Magdalena MATEJA
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
ORCID: 0000-0002-5959-1082

Politics Turned Into a Playground Drama: Infantilisation of the Election Campaign for the Polish Parliament (2023) Due to Mediatisation

Abstract: This article examines the phenomenon of infantilisation in the 2023 Polish parliamentary election campaign. Infantilisation is a consequence of the mediatisation of politics, a process that has transformed electoral competition into a spectacle, while aligning political communication with mass media logic. The introductory section outlines the electoral context, during which politicians deliberately incited conflicts to provoke strong emotions, thereby encouraging the media to engage with and amplify these issues through simplified and conventionalised narratives. The second section delves into the theoretical foundations of infantilisation. It identifies several mechanisms contributing to this trend, including mediatisation, which has reshaped political operations and communication by reducing them to simplistic, emotionally charged messages. The third section addresses the methodological framework, detailing the use of discourse and narrative analysis to analyse media coverage of political conflicts. The author's findings demonstrate how different media outlets constructed narratives surrounding the provoked conflicts.

Key words: infantilisation, conflict, mediatisation, election campaign, political communication

1. Introduction

In October 2023 Poles elected a new parliament, a decision that impacted not only who would rule the country for the next four years but also which direction Polish liberal democracy would take. For the public, foreign media editors and leaders of international organisations, the election results were seen as a test of Poles' attitudes towards freedom and other democratic values, as well as the stability of the political system and the state's overall condition (Picheta CNN, 2023). The extraordinary significance of the recent parliamentary elections was underscored by the voter turnout, which exceeded 74% (PKW, 2023) – the highest since 1989, when Poland regained its sovereignty and embarked on its political transformation. The relevance of the elections is underscored by the substantial corpus of literature that has emerged within a year in political science and media studies (e.g., Lesińska-Staszczuk, 2024; Musiał-Karg, 2024; Fordoński, 2024; Pacześniak, 2024; Słomka, 2024; Dąbrowska, 2024; Szudra, Kułaga, Czerwonka, 2024), yet none addresses the issue of infantilisation in political communication during campaign.

One of the key factors contributing to the record voter turnout was the protracted and intense election campaign, marked by the conflict between the ruling right-wing populist Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and the pro-democracy, centrist Koalicja Obywatelska (KO) (Reinsford BBC, 2023). To provide a comprehensive analysis of the political communication during 2023 campaign, the author examined Polish politicians' self-narratives on X portal, journalists' media narratives about the candidates, and the

mass media agenda-building process. The analysis focused on publications discussing the communication strategies of politicians within the context of mediatisation, which is understood as the adaptation of political organisations and actors to the logic of mass media. Although Stanisław Michalczyk (2009, p. 29) noted that "Elections are governed by their own laws and their own communication logic," these laws have also become subordinate to the operational frameworks and objectives of mass media. For several decades, the media have not only reported on election campaigns but have actively shaped their course (Jachimowski, 2009, pp. 84–85). Scholars researching the process of mediatisation have correctly predicted that it would lead to a gradual simplification of political communication (Michalczyk, 2009, pp. 32; Schulz, 2006, pp. 12) and diminish the role of rationality in decision-making and political elections.

To characterise politics effectively and vividly, it is common to employ metaphors and comparisons. For instance, the analogy between politics and theatre was acknowledged by Karl Marx in the mid-19th century: "The official scene was transformed in a trice: scenery, costume language, actors, dummies, prompters, the themes of the play, the content of the conflict, the whole situation" (Blackbourne, 1986, pp. 150). The canon of sociological works includes Erving Goffman's *Presenting the Self in Everyday Life* (2020), which explores the 'theatrical' nature of human social behaviour: presenting oneself to others through a 'façade', within certain 'decorations' and withdrawing behind 'backstage'. However, in the context of struggle for power, elements of theatre, play and art were not the only recognisable features (Rubisz, 2009, pp. 112); there have also been less sophisticated associations: the term 'chaos' applied to the party scene (Jachimowski, 2009, pp. 83), politicians labelled as showmen (Sztumski 2009: 105), and politics as a spectacle. It has been argued that 'politics contains all those qualities that a spectacle has: passion, which manifests as power in various forms – whether as lust, an aim or an instrument; human heroism and human frailty; the conflict between parties vying for power, with which the audience can identify; action with an unpredictable finale, shaped by the struggles of rival individuals and institutions; and an external form capable of becoming autonomous, which, as it transforms into art, becomes content itself (Rubisz, 2009, pp. 112).

In contemporary discourse, the most fitting analogy to capture the essence of politics and the manner in which power is pursued within a democratic system is perhaps the children's playground – a space designed for physical activity, play and development of social skills (Zwiernik, 2020, pp. 45–47). Despite its purpose, the playground often becomes a place of conflict, unbridled emotions and even verbal and physical violence. Similar behaviour was demonstrated by several candidates in the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections, which prompted the suggestion that the latest phase of the mediatisation of politics be termed the 'infantilisation phase'. It is necessary to recognise, however, that infantilisation as a distinct style and approach to practising a profession is not limited to contemporary politicians – it is also characteristic of other professional groups. Researchers in the social sciences and humanities have long employed the concept of infantilisation of culture (Mroczka, 2009, pp. 108; Jasielska, Maksymiuk, 2010, pp. 6–8), attributing this peculiar regression to the marketisation of most spheres of life and the rise of excessive consumerism.

The theoretical foundation for the research conducted in this article is grounded in the findings of experts in similar areas: 1) media democracy; 2) mediatisation as a process

that has transformed the functioning of contemporary politics and society; 3) political communication, particularly during election campaigns; and 4) psychology. Within this theoretical framework, it becomes possible to conceptualise the key term, *infantilisation*. One objective of the research is to clarify how the infantilisation of parliamentary election campaigns should be understood. Another aim is to use this concept to examine specific instances of political communication through both traditional and social media. The author assumes that by using netnography and other qualitative research techniques, it will be possible to identify a clear pattern of behaviour among Polish politicians before the 2023 parliamentary elections. In addition, the media's portrayal of the conflict should be taken into account. In advancing the research, the author has formulated the following questions:

Q1: What is the infantilisation of political communication, and in what ways does it intersect with the process of mediatisation?

Q2: Which political actors adopt infantilisation as a strategy, and through what methods do they achieve their political aims? What objectives fall within the scope of this approach?

Q3: Is there a pattern of infantilised political communication that effectively garners attention from both traditional and social media? If so, what are the key components of this pattern?

Q4: What narratives does the mass media construct to portray conflicts during the election campaign, and which conventions and genres do they draw upon?

2. Mediatisation – polarisation – infantilisation

The reduction of communication with the electorate to the arousal of intense emotions, primarily through the amplification of disputes, is intrinsically linked to the process of mediatisation. A key feature of mediatisation is the staging of politics, where political events are presented as a spectacle. The allure of this spectacle is enhanced by its dramaturgy, which is ensured by an emphasis on conflict, controversy and divergence. Conflicts are deliberately exaggerated as they attract more attention from the viewers-voters than calm, substantive debates. Scandal, similarly, is not concealed but rather highlighted and sensationalised in the media, as it possesses a similar appeal. The personalisation of political communication shifts the focus to the personalities of politicians, particularly party leaders, their private lives and character traits, rather than their political programmes. As John Street notes, the modern politician has to claim support, has to become 'popular' in people's private perception. Politicians have to become well-known figures. Mass media create individuals as 'stars', whether we are dealing with a serial killer, a soap opera star or a politician (Street, 2006, p. 168). The mass audience favours the blending of politics with elements of entertainment, a phenomenon known as 'entertainisation' and 'politainment' (Michalczyk, 2009, p. 28; Schulz, 2006, p. 141). Political messages have increasingly migrated into the realm of popular culture and, like other messages constructed for this medium, are designed to entertain and relax rather than to inform and build knowledge among citizens (Street, 2006, p. 177). Dorota Piontek argues that a new form of communication between politicians and voters has

emerged, termed 'popular political communication' (Piontek, 2011, p. 32; Brzoza, 2014, p. 396). It is difficult to dispute this perspective; the figure of the celebrity is a product of popular culture – be it film, television or pop music – so politicians as celebrities adopt the formulas and symbolism of popular culture, including the genre conventions of the media, as well as the language and style of marketing (Street, 2006, p. 168).

Joachim Westerbarkey characterises the mediatisation of politics as a process whereby political organisations and actors adjust their actions to align with the logic of mass media. This dependency encompasses all phases of political communication, from planning and implementation to the presentation of political actions and decisions. At the actor level, mediatisation necessitates continuous media presence; politicians must remain consistently visible in the media to sustain their influence. Political actors engage in self-presentation, managing their public image and media relations meticulously. Additionally, they contribute to the construction of the public's perception of reality by co-creating media messages, thereby influencing how events are portrayed and interpreted by both the media and the public. Another concept that must be considered when analysing the communication behaviour of politicians is media visibility. Introduced into academic discourse by John Thompson, this concept posits that in the contemporary world, it is impossible to exist without being visible, recognisable and constantly present. Participants in today's social communication operate under the principle: "The more I put myself in the eye of the public, the more I exist" (Szpunar, 2017, pp. 494–495).

A constant presence in the media correlates with certain types of behaviour, including those that provoke or intensify the aforementioned conflict. Conflict can be defined as the incompatibility of interests, attitudes and aspirations, or as the perception of certain values as conflicting by two or more individuals. From a quantitative perspective, conflict can be categorised into two types: individual, which occurs at the level of interpersonal communication, and collective, which involves a larger group of people (Ostrowska, 2017, pp. 12–15). Conflict can serve as a pretext for creating a political message (event → news) or as a central theme around which a media narrative is constructed. Moreover, conflict is an effective tool for polarising voters, dividing them into groups of supporters and opponents, and mobilising 'their own' supporters when the situation demands it. Polish society appears to be particularly susceptible to the use of conflict as a determinant of political communication: "A society of individuals or states reaches the maximal amount of conflict, [...] when the population is distributed into two equally sized groups. In contrast, a highly fractionalised society would be associated with a low level of equilibrium conflict" (Esteban, Schneider, 2008, p. 134). This strategy is exemplified by the division into 'Liberal Poland' and 'Solidary Poland', introduced by PiS politicians for propaganda purposes in 2005 and above all by the distribution of support between the two largest parties. Conflict serves as a tool for maintaining polarisation, which is a state of bipolarity within social consciousness, particularly with regard to values. Polarisation affects key areas of social life, including the political system, family life patterns, moral issues, and religious practices (Ruszkowski, Przestalski, Maranowski, 2020, pp. 5–6).

A communication space in which it is easy to provoke conflict – an outcome highly desirable from the perspective of the major political players in Poland – is the new media, particularly social media platforms. These platforms provide users with dynamic interaction through the exchange of opinions, experiences and perspectives (Grębosz,

Siuda, Szymański, 2016, pp. 11–14), as well as serve to entertain, build and maintain relationships and develop networks (cf. McQuail, 2007, pp. 416–420). However, researchers have identified not only the positive aspects of social media's influence on users but also its role as an accelerator of the dangerous process of cultural infantilisation and other threats (Wróblewska, 2013, pp. 41–42).

The infantilisation of culture refers to the phenomenon where traits typically associated with a child – such as playfulness, impulsiveness, emotional instability, irresponsibility, short-termism, volatility, self-centredness, boundary-crossing, and breaking prohibitions – become a universal and accepted set of values among adults (Bogunia-Borowska, 2006, p. 14). Following Benjamin Barber, one could argue that the essence of infantilisation is encapsulated by dichotomies: the dominance of the easy over the difficult, the simple over the complex, and the fast over the slow. Humans have become capable of quickly processing only semantically poor and superficial data as this is a straightforward and undemanding task. Such data is readily supplied by electronic media in a 24-hour news cycle. Multitasking, i.e. the simultaneous use of multiple media or communication channels, has become commonplace; this is another behaviour characteristic of the youngest consumers that has been adopted by adults.

Photo 1. The media often structure narratives in a particular manner. Typically, this takes the form of a journalistic genre, though it may also be a convention, a type of composition, or other formats. As we can see, conflicts between politicians and those between children are represented similarly
Source: Google Images, X/@EKOlodziejczak_.

The infantile individual is characterised by immature thinking and behaviour, exhibiting conduct that is inappropriate for their age and/or position. Infantilism can also be feigned or performed. John Street (2006, p. 177) rightly observes that politicians have seamlessly integrated themselves into the landscape of popular culture, utilising its inherent techniques in an instrumental manner, while altering their language and priorities, thereby changing the way they are perceived by the public. Infantilisation, therefore, needs to be examined from two perspectives: focusing on the participant who initiates the communication process, and considering the recipient of the message. The infantilised sender simplifies the content and form of the message to such an extent that it resembles communication directed at children. The objective of this approach is to ensure that the message is easily accepted and understood by a broad audience, including those who are less politically engaged or less educated. In other words, politicians start

to behave 'like children', and are guided by their own assumptions about voters. The imagined, virtual voter is perceived as an immature, emotional individual, behaving in an infantile manner and easily manipulated. Research by social scientists, and especially the outcomes of presidential and parliamentary elections in Europe and the US, confirm that infantilism also characterises the real voter. The susceptibility to propaganda and the support given to populist candidates and parties provide clear evidence that modern voters tend to favour the easy over the difficult, the simple over the complex, and the fast over the slow.

The candidate exhibiting infantile behaviour and the voter perceived as infantile communicate through three primary channels: the first is institutional media, which before the elections publish poll results, commentaries by publicists and expert analyses; the second is social networks, where it is easy to express support for or opposition to a party or candidate; and the third is public spaces in which politicians, voters and journalists meet. The content across these three channels in the lead-up to the 2023 elections illustrates the complete subordination of political communication to the 'politics of visibility'. Candidates exerted considerable effort to ensure that the media reported on their activities regularly, sometimes multiple times a day. This strategy is based on the principle that individuals tend to favour those who appear more frequently on their screens, with the frequency of exposure correlating positively with a favourable attitude towards the subject (Szpunar, 2017, p. 500).

3. Characteristics of research procedures, methods and techniques

The problem addressed in this study can be summarised by the question: what communication behaviours characterised parliamentary candidates (or other political actors) in 2023, and how did the media respond to the provoked conflicts? It was posited that contemporary campaigning is shaped by the logic of both institutional media and social media. Consequently, the analysis focused on a selection of journalistic publications from Polish-language news portals and tweets from candidates' individual accounts on the X platform.

The document analysis stage was preceded by participant observation on the internet, conducted by the author from March 3 to October 14, 2023, on platform X. During this period, the author followed several dozen accounts associated with politicians from Law and Justice (PiS), Sovereign Poland (SP), Civic Coalition (KO), Confederation, the Left, and Third Way, with a frequency of 1 to 3 times per week, while maintaining an online observation diary (Miller, 2012, pp. 80–91). The start date of the netnographic research coincides with the activities of Donald Tusk, the leader of the largest opposition group, who began pre-campaign meetings with voters in March and communicated extensively about them on social media channels. The end of the observation period is linked to the campaign's conclusion and the election silence. Based on trends and tweet analyses, the author identified which conflict provocations warranted further investigation, including the publications of institutional media, not just social media. The second selection criterion was the politician's rank and role in their party. Donald Tusk and Mateusz Morawiecki are examples of politicians whose behaviour attracted media attention and

led to media creating particular types of narratives. Both leaders demonstrate high activity on social media. Other politicians are positioned lower in the party hierarchy; however, they enjoy considerable popularity and recognition. Due to their assigned tasks and temperaments, they fall into the category of political image that Piotr Pawełczyk (2012, pp. 10–12) described as 'skirmishers'. Hence, the following events were included in the sample, along with their media representations:

– the election meeting of Patryk Jaki[1], a politician of Sovereign Poland (a coalition partner of PiS), which took place on 17 September in Góra Kalwaria and was disrupted by Kinga Gajewska, an MP of PO (the main opposition party to PiS, the core of KO);
– participation of Grzegorz Braun, MP for Confederation (nationalists, opposition party to PiS and PO) in an open lecture by Prof. Jan Grabowski on 30 May at the hall of the German Historical Institute in Warsaw;
– rally of Donald Tusk, leader of PO, leader of the opposition on 22 June in Jelenia Góra disrupted by trade unionists from Solidarity, and press conference on 19 September in front of the headquarters of public television in Warsaw disrupted by journalist Michał Rachoń from TVP;
– a rally of Mateusz Morawiecki, the Prime Minister, a member of PiS, in Otwock (18 September) disrupted by MP Gajewska, and his rally in Świdnik (23 September) disrupted by environmental activists;
– a confrontation between Janusz Kowalski, a deputy minister in PiS government, and Michał Kołodziejczak, a politician from the extra-parliamentary Agro-Unia party, a future PO coalition partner, which took place in the building of the Ministry of Agriculture on 27 July.

The selection of news portals and social networking sites was purposive. The publications analysed originate from several news portals, each with distinct ideological and political affiliations (Press, 2023; RMF24, 2023). *Wyborcza.pl* and *Onet* are openly critical of PiS, promoting liberal or left-liberal values. Conversely, the editorial stance of *wPolityce*[2] is conservative, with the platform explicitly favouring PiS. Its columnists have frequently collaborated with Jarosław Kaczyński's party on various matters. The other portals exhibit slightly different characteristics. *Wirtualna Polska* (WP) positions itself as a neutral and independent platform, offering diverse content aimed at a broad audience. Opinions on WP's actual editorial stance are divided; some users and media analysts perceive it as leaning left, given its focus on human rights, equality, environmental protection and criticism of certain aspects of conservative politics. Others, however, observe content reflecting a right-wing perspective, particularly in discussions on the economy, sovereignty and traditional values. A similar ambiguity exists regarding the

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[1] Other PiS and KO politicians, such as Jacek Ozdoba, Rafał Bochenek, Arkadiusz Myrcha and Borys Budka, displayed behaviour similar to that analysed. However, the author decided to limit the analysis to some of the most spectacular cases due to the repetitive pattern of how the candidates played the conflict and the similarity of the media narratives about the incidents.

[2] A less popular medium, but with a clear identity, the texts published there provide an important counterbalance to the content of Onet or wyborcza.pl. By juxtaposing two different points of view, it is possible to show the diversity of media narratives through which journalists have attempted to narrate the conflicts.

ideological and political orientation of *Interia*. While the portal provides a broad range of content to attract a diverse audience, experts have noted a conservative bias in some of its publications. In contrast, *RMF24* is a news service owned by the RMF FM group, one of Poland's largest radio stations. The editorial line of *RMF24* focuses on delivering up-to-date news across various domains, including politics, the economy, sport, culture and entertainment. Owing to the portal's format, primary functions and key objectives, *RMF24* strives to maintain neutrality and objectivity in its reporting, offering a variety of perspectives and avoiding partiality.

In light of the infantilisation of political communication, the author posited that attention should be directed towards the new media environment, characterised by rapid and dynamic information transfer, where message creators employ a variety of genres and codes. Additionally, online publications are frequently edited to update existing material with new information or to correct inaccuracies. The audience of such media exhibits specific habits, engages in particular practices, is familiar with communication conventions, and, as noted in the theoretical section, demonstrates a reduced sensitivity to stimuli.

The research investigated what journalists communicated about the candidates and their activities, as well as what the candidates themselves wrote about the events in which they were involved. This dual perspective allowed for the establishment of a sequence of facts and the description of the interaction between institutional media and social media, where politicians and journalists presented their respective versions of events.

The research concentrated on a specific aspect of media content, prioritising accuracy, comprehensiveness and detail (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2006b, pp. 44–45). Therefore, only communications that referred to conflicts involving at least one political actor were included in the sample (a full list of these is included in the reference section). The media tend to focus on the most attention-grabbing events, particularly those that are visually striking, involve individual actions or are characterised by controversy and conflict. The Americanisation of election campaigns, along with other processes previously discussed, has led to a shift in the style of party communication during the pre-election period, resulting in the "transformation of political competition into political communication drama." This 'communication drama' becomes the subject of media coverage, creating a self-reinforcing cycle (Schulz, 2006, p. 144). In other words, the media begin to reference not the reality or events themselves but rather what their competition has said on a given issue (cf. self-reference); thus a conflict repeatedly discussed by journalists escalates into a hyper-conflict.

The author posits that differences exist between an event and the information reported about it. During media processing, an event, which is attributed with the status of reality, is transformed into a narrative – a story about facts. Therefore, it can be argued that the media do not merely reflect the world but rather construct it (Schulz, 2006, p. 54; Mateja, 2015, p. 45). It becomes evident that media coverage, like other narratives, includes actors, their actions, time coordinates, location, causes and effects. This observation underscores the relevance of narrative analysis as a research method that considers the specificity of media communication. A narrative is defined as "[...] an ordered descriptive sequence intended to be a record of certain events. Narratives are constructed stories that attempt to explain how the world operates. They provide us with

frameworks of understanding and rules of reference concerning the construction of the social world, thereby offering answers to the question of how we are to live" (Barker, 2005, p. 9). Narrative analysis aims to identify the elements that co-shape the structure of a story and to determine their role in the process of meaning-making (cf. Bäcker et al., 2016, pp. 185–202; Kulas, 2014, pp. 111–130).

The narrative analysis employed in this study is qualitative in nature, as are the two other methods. Discourse analysis, specifically its linguistic variant, was applied to analyse messages concerning conflicts between candidates (Mateja, 2015, p. 58). According to Lisowska-Magdziarz (2006a, p. 16), discourse is defined as a set of linguistic behaviours, the content and form of which are influenced by cognitive concepts characteristic of a particular era, a particular type of communication, a particular type of activity, as well as the practical conditions present at the time of formulating an utterance. In the context of this study, particular attention was directed towards the following aspects of the content of tweets and journalistic publications: a) vocabulary (evaluative meanings, labelling of news protagonists); b) transitivity; c) modality; d) textual coherence; e) argumentative means (Mautner, 2011, p. 64). The content analysis of tweets and journalistic publications (hypertexts) revealed the presence of photos or videos. In such cases, the compositional interpretation analysis, referred to by Gillian Rose (2010, pp. 57–81) as the 'good eye method', was employed to examine their content. This approach emphasizes interpreting images in a social, cultural, and political context, encouraging detailed analysis of visual elements such as compositional structure, content, colors, spatial organization, and, in the case of films, staging and editing.

The author's discussion of netnography, a method of participatory observation that occurs in virtual spaces and facilitates the acquisition of information regarding the behaviour of web users (Jamielniak, 2013, pp. 97–106), is situated at the inception of this section. The observation focused on assessing how quickly and in what manner journalists respond to conflicts generated by candidates and presented on their X accounts. The nature of interactions between political actors as users of the social network was also a significant consideration.

4. Presentation of analysis results

4.1. Parameters of the communication situation in which the conflict occurred

To stage a 'political drama', it was necessary to select a communicative situation with specific parameters, enabling political actors to generate conflict. Consequently, they chose to participate in election meetings, rallies, press conferences and public lectures. Nearly all of these conventional communicative situations involve the presence of an audience, whether physically gathered at the event or following through media channels. To enhance the impact of their messages, the disruptors employed various props, including megaphones, microphones, loudspeakers, sirens, trumpets, drums, and banners. From a social psychological standpoint, these can be designated as aggression triggers (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 1997, p. 509).

Let us briefly examine the structure and functions of disrupted meetings. An election rally is a public gathering organised as part of an election campaign, during which candidates or political parties present their electoral programmes, encourage voter turnout, and mobilise their supporters. Rallies often feature promotional actions such as posters, leaflets, and artistic performances. While both an election rally and an election meeting are integral components of a campaign, they differ in form, purpose and organisation. A rally is typically a large-scale gathering held in an open space, such as a square or stadium, attended by a substantial number of people and often characterised by its spectacular nature. Organising a rally requires extensive logistics, including sound, lighting, stage, and security measures. Among the observed politicians, only leaders had such spectacular gatherings organised. Those disrupting the rallies were successful: interfering with the script of the spectacle guaranteed media coverage. Kinga Gajewska, whom the police tried to separate from Prime Minister Morawiecki, was particularly effective. The attempt to detain the MP became the subject of a continuing news story (Mateja, 2015, p. 29) with a lifespan of many months.

In contrast, an election meeting is more intimate, taking place in venues such as meeting rooms, schools, libraries and local community centres. The primary objective of a rally is to mobilise a large number of supporters, demonstrate the breadth and intensity of support, and present the main points of the electoral programme to a wide audience. In comparison, an election meeting facilitates detailed discussions and the development of more personal relationships with voters. Interaction at a rally is usually one-sided, with the candidate addressing the crowd, and feedback being minimal or absent. An election meeting, however, is marked by greater interactivity, enabling voters to ask questions, discuss, and engage directly with the candidates. In the context of the meeting's intimate atmosphere, Patryk Jaki effectively neutralised Kinga Gajewska's efforts to incite conflict. It was not the SP MEP who responded with verbal aggression to the MP's provocation, but the attendees of the meeting, the government supporters. In a restricted space, Patryk Jaki adeptly regulated the collective emotions and maintained the meeting's decorum. In contrast, Kinga Gajewska, despite receiving an invitation to engage in dialogue from the SP politician and the assembled individuals, chose to depart from the room.

A press conference can be defined as an organised meeting between media representatives and public figures, organisations or institutions intending to provide information on current events, decisions, achievements and similar matters. During a press conference, the organisers present their position, respond to journalists' questions and offer detailed information, which is then communicated to a broader audience through various media channels. The presence of the TVP journalist at Donald Tusk's press conference did not constitute a violation of the convention. However, his behaviour can be characterised as a deliberate provocation, aimed at eliciting an aggressive response from the PO leader. Michał Rachoń's actions were partially successful in this regard, as the conference was disrupted, and Donald Tusk, despite maintaining a composed and calm demeanour, exhibited signs of irritation through the language he used in his retorts.

An open lecture is designed for a broad audience, extending beyond students and university staff, and therefore the subject matter should be both engaging and accessible. Such lectures are often delivered by distinguished specialists, scientists, professors or invited guests who are recognised authorities in their respective fields. The format of these

events can vary, encompassing traditional lectures as well as interactive presentations that involve audience participation. The primary objectives of open lectures are to promote science, educate the public, and foster dialogue between the academic and the local community. In consideration of the lecturer's status, the purpose of the lecture, and the social characteristics of the attendees, Grzegorz Braun's intrusion into the room where Prof. Grabowski was speaking and his overt aggression constituted a significant breach of convention, which immediately aroused media interest.

The nature of the actions taken by Michał Kołodziejczak at the Ministry of Agriculture is challenging to categorise. On the one hand, the media reported it as an unannounced visit or an intrusion into the building; on the other, it was portrayed as an impromptu consultation to which Minister Robert Telus ultimately invited Agro-Unia. Regardless of how it is classified, this was a communicative situation that does not typically involve the presence of the public or the media. Public consultation is a process through which the Ministry seeks the input of various stakeholders on proposed activities, draft laws, regulations or other legislation. This process can occur in several ways, such as through open meetings, where all interested parties are invited (public consultation), or by collecting written opinions and comments on specific proposals (written consultation). Upon entering the Ministry of Agriculture, Kołodziejczak demanded a meeting with the Minister, and all his actions within the institution were recorded by professional media cameras as well as non-journalists. It can therefore be concluded that the activist deliberately violated the conventional framework, aligning his actions with media logic.

4.2 Media narratives in response to conflict

It is observed that campaign events involving politicians, as presented by the media, typically follow this sequence (fig. 1):

Figure 1. The way the narrative of conflict between politicians is created
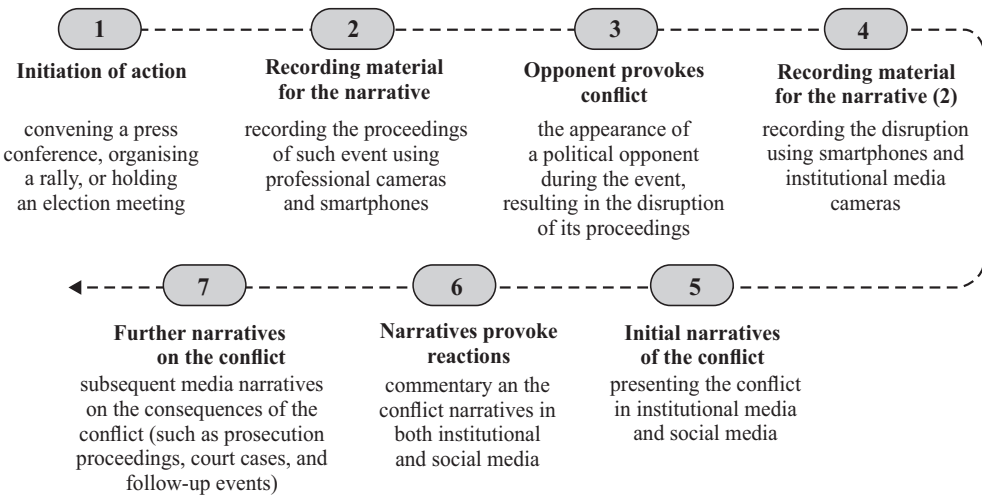
Photo 2. In January 2024, the megaphone Kinga Gajewska used to disrupt Mateusz Morawiecki's election rally was auctioned off for charity

Source: X/@gajewska_kinga.

Political actors are acutely aware of the advantages of attracting media attention to orchestrated conflicts. The deliberate nature of such actions is evidenced by Patryk Jaki's statement: "When I saw that Kinga Gajewska came to the meeting, I personally gave her the microphone (**I thought I would have content for the whole week**)." Gajewska herself informed the public via the X platform (tweet of 17 September 2023) that she intended to disrupt election rallies of PiS politicians: 'PiS supporters do not have access to reliable media, so **I will politely inform them** about #AferaWizowa **at PiS candidates' meetings** and appeal for criticism'.

In responding to the aforementioned events, the media employed vocabulary and phraseology that emphasised their contentious and sensational nature, albeit with varying degrees of negative connotation. The RMF24 portal sought to maintain an informative tone in its coverage, referring to the events at the Morawiecki and Tusk rallies as a 'disruption of the meeting' and an 'incident'. However, it characterised the dispute between the opposition leader and Michał Rachoń as a 'brawl' – a term used by the Interia portal as well. The protests by environmentalists at the Prime Minister's rally in Lubin were described as 'scuffles'. The headline capturing Michał Kołodziejczak's interaction with Deputy Minister Kowalski – 'Kowalski vs Kołodziejczak' – suggests through its syntax the confrontational nature of the meeting. In the body of RMF24's report, phrases such as "a dispute at the Ministry of Agriculture," "there was a tense conversation," and "there was a sharp exchange of views" were employed, indicating an attempt to maintain impartiality and avoid emotional bias in the description of events. In contrast, journalists from wyborcza.pl and wPolityce were less restrained, describing the situation in front of TVP as a 'brawl'. Furthermore, wyborcza.pl referred to the confrontation between Michał Kołodziejczak and Deputy Minister Janusz Kowalski as 'carnage'.

When the medium quoted a particular politician – an approach facilitated by the multimedia, multi-coded nature of online publications, where, for example, a tweet can be fully integrated into the content of an article – the language often was brutalised even further. Wyborcza.pl cited the remarks of MP Arkadiusz Myrcha (KO), who referred to the events at the Ministry of Agriculture as a 'circus'. The media also quoted Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz, who wrote on X: "PiS is no longer masking itself: it is sending TVP militias to break up opposition press conferences." The term 'militia', used to describe PiS supporters – whether TVP journalists, trade union activists or citizens gathered at rallies – also appeared in the discourse of Donald Tusk. The wyborcza.pl adopted this

terminology in the headline of one of its articles, without indicating that it was a quotation: "'Solidarity' militias in Jelenia Góra chanted: 'Turów stays, Tusk gets the hell out', 'Donald, Donald, you moron'."

In analysing media narratives surrounding conflicts instigated by politicians during the election campaign, the author focused on the structure of the story, particularly the characters involved – whether positive or negative as well as their individual/collective supporters; the plot, i.e., the sequence of events; and the message – the value, idea or information that the broadcaster intends to convey through the story. The media included in the sample presented the narrative in the style of a classic heroic tale: 1) the protagonist initiates an action, 2) the antagonist, sometimes aided by a supporting character, attempts to thwart the protagonist's plans, 3) the protagonist repels the attack, 4) the conflict is resolved. Media clearly aligned with either PiS or KO portrayed the politician they supported as the protagonist. For Onet and wyborcza.pl, the hero opposing evil is Donald Tusk, with the antagonist represented by a TVP journalist or a group of trade unionists from Solidarity. Conversely, for the wPolityce portal, the positive figure is Prime Minister Morawiecki or Deputy Minister Kowalski, with the antagonist being a KO politician, Michał Kołodziejczak or environmentalists. The role of the antagonist's supporters is depicted by PiS voters when the case is presented by wyborcza.pl: "'You jerk!', '*Volksdeutsche*' – such shouts were directed at MP Borys and the demonstrators," or by police officers securing the Prime Minister's rally: "[...] officers pulled the protesting activists down and held them on the ground [...] they shouted: 'Lie down, f***, lie down', 'You f*****', and 'm*****f******'". When wPolityce reports on Donald Tusk's conference in front of the TVP headquarters, the anti-hero's sidekick becomes Michał Kołodziejczak, who verbally and non-verbally attacks Michał Rachoń. The structure of the narrative remains consistent, and the message of the media narratives can be distilled into the formula of a "battle between good and evil," with only the names of the actors in the political drama changing.

4.3 Media discourse of conflict

The discourse surrounding events involving politicians is presented in a similar manner. When portals favouring the opposition characterised the participants in the dispute, they depicted the government side as the aggressor: "Morawiecki **criticised** Donald Tusk in his usual manner," "Morawiecki **became** increasingly **aggressive**, **attacking** his opponents," "When activists [...] took to the stage during the Prime Minister's speech, officers **brutally subdued** them, and a local newspaper journalist had her phone **smashed** when she attempted to record the incident," "Janusz Kowalski **flew into a rage** and **yelled** at farmers".[3] Similarly, the wPolityce portal portrayed Donald Tusk, Michał Kołodziejczak and Kinga Gajewska as the aggressors: "KO politicians **pounced** on Michał Rachoń," "Tusk **threatened** with imprisonment," while the Prime Minister,

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[3] At the same time, the same media quoted Tusk addressing Michal Rachoń of TVP in a vicious manner: "You are very ill-mannered. Your emotional arousal is medically disturbing. Those who disrupt opposition speeches will be held to account. [...] we will hold this kind of guest accountable for any rascality."

Patryk Jaki, Janusz Kowalski, and 'Solidarity' were cast as victims: "mine workers want to **express their protest**," "[Tusk] attacked public media journalist Michał Rachoń, who **was asking questions**."

For other media outlets covering the meetings where conflicts arose, the task appeared more challenging. However, they too succeeded in maintaining a narrative structure with clearly contrasted roles, while avoiding being accused of bias. The RMF24, Interia, and WP provided detailed accounts of the events, quoted representatives from both sides of the dispute and included tweets from politicians on both sides as well as video footage documenting the events. This approach allowed audiences to access content that was as impartial as possible, while still delivering a sensational and emotionally charged report of the conflict.

In contrast to the cases analysed above, the coverage of MP Braun's attack on Professor Grabowski and the disruption of Patryk Jaki's meeting with PiS supporters by MP Gajewska was notably distinct. Regarding Braun' actions, the media uniformly reported on the aggression that led to the destruction of property: "he **violently tore** a heavy microphone from its stand, **smashing** it against the rostrum before proceeding to **topple** columns positioned at the side of the room," "he **caused a commotion** and prevented the lecture from commencing." Wyborcza.pl quoted some of the politician's most inflammatory statements: "he **shouted** [...] '**Get out of Poland immediately!**'." The portal also emphasised the inaction of the security services responsible for maintaining order during the meeting. The aggression was universally condemned, though each outlet provided different justifications for this view. For wyborcza.pl, the attack on a scholar researching the issue of Poles' co-responsibility for the Holocaust was seen as an expression of an inability to confront difficult episodes in history. Meanwhile, the editors of wPolityce argued that Braun's actions were detrimental image-wise as they allowed Poles to be portrayed as anti-Semites.

In the case of Jaki's meeting with PiS supporters, the media reported on the 'unusual reaction of a politician' and an 'unusual incident'. This coverage referred to Patryk Jaki's non-confrontational behaviour as he invited his opponent for a discussion and handed her the microphone to let her make her points. The absence of conflict precluded the use of terminology that conveys tension and disagreement. Consequently, the language employed included phrases such as "**suddenly Kinga Gajewska** from the PO **appeared**" (instead of 'intruded'), "**Patryk Jaki stood** next to her **and waited** until she finished her speech" (implying patience), and "the MP participated in an event organised by Patryk Jaki," "decided to leave the meeting" and "also appealed to the assembled" (reflecting Jaki's convention). Although the journalistic material in subsequent paragraphs noted attempts by participants to keep Gajewska in the room ("one of the women grabbed the MP by the shoulders"), the lack of hostility and aggression between the primary figures made a conflict-driven narrative unjustified.

Conclusions

Thanks to the conducted research, it has been possible to demonstrate the nature of infantilisation as the final stage of the mediatisation of politics. In the election campaign for the parliament, infantilisation manifested itself through the provocation of conflicts among political actors, occurring in public spaces, during gatherings, and with the partic-

ipation of representatives from mass media. According to social psychologists (Aronson, Wilson, Akert 1997, p. 508), politicians exposed to intentional provocation responded with retaliation, exhibiting backward aggression. The conflicting parties employed verbal and physical aggression to assert their positions, thus capturing the attention of the mass media. The conflict became a subject of numerous journalistic narratives, which adhered to the "heroic tale" scheme, featuring clearly defined roles and values, and events organized into a repetitive sequence.

Researchers of the political mediatisation process aptly predicted that it would progress, leading to the degeneration of political communication. Mariusz Kolczyński (2009, p. 354) observed that since 2005, the primary platform for communication accompanying political rivalry in Polish political reality has been the plane of conflict. Its emergence is attributed to the PiS; however, it is a strategy that also meets the KO needs. The research indicates that parliamentary candidates were in constant dispute, which was not necessarily due to ideological differences or the content of political programmes. Politicians manifested, in a simplified, emotional, and striking manner – expressed through the notion of infantilism – that they were opponents of one another. In the case of the KO politicians, their opponents were from PiS, and vice versa for PiS politicians. In the last parliamentary campaign, the dispute, the basis to which was sometimes difficult to ascertain, was presented by the media as a pretext, a theme and a justification. This approach aligns with media logic, as negativity determines the attractiveness of news content. In addition to the attributes of novelty and timeliness, the media agenda is set by the presence of conflict, scandal or drama; uniqueness and unusualness; simplicity; and association with topics currently highlighted in news programmes, as well as visual appeal (Mateja, 2015, pp. 28–29). The analysis results expand upon the existing findings of media scholars, revealing an advanced degree of vulgarization in the communication of politicians and media during the campaign. It was not the ideas and political programs of the candidates that constituted the message of media narratives, but rather the situation of conflict.

The presented research findings demonstrate that politicians and journalists are interested in igniting and sustaining conflicts that can be narrated relatively easily and attractively. Deviating from the conflict-generating behaviour pattern, characteristic of mature individuals, causes discomfort among certain actors in the political spectacle and media personnel. Given the direction and stage of media development, especially of electronic media, it can be anticipated that the scale of infantilized behaviours in electoral campaigns will continue to expand.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization (Konceptualizacja): Magdalena Mateja

Data curation (Zestawienie danych): Magdalena Mateja

Formal analysis (Analiza formalna): Magdalena Mateja

Writing – original draft (Piśmiennictwo – oryginalny projekt): Magdalena Mateja

Writing – review & editing (Piśmiennictwo – sprawdzenie i edytowanie): Magdalena Mateja

Competing interests: The author have declared that no competing interests exist

(Sprzeczne interesy: Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieją żadne sprzeczne interesy)

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Patryk Jaki: @PatrykJaki

Janusz Kowalski: JKowalski_posel

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Z mównicy do piaskownicy. Infantylizacja kampanii wyborczej do polskiego parlamentu (2023) na skutek mediatyzacji

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje zjawisko infantylizacji w kampanii wyborczej do polskiego parlamentu w 2023 roku. Infantylizacja jest konsekwencją mediatyzacji polityki, procesu, który przekształcił rywalizację wyborczą w spektakl, jednocześnie dostosowując komunikację polityczną do logiki mediów masowych. Część wprowadzająca artykułu nakreśla kontekst wyborczy, podczas którego politycy celowo wzniecali konflikty, aby wywołać silne emocje, zachęcając tym samym media do angażowania się i wzmacniania tych postaw za pomocą uproszczonych i skonwencjonalizowanych narracji. Druga część tekstu odnosi się do teoretycznych podstawy infantylizacji. Identyfikuje kilka mechanizmów przyczyniających się do tego zjawiska, w tym mediatyzację, która przekształciła działania polityczne i komunikację, redukując je do uproszczonych, emocjonalnie naładowanych komunikatów. W trzeciej części omówiono ramy metodologiczne, szczegółowo opisując wykorzystanie analizy dyskursu i narracji do analizy medialnych relacji z konfliktów politycznych. Ustalenia autorki pokazują, w jaki sposób różne media konstruowały narracje na temat prowokowanych konfliktów.

Słowa kluczowe: infantylizacja, konflikt, mediatyzacja, kampania wyborcza, komunikacja polityczna