020 roku, określanego mianem pierwszej fali epidemii w Polsce. Aby odczytać sposoby konceptualizacji koronawirusa, w niniejszym tekście posłużymy się metodą wypracowaną przez etnolingwistów lubelskich – językowym obrazem świata.

Obraz koronawirusa, wyłaniający się z analizowanego materiału, budują dwa wyraźne profile: medyczny oraz społeczno-polityczny. Podobieństwo między nimi zasadza się na aspekcie wiążącym się z ujemną waloryzacją działania wirusa, z jego negatywnym wpływem na człowieka czy na otoczenie. Dlatego też elementem łączącym oba warianty pojęcia jest obecna metaforyka walki z wrogiem – z obcym, nieznanym przeciwnikiem, którego działania są trudne do przewidzenia. Czasem też występuje metaforyka walki z żywiołem trudnym do opanowania.

Już w pierwszym tygodniu, w którym odnotowano w Polsce przypadek osoby chorej na COVID-19, okazało się, że rozprzestrzeniająca się epidemia koronawirusa wpływa na obraz samego wirusa i jego relacji z polityką. Ten obraz wpisuje się w koncepcję wtórnego upolitycznienia zaproponowaną przez Mirosława Karwata. Na przykładzie koronawirusa widoczne jest wyraźnie to, że owa wtórność nie jest elementem postrzeganym w perspektywie temporalnej: chodzi nie tyle o przekształcenie się obrazu, o jego transformację w inny, ile o wykształcenie profilu składającego się na obraz wirusa SARS-CoV-2, który w przekazach medialnych był nie tylko drobnoustrojem chorobotwórczym grożącym ludzkości, lecz również wirusem politycznym czy społecznym, obejmującym oddziaływaniem całą ludzkość.

Wytworzenie profilu politycznego (czy polityczno-społecznego) przyczyniło się do tworzenia w przekazach medialnych niestącej relacji hierarchicznej między koronawirusem a polityką. Raz to epidemia wpływała na politykę, na wprowadzane regulacje, aby innym razem to politycy i dziennikarze wykorzystywali stan walki z koronawirusem jako oręż w walce politycznej.