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INFORMATION WARFARE IN THE PRESS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF DISINTEGRATION OF THE POST-COMMUNIST POLITICAL SCENE IN POLAND IN THE CONTEXT OF ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

(December 2002 – October 2005)

Abstract

The involvement of the Fourth Estate in the reconstruction of the political scene between 2002 and 2005 revealed more than just the weakness of those who should have been keeping an eye on politicians. Above all, it was crucial evidence of the imperfection of democracy in Poland. Many considered democracy to have a purely declarative and facade nature, claiming it was even some embryonic form of mediocracy. The essence of the problem consisted in the fact that we have never initiated any public debate on the subject. Instead, there is a permanent conflict in our country. Antagonization of the society is the idea of political elites in Poland for concealment of their own ineptitude, negligence and inability to build a serious state in the heart of Europe. The press (or the media in general), acting in the interest of politicians, utilizes mudslinging techniques (“black PR”) to incite and fuel negative emotions inspired by politics and worldview.

Keywords: Polish politics, internal information warfare, politicization of the Polish press, infotainment, mediocracy

Introduction

For at least two centuries, the press has been a natural tool of communication between politicians and societies. On its pages, members of political elites would present their own views and party programmes, or debate with their opponents. The presence of politics and politicians in the press was a natural phenomenon. Thanks to the press, people interested in politics did not have to participate directly in meetings

with representatives of different political parties or with lobbyists from centres of influence in order to learn their views. It was sufficient to read one or a few press titles.

In the 20th century, the press and journalists gained a peculiar subjectivity. Due to their empowerment, the way of making of politics underwent a change. Periodicals became active players along with political parties and governments. The press became the “Fourth Estate” whose powers in the 20th century included moderation of the public debate and shaping of opinions of the masses, or even of political ideologies. Individual press titles and their editors, apart from reporting on the situation on the political scene and presentation of the politicians’ activities, became actively involved in politics as makers thereof. Over two centuries, front page publications would elevate or topple down government cabinets. The press played the role of a peculiar public forum, and journalists championed the power of representative opinion. The culmination of the process of interpenetration of the political and media sphere was the emergence of mediocracy.¹

The genesis of politicization of the press

In the 21st century, the press in its traditional (paper) form found itself in a deep crisis. The decline in quality is accompanied by the economic one, caused by such factors as dramatic drop in circulation volumes and increase of publishing costs. Unfortunately, as every crisis, this one has brought negative side effects as well. Paper press is increasingly likely to accept different compromises, making many nods towards a less demanding reader, interested not so much in politics as in political sensation. In parallel with deterioration of the press message, an even more serious factor outclassing this medium appeared. The global economic crisis of the 2000s became a catalyst for the process leading to loss of the previous subjectivity (independence) by the press and journalists. Could it have been any different, given that owners of press titles seek the favour of political and economic elites to have the budgets of their publications reinforced? They wish to receive orders for advertising campaigns from both kinds of elite. The most profitable campaigns are commissioned by the State Treasury companies and great corporations. Winning of such orders is a condition of survival. All of this makes the press dependent and causes decline of its position.

Since late 20th century, an even greater threat to the independence of press publishers and journalists has become a too far-reaching identification thereof with

individual political forces. We can observe this phenomenon in its fullness in post-Communist countries, including Poland. Most press titles identify with some of the predominant politico-ideological options and, actually plays the role of their press representations. Journalists, on the other hand, drop all pretenses to openly step out as party propagandists or even crypto-politicians.

An accurate reflection on the latter form of “practice” of the journalist profession was shared by Michał Lange – a publicist and commentator. Addressing this problem, he pointed out that as early as 1989,

“some newcomer journalists, looking for a chance to build a career, decided to join the community of politicians. However, they did not do so in order to describe political phenomena and observe the essence of the difficult political craft. They joined to exert a direct and often very powerful influence on the politics, or more accurately, on important decisions. Such an attitude was a completely innovative approach to the journalist mission. The vanguard at the time consisted of those who regard themselves today as stars of journalism or those with social authority, thus causing considerable confusion in the heads of not-necessarily-informed recipients.

A crypto-politician disguised as a journalist, directly or indirectly impacting crucial political decisions, while not bearing any personal responsibility for anything, not subject to any social or democratic control – this is a creature whose tradition in the Polish public space is more than 25 years old, and he finds itself perfectly in the 21st-century realities.

Such a ‘journalist’ plays an advisory and service role towards friendly political, social, or business groupings – with his job made easier by the fact that those three areas are intermingled and interdependent. Sometimes, he will advise how to overcome a political opponent, getting involved in an electoral campaign; another time, he will hold a thematic or ‘scholarly’ conference or, at least, a public debate allowing us to hear how much of a menace this or that political formation is and what should be done to defeat it efficiently; finally, he will compose an interview in such a way as to allow his political favourites not to be concerned about saying something they should not say.” (Lange 2016).

Under such conditions, the press and journalists do not focus on reporting on political disputes which are a natural occurrence in democracy. They become – how terrifying – participants of such disputes, or even organizers of the political scene. In fact, such participation first already revealed itself in the late 1980s, at the moment when the process of transformation of the political system had been initiated in Poland. At the stage of building of the parliamentary government majority after the June elections in 1989, it turned out that the role of the resurgent free press will entail more than performance of the informational function, since an equally important role would still be

played by the function defined by Lenin: organizing. The paradox was that the first step into this direction in free Poland was not made by the post-communist *Trybuna Ludu* but by the representative of the reborn Solidarity – its organ *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

The idea of sharing the power between the Communist and Solidarity sides, as articulated by the editor-in-chief on the front page of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in the famous text “Your President. Our Prime Minister” (Michnik 1989), contrary to the author’s intent, fully expressed the organizing function of the press. In this specific example, the involvement of Adam Michnik in the ongoing politics had a deeper basis, since while articulating his proposal of organization at the very heights of power, he was simultaneously an active politician. He became the full manifestation of the perils of personal connections between leading representatives of the Fourth Estate and the legislative as well as executive at the onset of the system transformation in Poland.

Therefore, the organizing function of the press was to remain a standard in Poland ruled by President Wojciech Jaruzelski and Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and would manifest itself many a time within the first decade of the Third Republic,² although not necessarily in such a spectacular way as in July 1989.

It was to reveal itself again in all its power in late 2002, when the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in the issue of 27 December, published an article by Paweł Smoleński, “Ustawa za łapówkę czyli przychodzi Rywin do Michnika” (“Law for Bribe, or Rywin Came to Michnik”). The next eighteen months of publicizing the affair featuring Lew Rywin, until the moment of resignation of the Leszek Miller cabinet on 2 May 2004, revealed, in all their fullness, both the scope of influence of individual press titles (media) on the Polish political scene and the scale of dependence of the Fourth Estate on politicians.

The involvement of the press in information warfare

Not only was everything that the public had learned in the process of disclosure of facts related to the Rywin affair compromising to the legislative and executive, but it also exposed the embarrassing truth about the Fourth Estate in the Third Republic. The impartiality and reliability of journalists was put into question. Worse still, the hearing of a leading Polish publicist before a special parliamentary commission set up to

investigate the Rywin affair exposed not only his own arrogance but, in fact, arrogance of a considerable part of the journalist community he had represented.³

Those outside of this community tried to go beyond the narrative framework set out by the *Gazeta Wyborcza* in their publications concerning the Rywin affair. Both leading socio-political weekly magazines, the *Najwyższy Czas* and the *Tygodnik Solidarność*, went their own way in reporting the affair. More importantly, some media, especially regional ones with ideological profiles falling somewhere between the *Trybuna* and the *Gazeta Wyborcza* or between the *Nasz Dziennik* and the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, started departing from uncritical acceptance of the version of events propagated by the editors of the *Wyborcza*.

Unfortunately, the pluralization of the press message was accompanied by progressing antagonization of the journalist community, resulting from too far-reaching identification with individual political forces. This also started affecting the reactions of a part of the society that had been involved in following the course of events through the press. Confrontation in discovery of compromising (exposing) facts about politicians, typical in case of disclosure of affairs involving them, started transforming step-by-step into confrontation of opinions about facts, sometimes even acquiring features of internal information warfare between two post-Solidarity political and media centres on the one hand and their post-Communist opponents on the other hand.

Here, a broader digression would be necessary to bring closer the process of formation of those three political and media centres. It started in 1989 and finally, in the early 21st century, brought establishment of two new centres beside the one in which the Civic Platform [Platforma Obywatelska, PO] was involved, with its leading title being the *Gazeta Wyborcza*. These included the left-wing centre represented by the Democratic Left Alliance [Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD] in tandem with the *Trybuna* and the right-wing one, created jointly by Law and Justice [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS] and its sympathizer, the *Nasz Dziennik*. Apart from the mentioned (leading) newspapers, the circle of press titles aligned with each of the political centres also included other opinion-making daily and weekly press. It is worth stressing that their political inclinations often changed along with replacement of publishers and editors-in-chief.

Between 1989 and 2002, the first two communities dominated the media message, shaping the public opinion efficiently, even if not always in accord with each other. The coexistence of liberal-left post-Solidarity circles with the post-Communist one provided a chance for the latter to avoid isolation looming over it since the moment of the fall of the People's Republic of Poland. It also opened up the prospect for participation in an attempt of actual monopolization of not just the press (media) market but the political scene itself.⁴

The first symptoms of persistent departure from this post-Round Table bipolarity in the political and media space appeared at the turn of the 21st century. The accord between the liberal-left portion of the post-Solidarity milieu and the post-Communists concerning the marginalization of the right wing on the political scene⁵ was significantly shaken in October 1997, when the Freedom Union [Unia Wolności, UW] engaged in a coalition with the right-wing Solidarity Electoral Action [Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność, AWS]. The second stronger signal came in October 2001, when the PO, filling the gap after the UW,⁶ together with the PiS, took the stance of hardline opposition against the SLD taking over the government in Poland. The fear of recidivism of post-Communism on the one hand and the behind-the-scenes moves connected with the prepared accession of Poland to the European Union caused the structure of power, established for many years, to finally break. A year later, it turned out that the post-Solidarity liberal-left and right-wing circles established a united front against the SLD, not just on the political level but in the area of information as well.

One would have a hard time trying to search the press sympathizing with the UW, and later with the PO, for information concerning internal and external conditions that contributed to the shift of that community's orientation from anti-PiS to anti-SLD. Readers had difficulties understanding why the post-Solidarity right-wing milieu, which had been demonized since the moment of establishment of the Jan Olszewski cabinet, suddenly ceased to be shown as the threat to the young Polish democracy. Why had SLD, presented as an ally⁷ in defence of this democracy for many years, suddenly lost all of its previous attractiveness from month to month?

As far as the external context is concerned, the answers to these questions are connected with the matter of preparations for the Polish accession to the European Union [EU]. This motif would often appear in insightful analyses published by opinion-making daily and weekly press. However, it never showed up in the context of

allocation between Polish elites of their posts in the EU. For the sake of image, the post-Solidarity liberal-left circles were uninterested in sharing jobs in EU institutions with post-Communists. Alone, they were unable to thwart their growing aspirations, especially when it turned out that the L. Miller's cabinet, while negotiating the conditions of Poland's accession to the EU, had never neglected the matter of careers of its people in Brussels. Only reorientation to cooperation with the post-Solidarity right wing provided an opportunity to stop the aspirations of the SLD. The post-Solidarity liberal-left circles were particularly eager to reverse the alliances, given their belief that the right wing, maintained in isolation for many years, will prove unable to threaten their candidates in the future election to the European Parliament, let alone the race for jobs in other European institutions.

Concerning the internal context of the events between 2002 and 2005, one should pay attention to the blurring, to the younger part of the public, of the clarity of division which had organized the Polish political scene since 1989, with three main components: the post-Communist left wing, the liberal-left post-Solidarity centre and the post-Solidarity right wing. The press paid much attention to this issue, yet avoided formulation of clear conclusions. This was not the case with certain post-Solidarity politicians. Through their actions, they initiated a long process, ultimately leading to elimination of post-Communists from the political scene, whereas it had been intended as a temporary measure to remove them from power. Both goals were to be assisted through entangling SLD in scandals and by journalists who publicized such scandals.

Friction within the SLD took place directly after the party's great victory in the parliamentary election in 2001. It started from dissent between the milieus of President Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Prime Minister L. Miller. Therefore, the Rywin affair broke out due to factional infighting in the SLD. In a similar vein, a later scandal concerning the Orlen fuel company had its sources in the conflict within the post-Communist grouping, when former Minister of Treasury Wiesław Kaczmarek had challenged his former governmental boss L. Miller. The attempt at instrumental utilization of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* milieu by some post-Communists in the infighting that accompanied the Rywin Affair ended the peculiar closed season "for the left foot" on the newspaper's part.

It should be noted that at the beginning of the 21st century, nothing had suggested things would work out that way. The best proof was the publication in the Saturday

issue of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* of 3 February 2001 r. Agnieszka Kublik and Monika Olejnik published a multi-page joint interview with Adam Michnik and General Czesław Kiszczak, titled “A Farewell to Arms”. In that interview, the editor-in-chief of the *Gazeta* called Czesław Kiszczak and Wojciech Jaruzelski “people of honour” who stood by their obligations taken on during the Round Table talks (Kublik and Olejnik 2001).

Commenting this statement in the *Rzeczpospolita*, Maciej Rybiński commented in astonishment that “prisoner Michnik and jailer Kiszczak share identical views on Communist Poland, even though they stood on opposite sides of the barricade. Both interlocutors issue top-grade certificates of morality to each other. They say that everything gets balanced on the scales of history. Forty-five years of the People’s Republic of Poland on one scale, the Magdalenka talks and the Round Table on the other one. But has the reckoning really been done?” Rybiński wondered (Rybiński 2001).

Alojzy Orszulik, the Bishop of Łowicz, stated that “All that conversation was done for the benefit of the generation that had been no more than 5 or 10 years old at the moment when the PRL collapsed and has remembered nothing from that period.” (Woleńska 2001). In his opinion, both gentlemen intended to authenticate the post-Communist milieu, as one of many present on the Polish political scene, in the eyes of the generation entering the adult life at the time, which was supposed to make responsible decisions at the ballot box. Therefore, the main message of the interview was the conclusion that despite their “troubled past”, there were no negative differences any longer between post-Communists and other players at the political scene of the Third Republic in 2001.

Less than two years later, public authentication of post-Communists did not mean a thing any more. The wisdom of the next stage cleared the way for a frontal political and media assault against the SLD. Some journalists, dropping all pretenses, started acting openly as party propagandists. The greatest weakness of the Polish press (media), i.e. its too far-reaching identification with individual political forces, revealed itself in all its power.

At the end of 2002, the subject of the confrontation with the SLD was officially the evaluation of the Rywin affair caused by a publication of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, but the

actual aim (subject) of the media (including press) campaign became the public, especially its younger portion that should have been won over.⁸ Politicians sitting on the parliamentary commission investigating the affair were not the only ones vying for the “hearts and minds” of the society. An equally determined battle for impact on the society was fought by editorial staff of major opinion-making daily and weekly titles reporting the works of the investigative commission. Even tabloids revealed their aspirations in this regard. Interestingly, in addition to the veteran *Super Express*, those also included the *Fakt*, having only entered the press market in 2003. The process of pushing of political logic out of the information space created conditions for replacement of political communication by “politainment”.⁹ The latter started being “served” to readers not only by tabloids but, with increasing frequency, by (hitherto) serious opinion-making daily and weekly press.

The *Gazeta Wyborcza* found itself on one side of the dividing line, along with all those editorial boards which adapted and reproduced its narrative of the Rywin affair or developed it additionally, like media connected with the PiS centre; the other side consisted of the *Trybuna* and those titles that, publicizing facts unspoken by the opposing side, tried to shift at least a part of the responsibility for the affair from the SLD to the Agora publishing company and its political background.

The *Trybuna* has been a place where we can find a good illustration of attempts in this direction. In response to the words of Adam Michnik before the parliamentary investigative commission, where he claimed the *Trybuna* to be an organ of L. Rywin and called publications of this daily newspaper on the affair in which he had been involved “a piece of this puzzle, of real knowledge about what happened and is still happening in the case we are discussing”, Marek Barański published a pointed commentary in the newspaper he headed.

In this commentary, he said, among other things, “I am listening to the statement of Mr. Adam Michnik concerning the *Trybuna* with some embarrassment, not to say with astonishment. His words imply he would like to have a monopoly, to be the only righteous man in this case.”

He added that “This cannot be allowed. (...) After all, Michnik fought for the people being able to speak with their own voice. Today, strangely, he would like the *Trybuna* to speak with the voice of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*”. He also added that

“concerning the Rywin affair, the press has the right to ask and investigate. We are a part of the press. The *Rzeczpospolita* has its doubts, right-wing publicists have their doubts; the *Trybuna* has its doubts too”.

Barański said that “the doubts of the *Trybuna* are rooted in what has been written, said, or what journalists have discovered. If we come into possession of a photograph showing Mrs. Rapaczyńska (the president of Agora) and Mr. Rywin in a cordial situation, if this picture is bursting with joy and laughter, do we have no right to ask what it is about? These people were friends, as you can see in the photo; they were doing business with each other. What has suddenly happened?” (Barański 2003).

What has happened? Quite simply, the “wisdom of the stage”, mentioned above, has changed and the left wing lost its protective shield of the media. What had earlier passed unnoticed would now turn out to be a mine used to blow the post-Communist left out of their chairs by a newspaper that used to be favourable to them.

The online edition of the *Press*, a magazine on the media and advertising, published an interview “Faith and Guilt” with a date of 13 September 2006, between Andrzej Skworz and the author of the article “Law for Bribe, or Rywin came to Michnik”. Inquiring into the genesis of that historic publication, the journalist referenced a sentence of significance for the background of the case, uttered before the investigative commission by the president of Agora, Wanda Rapaczyńska. Her words implied that the bribe proposal L. Rywin came up with was the third similar case in the 13 years of publication of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Andrzej Skworz inquired why the editorial board had decided not to publicize those other cases. He asked outright: how a journalist describing the Rywin affair could not learn anything of the two previous corruption attempts in Agora?

In response, Paweł Smoleński stated enigmatically:

“There are things that can be translated to the paper and things that cannot. And when you get such a vile offer as the one Rywin has made – explicit, with tangible evidence – other stories, veiled, subtle ones, start clearing up to you.

A.S.: I thought you would answer that the Rywin affair was so great a scandal that when you had asked about the previous one, it turned out those had been some petty attempts at fraud involving transport or paper. So has your text surely been an ordinary investigative report, rather than an in-house task to be performed?

P.S. I do not know why such a conclusion.

A.S.: Because normally, a journalist writing about corruption, hearing about three affairs, would at least ask about them.

P.S.: But I was writing about the Rywin affair.

A.S.: No, you were writing about the problem of corruption.

P.S.: I was writing about a specific case for which we had impeccable evidence: a tape. I never claimed it was a part of a bigger picture. I did not write about tolerance for corruption. And somehow I have not noticed any text on the other two cases in other newspapers.

A.S.: Do you know what they were about?

P.S. More or less. To my best knowledge, those were matters you can't write about. You can feel them.

A.S.: What was that about?

P.S.: Money. The operation of the company on a broader market – let's call it so." (Skworz 2006).

Was it really just about the money? Or was it rather about big politics? The utilization of the Rywin affair to compromise the SLD opened the way for promoting the idea of a great centre-right coalition consisting of the Civic Platform as well as Law and Justice [POPiS]. By publicizing the Rywin affair, media sympathizing with that coalition, apart from the informational mission, also performed the organizing function, providing an impulse for deep changes on the political scene. The cost of the caused changes was enormous, amounting to more than antagonization within the media community in Poland; it was an important step towards deepening of divisions within the public. Those who expected a joint electoral victory of POPiS in the September parliamentary election to bring that process to a stop must have experienced a huge disappointment soon.

The failure of the talks concerning formation of a coalition government caused friction in the POPiS even before the October presidential election. This friction translated into the first mutual accusations publicly articulated in the press. Before the idea of a centre-right coalition was ultimately dead and buried, media favourable to POPiS continued the ruthless struggle against the SLD, which was felt particularly strongly by the left-wing presidential candidate Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz.

His withdrawal from the electoral race provided conditions for redefinition of the main axis of political division in the Third Republic. The antagonism between the "post-Home Army Poland" and "post-Communist Poland", which had dominated the Polish political scene and electorate since 1989, was becoming a thing of the past, and at that

moment, the latter of two Polands was symbolically represented by Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz.¹⁰ The country was entering a period of growing antagonism between “solidary Poland” and “liberal Poland”, represented by PiS and PO respectively (Kolczyński 2010). Coherent actions of centre-right political and media centres, oriented to combatting the left-wing opponent, were drawing to a close after less than three years from their initiation.

Evolving towards the bipolar media democracy (mediocracy¹¹), the pillars of which PO and PiS were to become in late 2005, the Polish political scene was entering a period of open confrontation aimed at discrediting the rival. The method of making politics through conflict (Marzęcki 2012; Łabędź 2010) and its mediatization (Napieralski 2010), practiced over the last three years, was to be utilized with even greater commitment on both sides in the rivalry between the hitherto allies.

In order to substantiate the differences between “solidary Poland” and “liberal Poland” in the eyes of the public, political opponents had to “artificially” amplify the negative message about themselves (Kwiatkowska 2010). The memory of the POPiS idea, still fresh among the electorate, hardly made the task easier to politicians. The situation started changing quickly when the media aligned with the former coalition partners started using the mudslinging (“black PR”) methods¹² previously proven against the SLD as well as against its candidate before the first round of the presidential election (Chłodnicki 2010). One of them was discrediting. Jacek Kurski is credited with the priority in usage thereof. The MP-elect of the PiS, in an interview for the *Angora* weekly, gave the following answers to the journalist interviewing him:

“Katarzyna Pastuszko: Are you starting the mudslinging for the second round?

J. Kurski: No. I am telling the truth.

K. Pastuszko: Is it true that one of the smear operations you have planned was to dress Donald Tusk in a Wehrmacht uniform?

J. Kurski: This is disgusting. The fact that German was spoken at his family home does not mean he should be dressed in a uniform.

K. Pastuszko: German?

J. Kurski: Tusk’s parents were citizens of Gdańsk and spoke German. He often wrote about it in his books. However, there is a shroud of ambiguities and mystery concerning Donald Tusk’s grandfather. I believe it is in his interest to explain this issue. In case of presidential election, the Poles have the right to know everything about the candidate.

K. Pastuszko: I suppose you do know?

J. Kurski: I do not know anything for certain. Serious sources in Pomerania claim that Tusk's grandfather volunteered for the Wehrmacht. Recruitment to the Wehrmacht was widespread in Pomerania, but that was by force. However things looked like with his grandfather, I do not blame Donald Tusk for it. I only blame him for tolerating rumours in this regard. He should either deny it or confirm it, rather than staying silent. This is not his private matter anymore. Tusk is not running for the mayor of Sopot but for the president of Poland." (Pastuszko 2005).

The PO presidential candidate, Donald Tusk, referencing this statement, said that his opponent Lech Kaczyński and his collaborators "have sought to land a blow intended to hurt the most. These words are a transgression of the limits of indecency," Tusk assessed. In his opinion, everyone who raised his hand against the deceased was unworthy of honours and offices. "I do not want the Fourth Republic to be a country where the authorities divide the people," stressed the leader of the PO. He added that after such slander he did not expect fair play from his opponents, yet he would discuss this issue with Lech Kaczyński (Wroński 2005).

Jacek Protasiewicz, the manager of Donald Tusk's presidential campaign, earlier declared at a specially convened press conference that both of Tusk's grandfathers had never served in the Wehrmacht. Protasiewicz accused Lech Kaczyński's staff of spreading calumnies about the family of the Civic Platform's candidate. One type of message started dominating the media: Jacek Kurski is slinging mud at Donald Tusk. Consequently, that MP was dismissed from Lech Kaczyński's electoral staff.

Those who resisted the emotions unleashed by the press, closely watching the course of the campaign,¹³ could not help but wonder why Donald Tusk's staff, and the candidate himself in particular, had not responded to the insinuations about his grandfather when they had already appeared a week before in the left-aligned *Przekrój* weekly. That was particularly strange considering that they were articulated by Piotr Najsztub in an interview with Tusk himself. Here is a part of their conversation:

"P. Najsztub: Did your grandfather serve in the Wehrmacht?

D. Tusk: Both of my grandfathers spent the war in dignity, one of them passed through two concentration camps, and the other—

P. Najsztub: I am asking because there are dark rumours, insinuations going around. Maybe someone will soon disseminate something like that about your grandfather, a week may pass before you break through with an effective rectification, and you will become a victim of a provocation.

D. Tusk: This is one of 20 nasty rumours about me that my opponents are spreading." (Najsztub 2005).

Disregarding a family/personal provocation from a weekly magazine associated with the SLD may be explained by the fact that the “wisdom of the new stage” allowed one to pass indifferently by insinuations concerning the past of the family if they were articulated by the left, compromised after the “Cimoszewicz Affair”.¹⁴ When the same insinuations were proclaimed by a close collaborator of the main rival in the presidential election, that was a different story. Such a blunder of the opponents could not be missed. This was not just about the temporary effect in the form of elimination of a key member of Lech Kaczyński’s staff but, above all, about utilization of that single case of verbal aggression to create a belief that “fiddling with biographies” is a typical practice of all “kaczysts”.¹⁵ The pro-lustration attitude of the PiS naturally reinforced the image of the political opponent, created in such a manner.

Thanks to the “grandpa from the Wehrmacht”, the media finally gained an opportunity to direct a sufficiently suggestive message to the public, capable of showing the difference between (traditional) “solidary Poland”, drawing on the past, and (modern) “liberal Poland” getting rid of the weight of the past.

Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz tried to emphasize this difference in her own way. At a press conference held at a Warsaw hospice, she informed the public that Lech Kaczyński, while serving as the mayor of Warsaw, was responsible for reduction of subsidy amounts for the capital’s hospices. It was only several days later when it turned out that the reduction of amounts for individual hospices resulted from an increase of their numbers in the city, and Kaczyński’s personal responsibility for allocation of subsidies was problematic. Nevertheless, the PiS presidential candidate was successfully labelled as someone who is indifferent to suffering and loathes the poor.

This was reinforced with a reinvoked colloquialism: “Bugger off, old bum!” (*Spieprzaj, dziadu!*)¹⁶ The PO-aligned press and electronic media used it with delight before the 2005 presidential election. Donald Tusk also referenced it indirectly during the campaign. He did so even during a presidential debate of 26 September 2005 at the Polsat TV channel, attended by Lech Kaczyński, speaking: “I will not quote it, but that saying has made quite a stir. I believe there are no people, circles or old bums in Poland that should be excluded.”¹⁷ Without the involvement of the media, including the press, the mudslinging practiced by politicians would not be possible.

Conclusions

The fact of involvement of the Fourth Estate in the reconstruction of the political scene between 2002 and 2005 became the final proof for more than just the weakness of those who should have been keeping an eye on politicians. Above all, it was crucial evidence of the imperfection of democracy in Poland. Many considered the nature of our democracy to be purely declarative (constitution) and facade (institutions), claiming it was even some embryonic form of mediocracy (media democracy). The essence of the problem consisted (and still consists) in the fact that no public debate on that subject was ever initiated.

Above all, who should have done so? Non-governmental organizations? No! Both in 2005 and today, they have been too weak, overly dependent on subsidies at the disposal of government, self-government and corporate structures, or, to put it differently, the political and business spheres. The developing social media? Yes! Indeed, this is where the subject matter of the development of mediocracy in Poland is discussed, where the related pathologies are openly described. This is a place for raising alarm that the development of mediocracy brings numerous threats, such as infotainment¹⁸ or, above all, restriction of the political and media pluralism. The problem is that social media make it difficult to break through to wider circles of the public with information of the real condition of the Polish democracy¹⁹, including the condition of important component thereof, the Fourth Estate.

What the Polish society has been experiencing since 2005 and what has been created by politicians and journalists cooperating with them has long ventured beyond ordinary political and informational confrontation. This is, in fact, internal political warfare conducted in parallel to an information warfare. The former is the source of the latter. Both formally play out between the two leading political forces and their media sympathizers. In fact, however, this is a battle between the two main parties in power, utilizing the media (including the press), for the “hearts and minds” of the society. Ruling through a fabricated conflict, making the society involved in that conflict through the media (including the press), is the idea of political elites in Poland to conceal their own ineptitude, negligence and inability to build a strong (serious) state in the heart of Europe. The media (including the press), utilizing mudslinging techniques, incite and fuel negative emotions based on politics and ideology. Antagonization of people leads to social disintegration, taking place even at the family level. An atomized society, confused individuals living in cognitive and informational chaos imposed onto them, are much easier to manipulate, both by the ballot box and after they step away from it.

The picture of the media democracy in Poland, based on the symbiosis of the first two powers with the fourth one, is complemented by the oligarchization of the Polish politics and media (including press), in progress since 2005. Today, we are functioning under legal conditions making Poland similar to a republic ruled by informal political leaders and their supporting propagandists (crypto-politicians). This leads to a situation wherein a handful of people are “formatting” more than the political life for the other thirty million. We cannot take for granted that they will not try to make another step soon, to bring Poland from the stage of media democracy into the era of post-democracy²⁰ that will finalize the already ongoing process of merging of political and media elites into a homogenous group controlling the “hearts and minds”.²¹

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Notes

1 This word is a portmanteau of “media” and “democracy”. It defines the processes taking place at the line between the media and politics. See (Tassano 2006; Meraz 2011; Lepa 2008; Machnik 2016; Krzemiński 2011). See also: (Pawłowski 2013). More broadly on this subject matter (Michalczyk 2010).

2 Particularly during the electoral campaigns before the 1990 presidential and 1991 parliamentary elections, as well as in the weeks leading up to the dissolution of Jan Olszewski’s cabinet in 1992.

3 The recording of hearing of Adam Michnik before the parliamentary investigative commission for examination of allegations concerning cases of corruption during works on the amendment on the Broadcasting Act, as disclosed in the media: <http://bit.ly/2dluWZ> (accessed May 27, 2016).

4 The fall of Communism and the divisions in the Solidarity community in early 1990s helped reveal many similarities in economic and social issues between the liberal-left post-Solidarity milieu and post-Communists.

5 The only significant exception in the political marginalization of the right wing was the establishment of the Olszewski cabinet, and in the area of the media (press), the emergence of the ephemeral *Nowy Świat* daily.

6 In the 2001 election, they won 3.1% of the vote and failed to enter the Sejm.

7 A “troubled-past” ally.

8 On the methodology of “convincing”: (Cialdini 2009; Jarmuła 2006).

9 An interesting sociological analysis of political television advertising in Poland on the basis of spots from three significantly different electoral campaigns: the 2004 European Parliament election, the 2005 Sejm and Senat election, and the presidential election from the same year, was proposed by (Olczyk 2009). Some of the author’s conclusions can also be related to press titles, especially their online editions.

10 To tell the truth, it should be noted that after 1989, despite the constantly persistent division, there were conflicts and political disputes not fitting in with the pattern of rivalry between both political milieus under consideration.

11 In mediocracy, voters cast their vote, based on non-substantial suggestions by journalists, on those politicians who are better presented by the media, rather than on the basis of what these politicians have or have not done even though they had promised. In order to vote in the substantial way, one should have some knowledge of the activity of politicians. An average person has neither time nor will to acquire such knowledge. Media could do it if they were information centres. They do not because they complement political centres and pursue information policies, rather than informing people.

12 “Black PR” is the propaganda of the 21st century, a modern method of manipulation, deception of people, claims Prof. Jerzy Olędzki, studying the theory and practice of public relations as well as political marketing. More broadly (Olędzki and Tworzydło eds. 2009; Ociełka ed. 2003). An interesting approach to this subject matter is proposed by (Noremberg 2012).

13 Perceptive observers of electoral campaigns in 2005 noticed that it had not been the attack on Tusk that had, in fact, opened the “family front”. As early as 18 May 2005, during the *Prosto w oczy* television show, Paweł Śpiewak, a candidate from the PO electoral list in Warsaw, reminded Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz that the presidential candidate’s father had worked for the special services. The popular sociologist and historian of ideas said, “The problem is that in some way, Cimoszewicz symbolizes the persistence of the PRL system. This includes his father who worked for the special services, as well as himself having been very active politically, at least during his student years. He was a person who supported the Communist movement. This family continuity will surely be stressed here.” This statement is invoked by (Borowicz 2010).

14 The case was analogous with the Rywin affair. Robert Mazurek and Igor Zalewski were the first to describe it in early September 2002, in the *Z życia koalicji* (From the Life of the Coalition) column of the *Wprost* weekly, yet their publication remained unnoticed until December 2002.

15 The author of the publicist/political neologism “kaczyszyn” (“Kaczyszyn” or “duckism”) is Stanisław Janicki; the word was first used in 2005 by *Wprost* journalists Robert Mazurek and Igor Zalewski to denote the Kaczyński brothers’ political doctrine and vision of the state. The same year, during a Sejm debate, the term was first utilized pejoratively among politicians by MP Joanna Senyszyn of the SLD.

16 These words were uttered by Lech Kaczyński while getting into his car, just after the end of a meeting with voters at the Praga-Północ district of Warsaw in November 2002, before the second round of the mayoral election in the Capital City of Warsaw, as the last of several attempts to silence a meeting participant who had been stubbornly harassing him. See: a video illustrating the course of the incident with L. Kaczyński in Praga-Północ in Warsaw, November 2002: <http://bit.ly/2ddjA71> (accessed May 23, 2019).

17 A record of the presidential debate on the television of 26 September 2005: <http://bit.ly/2cFyup6> (accessed May 4, 2016).

18 Press information messages acquire some features of entertainment messages. Even serious opinion-making daily and weekly titles publish much “trifle”. Infotainment is pushing out hard information. Therefore, a potential threat in media democracy is domination of trivial and second-rate news over relevant information – See (Golinowski 2012). Cf. (Fras 2013; Bala A. Musa and Cindy J. Price eds. 2006).

19 A substantial portion of the Polish people have been and virtually still remain digitally excluded.

20 Post-democracy means atrophy of democratic processes, merging of political, cultural and economic elites. The Polish language has a range of informal terms for this phenomenon, such as: *kumoterstwo* (nepotism), *klika* (clique), *kolesiostwo* (cronyism), *układ* (the system), etc. This is a universal phenomenon, occurring both in Poland and in Western Europe – See (Brzechczyn 2012).

21 The Polish sociological literature has few attempts at conceptualization of this process. Apart from Zdzisław Krasnodębski, the phenomenon of merging of elites is discussed by Andrzej Zybertowicz (in the context of the concept of “anti-development interest groups”) and Jadwiga Staniszkis (in the context of the concept of “political capitalism”). See (Staniszkis 2005; Zybertowicz 2005; Krasnodębski 2012). In truth, there are lots of issues and people to write about. It is worth starting from the most trivial cases: Magdalena Ogórek (a journalist and presidential candidate backed by the SLD), Rafał Ziemkiewicz (a journalist and leader of the New National Democracy), Tomasz Lis (a journalist and would-be presidential candidate). These are but the most suggestive examples of journalists entering the world of politics. On the other hand, numerous politicians wander in the opposite direction, such as Jan Maria Rokita, the late Andrzej Urbanowski, or Janusz Korwin-Mikke, combining his activities in the areas of politics and journalism since the 1990s, initially as the editor-in-chief of the *Najwyższy Czas* weekly and the head of the Real Politics Union (nowadays, the KORWIN Party/Confederation). The process of merging of political and media elites into a homogenous group displays a much greater dynamics at the regional level.

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