

The (Il)liberal Shift in Polish Migration Discourse: A Multimodal Analysis of Civic Platform's Portrayal of Immigrants

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ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the 2015 European migration crisis, Polish discourse on migration has undergone significant changes. While in the past the discursive construal of the immigrant was relatively neutral, since 2015 it has been subject to vilification of the Muslim Other. So far, research on Polish migration discourse has concentrated on right-wing and conservative discourses, while the liberal one has been understudied. Combining the Discourse-Historical Approach with selected methods of multimodal analysis, the study offers a thorough investigation of the discourse of the liberal Civic Platform, Poland's ruling party since the end of December 2023. The triangulation of methods thus allowed to verify how the visual and verbal work together to form a coherent whole. In addition, the findings were interpreted through the lens of social theories of securitization and orientalizing, which allowed to go beyond the discursive dimension. The application of the discussed theories helped to place the findings in the broader context socio-political context of Europe, discussing the intricate dynamics of power, identity, and the construction of "the other." The results suggest that, despite its liberal profile, Civic Platform demonized migration and immigrants, portraying them as a threat to Polish security. In addition, the then government was presented as facilitating human trafficking and collaborating with criminals. Overall, the analyzed discourse is strikingly similar to contemporary far-right discourses on migration, which is surprising in light of previous research on liberal discourse, which has tended to emphasize the humanitarian dimension of migration and the need for solidarity with migrants.

Keywords: Migration Studies; Discourse-Historical Approach; Multimodality; Poland; Political Discourse

INTRODUCTION

AN OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION DISCOURSE IN POLAND AND EUROPE

Traditionally, Poland was a country characterized by emigration rather than immigration, with Polish migration research primarily focusing on Poles living abroad, their adaptation strategies, and their interactions with residents of other countries (Okólski & Salt, 2014; White, 2011). However, the situation changed significantly after 2015, largely due to the migration crisis in Europe. During this period, the right-wing Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), led by Jarosław Kaczyński, framed the influx of migrants from Africa as a threat to Poland's security. Research indicates that PiS successfully influenced public opinion, shifting Poles' attitudes toward migrants from Africa and Asia (Krzyżanowski, 2018). While a majority of Poles

initially supported accepting refugees from war-torn regions in early 2015, this perspective underwent a drastic shift within a few years (Cichocki & Jabkowski, 2019, p. 33). Another significant turning point in Polish migration discourse was the 2021 EU–Belarus border crisis. In July 2021, Belarusian authorities began orchestrating the movement of large groups of individuals from Asia and Africa to the borders of EU countries, aiming to create chaos within the EU by disrupting its migration policies (Krępa, 2022). To this day, the Polish Border Guard continues to report daily attempts to cross the Polish-Belarusian border. Migration also became a central issue during the 2023 parliamentary election campaign, as a nationwide referendum was held concurrently with the elections. Two of the four referendum questions directly addressed migration: “Do you support the removal of the barrier on the border between Poland and Belarus?” and “Do you support the admission of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, in accordance with the forced relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy?” (Żuk & Żuk, 2024, p. 5).

In the summer of 2023, a so-called “visa scandal” erupted in Poland, involving alleged corruption in the issuance of visas by officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the consular service. While opposition politicians from Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*) claimed that approximately 350,000 visas had been issued illegally (Kość, 2023), this figure is widely considered an overestimation (Nolan, 2023; Słowik, 2023). Nevertheless, the scandal became a hotly debated topic leading up to the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections. These events have collectively elevated migration to a prominent issue in Polish political discourse. Subsequently, the purpose of this article is to examine the portrayal of immigrants and refugees in Polish liberal discourse. While there is ample research on conservative political discourse in Poland (as the right-wing PiS governed Poland from 2015 to 2023)¹, its liberal counterpart is highly understudied. Thus, the present article focuses on the discourse of Civic Platform – Poland’s current ruling party that seized power at the end of 2023 – rather than providing yet another study of PiS discourse.

As the opposition leader, Donald Tusk, head of Civic Platform, frequently criticized PiS’s migration policies and rhetoric. For instance, Tusk said that “[people at the border] are poor people who are looking for their place on Earth. And there is no need for such abominable and grim propaganda aimed at the migrants as these are people in need of help” (Śmiłowicz et al., 2021). Tusk would also admonish the then Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki for treating migrants as “political gold” (Tusk, 2021). In a widely discussed speech at the Polish Women’s Congress, Tusk described the actions of the Law and Justice party over the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border as “one of the biggest scandals that has ever happened in Poland”, accusing the government of the day of “merciless treatment” of women and refugees (Bagińska, 2022). In addition, important politicians affiliated with Civic Platform, such as Minister of Justice Adam Bodnar, would condemn the use of the pushback procedure by Border Guard officers (Bodnar & Grzelak, 2023). Still, more than a year after Civic Platform seized power, push-backs are still used against people trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian border. This fact has drawn criticism from numerous humanitarian organizations who have accused the Tusk-led government of hypocrisy (Ciobanu, 2024; Walker, 2024). The government’s actions were also criticized by Janina Ochojska, founder of the Polish Humanitarian Action and an MEP elected from the lists of the European Coalition (an alliance of left-liberal parties) on the recommendation of Civic Platform (Łupak, 2024). Preliminary observations suggest that Civic Platform’s migration discourse eludes straightforward

¹ In short, scholars argue that both PiS and the media affiliated with the formation created an image of immigrants as a threat to the security of Poland. Moreover, they used a simplistic and stereotypical image of the immigrant – most often revolving around portraying Islam and Muslims as inherently hostile and intending to destroy Christianity and conservative values (Potulski & Modrzejewski, 2024; Ociepka, 2023; Polynczuk-Alenius, 2021; Konopka, 2019).

classification, making it a particularly intriguing subject of analysis. As Donald Tusk has been Poland's Prime Minister since December 13, 2023, his discourse on immigration is especially influential in shaping public perceptions. This article, therefore, focuses on Civic Platform's portrayal of migration and immigrants during the second half of 2023, aiming to provide insights into the relatively understudied liberal political discourse in Poland.

In broader European contexts, liberal and left-wing parties and media typically portray immigrants and refugees as victims, aiming to foster empathy and compassion toward them (Szyłko-Kwas, 2023; Kleres, 2018; Mushaben, 2017). In her seminal article summarizing research on the discourses on the 2015 migration crisis Triandafyllidou (2018) points out that two main media frames were identified: moralization and threat. The former was used predominantly by liberals, and the latter by conservatives. The moralization frame presented refugees and immigrants as victims deserving help in the spirit of European solidarity. Solidarity was presented as a higher moral ground, a commitment by Europe to be true to its humanitarian values, to protect the persecuted, to show humanity. This frame dominated media coverage and political discourse in Western Europe. In contrast, the threat frame depicted the influx of migrants as uncontrolled and unpredictable, often utilizing a strongly marked "us vs. them" dichotomy. This perspective was most prevalent in countries such as Poland, Slovenia, and, to a lesser extent, Austria and the UK. Within the Polish context, this frame frequently highlighted perceived failures of other countries, such as Sweden for allegedly failing to defend its borders and permitting the influence of Sharia law and Germany for being at the helm of an EU that was portrayed as powerless.

When it comes to media discourses on migration in Poland, a similar divide has been identified: liberal and left-wing media have put a particular emphasis on solidarity and compassion with immigrants, whereas conservative and right-wing outlets have concentrated on warning against dangers connected with mass migration (Czachur, Opiłowski & Smykała, 2022; Troszyński & El-Ghamari, 2022; Kotras, 2016). However, research on political discourse about migration in Poland has predominantly centered on PiS. There is a notable lack of studies examining the perspective of Poland's largest liberal party, Civic Platform, with only a few exceptions (see Klepański, Hartliński & Żukowski, 2023; Pacześniak & Winclawska, 2024).

Overall, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Civic Platform discursively construct immigrants and migration?
2. How does the discourse of Civic Platform fit into broader discussions on migration in Poland?
3. To what extent is the analyzed discourse consistent with the dominant liberal discourses in Europe?

The structure of the paper is as follows. The introductory section outlined key notions and characteristics of Polish and European migration discourse, focusing on post-2015. Afterwards, the analytical approach is presented – the macro approach for the study is the Discourse-Historical Approach; subsequently, more specific analytical categories (discursive strategies, visual representation strategies, social theories of securitization and orientalizing) are discussed. Then, the final section brings together the findings from the previous section for analysis and interpretation in their broader contexts and theories, offering conclusions regarding the portrayal of migration and immigrants in the discourse of Poland's ruling party.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The study employs a comprehensive model, using the Discourse-Historical Approach as its primary framework. This interdisciplinary research program contextualizes discursive practices within broader historical and social contexts. Additionally, insights from Multimodal Discourse Analysis are incorporated to address visual and textual dimensions of discourse. To extend the analysis beyond linguistic aspects, social theories related to orientalism and securitization are also applied.

DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

The fundamental analytical framework employed in this study is the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that emphasizes the socio-political contexts of discourse. Within CDA and DHA, discourse is understood as a social practice that negotiates social, political, and cultural orders (Krzyżanowski, 2014, pp. 353–354). This approach assumes that discourses are not objective reflections of reality but rather constructs that shape representations, relationships, and identities of social actors and phenomena. In this paradigm, there is a dialectical relationship between language and society: language shapes society while simultaneously being shaped by it (Fairclough, 2013, pp. 10–11). CDA examines how texts employ various methods and strategies to construct meaning, revealing how discourses are formed and how they influence readers' perspectives and beliefs. Furthermore, analyses conducted within this framework highlight how these linguistic choices perpetuate and reinforce unequal power dynamics, especially in the relationships between dominant and minority groups (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, pp. 456–459). By focusing on these linguistic choices, CDA helps uncover the connections between language and the societal contexts in which it operates.

Central to a DHA analysis is a reconstruction and investigation of discursive strategies, which are defined as “a more or less intentional plan of practices adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 44). Subsequently, DHA distinguishes between five discursive strategies:

- a) Nominalization (ways of naming and linguistically defining persons, social phenomena and processes and the actions taken by social actors);
- b) Predication (categorizing social actors, which is done by assigning them certain characteristics, functions and identities, and then expressing judgments about them);
- c) Argumentation (justifications of positive and negative attributions; in DHA, argumentative schemata that “justify the transition from the argument to the conclusion” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 110) are called “topoi”);
- d) Perspectivization (focuses on the point of view of the social actors in question and the perspective from which the other discursive strategies are uttered);
- e) Intensification and mitigation (strengthening or weakening the illocutionary power of an utterance).

As signaled above, broader socio-political contexts are of particular importance to DHA. The adoption of the approach in question thus allows to take into account the specific Polish historical, political, and social settings with regard to migration that could otherwise be

overlooked. This is why the main themes and contexts of migration discourse in Poland and Europe were outlined in the introductory section; the review served as a point of reference for a further discussion.

Overall, DHA distinguishes between four levels of context (Resigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 93):

- a) immediate language or text internal co-text;
- b) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses;
- c) the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames of a given situation;
- d) the broader frame of historical and socio-political relations, processes and circumstances in which the analysed discursive events and practices are embedded.

In this study, the empirical analysis focused on the first two levels. Within these levels, discursive strategies were reconstructed, analyzed, and discussed in relation to the methods employed and relevant research in the field. To transcend the purely linguistic dimension, the study also examined the verbal representation of key social actors and the interplay between visual and verbal elements, demonstrating how they work together to create a coherent narrative. In the discussion and conclusion section, the findings were interpreted through the lens of social theories of securitization and orientalizing. This theoretical framework enabled a broader discussion of the results within the contexts of Polish and European migration discourse, as well as institutional practices related to immigrants.

MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

While Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) initially focused on written language (e.g., Fowler & Kress, 1979), since the 1990s, scholars have increasingly emphasized the multimodal nature of communication (van Leeuwen, 2014; Machin, 2013). Modern CDA highlights that meaning arises from the interaction of all communicative modes, not just verbal components (Kress, 2011, p. 207). This is particularly relevant in contemporary political communication, where multimodal resources—especially in social media—play a pivotal role.

To provide a comprehensive analysis of Civic Platform's migration discourse, this study incorporates both verbal and visual representations of immigrants. For the visual component, van Leeuwen's (2008) typology of social actor representation is applied, which identifies five key dimensions of portraying people in visual texts (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 142–148):

- a) Exclusion (not including certain people in group representations that they belong to; e.g. pictures of American army consisting of white people only);
- b) Roles (assigning specific roles to particular individuals; e.g. showing immigrants mostly as committing crimes and breaking the law);
- c) Specific and Generic (the former involves presenting social actors as a specific person – all members of a minority are shown as similar to one person (historical or fictional); the latter strips the depicted of their individuality – a certain generalized stereotype is used for this, implemented with, for instance, physical features);
- d) Individuals and Groups (in the case of the latter, the depicted are similar enough that their individual characteristics cannot be distinguished);

- e) Categorization (one distinguishes here between biological and cultural characterization; cultural categorization is carried out using standard attributes commonly associated with given social groups to classify their representatives. In contrast, the latter uses certain generalized and exaggerated physical characteristics of a specific group to evoke negative or positive associations among the group for which the representation is created).

Van Leeuwen's typology has been widely used in political discourse analyses, proving effective for diverse material. For instance, Martínez-Lirola (2023, 2022, 2016, 2014) analyzed sub-Saharan immigrants' portrayal in Spanish media, finding that their arrival was framed primarily as a threat, with occasional victim or hero narratives. However, these portrayals often adopted a Eurocentric perspective, neglecting the immigrants' motivations. Similarly, Lorenzetti (2020) examined social media posts by Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini, showing reliance on stereotypes and the framing of individuals as emblematic criminals. In addition, Rasheed's (2017) study contrasted linguistic and visual portrayals of Afghan immigrants, highlighting superficial international portrayals and more nuanced yet burden-focused depictions in Pakistani media.

For this study, integrating discursive strategies into the model enhances verbal analysis by providing a clear typology, rooted in the rhetorical foundations of DHA (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Additionally, analyzing the interplay between visual and verbal components aligns with DHA's triangulation of methods, emphasizing how meaning emerges through multimodal synergy. To broaden the analysis, relevant social theories are also incorporated, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the material.

SOCIAL THEORIES

In order to go beyond the discursive dimension, which is a characteristic trait of a context-sensitive approach to discourse that DHA represents (Clarke, Kwon & Wodak, 2012, pp. 457–458), the results were interpreted through the lenses of the following social theories: securitization and orientalization.

Securitization involves framing an issue as an existential threat to the state, territory, or society (Fischhendler, 2015). Drawing on the Copenhagen School in security studies, this study adopts a constructivist perspective, which emphasizes that security threats are socially constructed through discourse (Buzan, Wæver & De Wilde, 1998). Unlike traditional realist views that focus on material power, constructivist approaches explore how narratives shape security perceptions and policies (Cho, 2012). This paper evaluates whether border discourses reflect legitimate securitization practices or rely on rhetorical manipulation, applying Floyd's (2022) concept of "just securitization," which assesses the intentions of the securitizer and the validity of the perceived threat.

Orientalism, as introduced by Said (1978), refers to the Western construction of the "East" as exotic, inferior, or threatening. This discourse has historically justified domination over non-Western societies and, post-9/11, has often framed people from the East as Islamic extremists or culturally inferior (Kerboua, 2016). In Poland, such discourse has been used by parties and movements associated with the broadly defined Right (Kosman, 2024; Kabata & Jacobs, 2023; Balicki, 2021). This study analyzes whether Civic Platform, as a liberal party, adopts a more balanced approach to migration or perpetuates similar orientalist narratives.

THE DATA

The study examines three election videos posted on the official social media channels (X, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok) of Civic Platform and Donald Tusk.

- a) Poles must regain control of their country and its borders! (*Polacy muszą odzyskać kontrolę nad swoim państwem i jego granicami!*; one minute and 12 seconds) – 1 July 2023;
- b) They threatened, they threatened, and they let them in themselves! #FraudPiS (*Straszyl, straszyl, a sami ich wpuścili!* #OszustwaPiS; 30 seconds) – 7 September 2023;
- c) The referendum is a lie by PiS! Border Guard report confirms - PiS has lost control of the border! (*Referendum to kłamstwo PiS! Raport Straży Granicznej potwierdza - PiS stracił kontrolę nad granicą!*; 32 seconds) – 11 October 2023.

The videos garnered significant attention, with the first video alone amassing over 5.7 million views on Donald Tusk's X account. Shared widely by Civic Platform members and supporters, these videos represent a relevant sample of the party's migration discourse. Released across different months, they allow for analysis of shifts and consistencies in Civic Platform's messaging on migration during the election campaign. Their widespread views and media coverage, both in Poland and internationally (Adler, 2023; Tilles, 2023), further underline their relevance.

It needs to be pointed out that the above-mentioned videos do not exhaust the issue of the Civic Platform's discourse on migration, especially given the fact that as a ruling party Donald Tusk's formation de facto shapes Polish migration policy. This study, however, focuses on the 2023 parliamentary election campaign period and is primarily qualitative in nature. The present paper also shows how the party constructed the issue of migration before taking power in Poland. Whether and how Civic Platform's discursive framing of the issue changed after 15 October 2023 could be the subject of a separate study that would take into account, among other things, official statements by the Prime Minister and ministers, important policy documents or parliamentary debates.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

THE REFERENDUM IS A LIE BY PIS! BORDER GUARD REFORM CONFIRMS – PIS HAS LOST CONTROL OVER THE BORDER

The video starts with the voiceover reading the phrase “We are revealing the secret report of the Polish Border Guard” (*Ujawniamy tajny raport polskiej Straży Granicznej*); written in large white letters, the phrase is also displayed on a black background, which focuses the viewer's attention on the message. The verb “reveal” suggests that the PiS government had been hiding the truth about the border events from public opinion and it was disclosed due to the actions of the opposition and the left-liberal media; similarly, the adjective “secret” also suggests that the report was not to be communicated to Poles.

The video employs mitigation and intensification strategies to critique the PiS government's migration policies and highlight alleged ineffectiveness. Regarding the former, the barrier on the border between Poland and Belarus that was completed on June 2022 is called “fence”, which presents it as considerably less imposing and relatively easy to penetrate; in reality,

the barrier is approximately 5.5 meters high, the walls are made of steel, and there is barbed wire on top of them (Stępka & Mazurkiewicz, 2024). Moreover, while the ad states that “[the fence] can be cut with an ordinary saw blade” (*można go przeciąć zwykłym ręcznym brzeszczotem*), this is an exaggeration as such tools are only capable of gouging of an already existing cut (Szpyrka, 2023). Also, the video ends with an exclamation “Stop the smuggling mafia of PiS”, which suggests that it is in fact the formation led by Kaczyński which is responsible for the outbreak of the border events; furthermore, in the narrative of Civic Platform, the party is supposed to not only condone human smuggling, but even actively participating in it (see Figure 1).

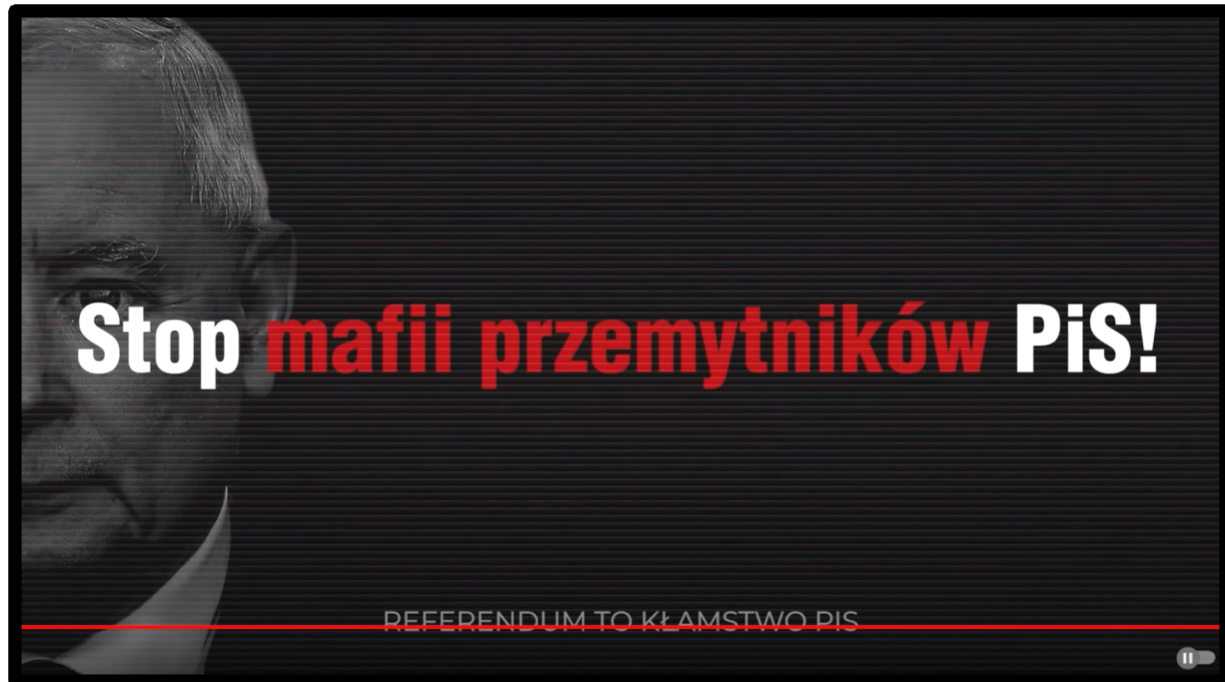


FIGURE 1. Accusing PiS of facilitation of human trafficking

When it comes to the discursive construction of immigrants, the video uses imagery typical of far-right anti-migrant discourse (see e.g. Ganesh & Faggiani, 2024; Pruitt, 2019; Strom & Alcock, 2017). This is striking particularly in the context of the phrase “A **river** of migrants is **encroaching into Poland** and **flooding Europe**” (*Fala migrantów wdziera się do Polski i zalewa Europę*). The vocabulary used therein shows people at the border in terms of a disorganized mass without individual qualities; furthermore, the materials make an analogy to a natural disaster – turbulent rivers and floods cause considerable damage. The language of flood and destruction can be interpreted as objectification of people, their dehumanization, degradation, and removal of their human status via discursive means.

Furthermore, the “over 30 thousands of migrants from the East” (*ponad 30 tysięcy migrantów ze Wschodu*) were said to have “illegally encroached” (*nielegalnie wdarło się*) Poland. The word “encroach” suggests the forcible nature of the border crossing, which is amplified by the adjective “illegally”. Thus, the discussed predication strategy presents people at the border both as breaching the law and displaying violent behavior. Overall, the video assigns stereotyped roles to the depicted, once again grouping them solely as criminals. Moreover, by highlighting that they are from “the East” the ad stresses the difference between Poles and people at the border, showing

the latter as belonging to a different, less civilized world, which is amplified by their visual presentation (see Figure 2). The portrayal of the people at the border is generic and exemplifies cultural categorization (cf. van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 142–144). Only dark-skinned men are presented in the analyzed material. They are almost always shown in groups and no individual traits can be discerned easily. Also, numerous shots depict them storming the barrier, making holes in it or fleeing, which assigns them specific roles (criminals, fugitives, or invaders; see Figure 2, shots depicting people). They are also presented from a distance and their faces are never shown; in fact, they are shown as deliberately hiding them (they wear hoods or caps). Thus, in line with van Leeuwen’s (2008, pp. 141–147) toolkit, one could say that their visual representation is clearly intended to invoke negative connotations. In fact, studies by Martínez Lirola (2023, 2016), which similarly used the above-mentioned framework in her investigations of the linguistic and visual construal of immigrants in the Spanish press, evidence that such portrayal contributes to their criminalization by construing them as causing problems and their presence being a burden to the country of their arrival. In addition, their depiction as anonymous individuals homogenizes people at the border.



FIGURE 2. The portrayal of people at the border

The only instance in which one may see a single person is the fragment between 0:13 to 0:15 when a young man is shown at the top of a ladder, raising his hands in a gesture of victory, knowing that in a moment he would jump over the wall on the Polish-Belarusian border (see Figure 3). He is masked and dressed in grey, making him distrustful and mysterious. In addition, the man is depicted with the use of a worm’s eye view perspective, which suggests that the man is imposing and strong, whereas the viewer may feel helpless in comparison (cf. Hart, 2014, p. 92). Such portrayal not only suggests the dangers connected with “migrants from the East” but also presupposes the need for “regaining control” of the border.



FIGURE 3. A young masked man crossing the Poland-Belarus border

One may also notice certain fragments of the videos with text written in Arabic. The dates and emojis (saluting face, fire, flag of Germany; Figure 2 and 3) suggest they show successful attempts of crossing the barrier at the border. Not only does this portrayal limit the discursive construction of “immigrants” to solely Arabs, but it further associates them with threat and danger as the “Arabs” in the video are shown as dangerous and breaching the law, which strengthens the narrative of Civic Platform that the people of the border are exclusively from Arabic countries, simultaneously referring to the stereotype in Polish migration discourse post-2015 that Arabs are potential terrorists and criminals (see e.g. Konopka, 2019; Goździak & Márton, 2018). Moreover, the video suggests that the people at the border are predominantly interested in accessing Germany. This may be interpreted as a delegitimization strategy as they are shown as economic migrants who want to get to a country with a developed social system, not seek asylum by fleeing war in their own countries.

**THEY THREATENED, THEY THREATENED, AND THEY LET THEM IN THEMSELVES!
#FRAUDPIS**

The video begins with the phrase, “It finally came out” (*wydało się*), framing the content as an “inconvenient truth” allegedly concealed by the PiS government. This opening sets the tone for the narrative, presenting the material as a revelation of hidden or suppressed information. This message is further reinforced by a shot showing a person opening their eye, suggesting that Poles are finally beginning to see the alleged hypocrisy of Jarosław Kaczyński’s formation with regard to migration policy. However, it is difficult to find a rational justification for the introductory shot. It depicts a demonic figure against a red background. The figure evokes the worst possible associations – its eye sockets are empty, it has no nose, and its teeth are unnaturally large, yellow and covered with blood. The demon looks straight at the viewer, maintaining eye contact with them, establishing his imposing position. The placement of the demonic figure in the video serves

two functions: first, it shows the consequences of the Polish government’s migration policy, portraying it as “diabolical” so to speak, as it allegedly resulted in putting Poles in grave danger; second, it is meant to associate Law and Justice with it, as two shots later the red PiS logo appears on the screen (see Figure 4, bottom right).



FIGURE 4. Showing PiS as hiding the truth about illegal migration

In terms of discursive strategies, one may also note the phrase “the PiS government has invited to Poland 250 thousand immigrants from Asia and Africa” (*rząd PiS zaprosił do Polski 250 tysięcy imigrantów z Azji i Afryki*). Firstly, the verb “invited” (*zaprosił*) suggests that not only did the then government do that on purpose, but it also highlights the naivety of its representatives: the verb “invite” carries positive connotations, but – given their portrayal – the immigrants and refugees are associated with threats to Poland. Moreover, the topos of number is used – 250 thousand is indubitably a high number and all the people discursively constructed as “immigrants” in the video are framed as dangerous and alien. Further, highlighting the fact that they are “from Asia and Africa” not only emphasizes their foreignness, but also refers to the topos of fear and danger present in Polish migration discourse after 2015, which equates immigrants from these continents with potential terrorists and a threat to cultural cohesion in Poland (Polynczuk-Alenius & Hartikainen, 2024; Konopka, 2019; Cap, 2018). The statement that “250 thousand immigrants” is “more than France or Germany let in” (*więcej niż Francja czy Niemcy*) further builds on this narrative. In Polish anti-immigrant discourse, these countries are often portrayed as examples of failed migration policies, unable to manage migrant crises effectively (Kosman, 2024; Krzyżanowski, 2018). This specific example illustrates how Civic Platform recontextualized rhetoric traditionally used by right-wing parties and media to criticize PiS policies and delegitimize its approach to migration.

The video includes seven shots depicting people at the border, all of which carry pejorative connotations. Some shots are repeated to reinforce this negative portrayal. The tone of these visuals is consistently negative and anxiety-inducing, creating an atmosphere of suspicion. Notably, none of the images align with the video's theme of visa facilitation for temporary workers. The individuals shown are not depicted working or interacting with Polish society. Instead, they are portrayed as isolated and excluded, reinforcing a sense of social detachment. This approach exemplifies social exclusion as defined by van Leeuwen (2008, p. 142), where immigrants are framed as outsiders who do not belong to Polish society. This portrayal is particularly misleading, as most migrants who came to Poland during the PiS government's term were legally employed workers. However, the video presents them as suspicious and disconnected, further emphasizing their outsider status.

If interactions are indeed shown, migrants and refugees talk only to each other, which only emphasizes their distance from Poles and Europeans. For instance, the shot which shows five young men talking to each other depicts them from a distance, making the viewer of the material think of them as strangers (see Figure 5). As van Leeuwen (2008, p. 138) argues, in shots or photographs, distance takes on a symbolic dimension. People shown in close-up are depicted as if they were an important part of a group of their own; on the other hand, people shown from a distance are treated as not belonging to it. What is more, the building that the young men are in is abandoned and in complete disrepair. Plaster is falling off the walls, graffiti is visible on the columns, and the floor is covered with broken glass and trash. The men themselves are wearing jackets and carrying bags and backpacks. This visual representation suggests that they are constantly on the move – perhaps they are in “Poland” illegally and need to escape the police or border guards. This is an example of assigning specific roles to the depicted (cf. van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 142–143) – they are unequivocally portrayed as fugitives.



FIGURE 5. Immigrants hiding in a dilapidated building

Indeed, the portrayal of people at the border as being constantly on the move and potentially fleeing from something is one of the key elements of the video (see Figure 6). The first shot which depicts migrants and refugees shows them walking in line along a forest road. All the people depicted in the shot in question are dressed in warm jackets and are carrying suitcases or bags. It is also worth noting that the analyzed shot shows people with European facial features – all the others show people with dark complexions. Subsequently, the second shot shows dark-skinned men wrapped in blankets standing in line for distributed food (Figure 6, bottom left). The two men are not looking straight at the camera, their gaze is directed downward. According to van Leeuwen (2008, p. 141), avoiding the eye contact with the viewer contributes to representing people as objects for our scrutiny, as opposed to showing them as subjects addressing the viewer directly and symbolically engaging with them.

The man depicted in the back is then shown in the next shot. He is sitting with a can in his hand and his eyes directed at a woman and child walking somewhere. In the foreground, one might see a makeshift refugee camp – as suggested by the pitched tents (Figure 6, bottom right). Then, the focus switches to the above-mentioned abandoned building. This sequence further highlights the message that the depicted are hiding – assumedly due to their “illegal” status (Figure 6, upper right).



FIGURE 6. Visual representation of immigrants

In addition, the strategy of objectivation of the immigrants is further implemented while discursively constructing the migration policy of the then government. When it comes to discursive strategies, the policy is described in as follows: “Their people set up a system to allow

intermediaries to issue visas for bribes” (*Ich ludzie stworzyli system umożliwiający pośrednikom wysytawianie wiz za łapówki*). On a visual level, this representation is accompanied by images that are meant to evoke associations with a corruption scandal: banknotes, handshakes, putting dollars in pockets, the intervention of services. Then, the shots of Mateusz Morawiecki and Jarosław Kaczyński are shown while the voiceover reads “They threatened, they threatened, and they let them in themselves!” (*Straszyli, straszyli, a sami ich wpuścili!*). This suggests that the alleged scandal took place with the knowledge or acquiescence of the highest authorities of PiS, who did not put an end to it. Overall, immigrants are treated as part of a system supposedly allowing the discursively undefined “their people” to make money. Their motivations and reasons to flee their respective countries are never mentioned. Moreover, in the video the following argumentation scheme is presented: if immigrants appeared in Poland because they had given bribes to unspecified intermediaries, they thus found themselves in Poland as a result of a crime; therefore, if they are indeed criminals, they are potentially dangerous to Poland, and Poles were put in that danger by the PiS government. Thus, in the narrative of Civic Platform, the immigrants that are in Poland are there as a result of an organized crime. The fact that refugees from war-torn countries are among them is not highlighted in any fragment of the video.



FIGURE 7. Portraying the PiS government as corrupt and responsible for the dangers

POLES MUST TAKE BACK CONTROL OF THEIR COUNTRY AND ITS BORDERS!

In the video posted on Twitter on July 2, 2023, Donald Tusk warned against the consequence of admitting people from countries where the main religion is either Islam or Hinduism. The discussed material differs from the two previous ones with relation to form – the shots show solely Donald Tusk speaking to the viewer. Thus, attention was paid herein almost exclusively to the verbal component.

The video starts with Tusk's remark that "We are all shocked watching scenes from the violent riots in France" (*Oglądamy wstrząśnięci sceny z brutalnych zamieszek we Francji*), referring to the riots broke out in the wake of the killing of Nahel Merzouk on 27 June 2023 (Beaman, 2023). In the spot, Tusk attempts to simplify the issue by suggesting that the people responsible for the riots are migrants. In his argument, the politician ignores the fact that the 2023 riots in France were not provoked by "migrants" or "foreign citizens" but they predominantly involved people born and raised in France. Such people, regardless of their skin color or professed religion, are not "migrants" or "foreign citizens" as Tusk suggests in the video. There are complex causal mechanisms behind the riots in France such as police brutality, the social divide between different classes (see Bueno Lacy & Van Houtum, 2024). None of which are mentioned by Tusk, who relies on the topos of threat, implying that if people from the discussed countries were to come to Poland, the country would plunge into chaos. The politician thus uses a false analogy, trying to compare Poland's situation to France, despite the fact that the two countries have different experiences and migration policies.

Moreover, Tusk suggests that the person responsible for any potential threat to Polish security caused by migrants will be Jarosław Kaczyński. In the discussed election video Tusk says that as the riots in France are taking place, "Kaczyński is creating a document which will allow even more citizens to come to Poland from countries such as Saudi Arabia, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, or the Islamic Republic of Pakistan" (*Właśnie teraz Kaczyński przygotowuje dokument, dzięki któremu do Polski przyjedzie jeszcze więcej obywateli z takich państw, jak Arabia Saudyjska, Indie, Islamska Republika Iranu, Katar, Zjednoczone Emiraty Arabskie czy Islamska Pakistanu*) (Figure 8).

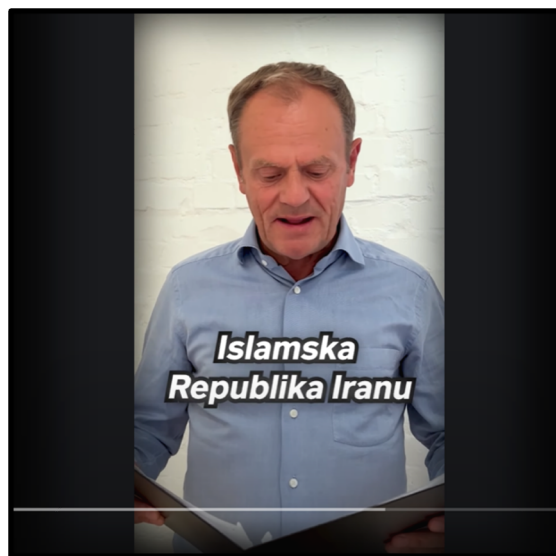


FIGURE 8. Donald Tusk warning against immigrants from Islamic countries.

Regarding Tusk's discursive strategies in the above-mentioned excerpt, the adverb "even" (*jeszcze*) suggests that the number of immigrants in Poland that had been let in before Kaczyński started working on the discussed document had already been high. Thus, in the narrative of Civic Platform, increasing the number of immigrants in Poland would only exacerbate the potential threat. Further, in his discursive construal of Kaczyński, Tusk attempts to portray him as directly responsible for the situation even though the politician has never been involved in the issue of migration. Thus, by relying on the strategy of intensification Tusk attempts to blame Kaczyński for the alleged crisis. In addition, Tusk argues that the leader of PiS is responsible for the situation because of the political gains he is making from it ("Why does Kaczyński simultaneously rants against foreigners and against immigrants. And at the same time he wants to let in hundreds of thousands and from such countries. Maybe he needs an internal war, a conflict, the fear of Polish citizens, because then it is better for him to govern, because then it will be easier for him to win the elections².") Thus, while Tusk accuses Kaczyński of using the topos of threat as well as of dividing Poles, the leader of Civic Platform himself portrays immigrants as dangerous to the security of Poland, relying on clichés, racist discourse, and the same topos that allegedly Kaczyński was using. Therefore, Tusk again intends to simplify a complex issue that is mass migration to Poland – involving both refugees fleeing from their countries due to wars, and agents of Russia and Belarus infiltrating the European Union – by presenting it as a confrontation between him and Kaczyński.

Focusing on the strategies of nominalization, it is worth mentioning that in the case of Iran and Pakistan Tusk reads out the official names of the countries ("the Islamic Republic of Iran" and "the Islamic Republic of Pakistan³") even though they are rarely used in everyday standard Polish. Interestingly, these two countries are the only ones that were referred to by their official names despite the fact that Tusk mentions more African and Middle East countries. Thus, for example, Tusk says simply "Qatar" (not the State of Qatar), "Saudi Arabia" (not the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), or "Nigeria" (not the Federal Republic of Nigeria). Presumably, the official names of Iran and Pakistan were used to further associate Islam and Muslims with threat and danger (given the presence of the adjective "Islamic" in the official names of both countries). Furthermore, in the material Tusk mentions only a selection of countries which would be granted visa facilitation in Poland. It must be stressed that the countries mentioned by the politician in the video are countries where the majority of inhabitants are Muslim or Hindu, which emphasizes their cultural otherness.

The aforementioned draft regulation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stipulated that foreigners could apply for a visa by the head of the Polish ministry, through so-called visa outsourcing, i.e. third-party entities offering the service of receiving and preliminary evaluation and selection of applications in the mentioned countries. Moreover, the draft lists 21 countries. Contrary to Donald Tusk's narrative, these were not countries exclusively from Asia or Africa, but also countries from Europe – including Poland's neighbors (such as Ukraine and Belarus – TVN24, 2020). Still, the video clearly suggests that the regulation would concern only Muslim or Hindu countries, giving the viewers a false impression of its premises.

In the video, Tusk emphasizes that "Kaczyński pulled more than 130,000 citizens from such countries last year—50 times more than in 2015" (*Kaczyński ściągnął z takich państw ponad 130 tysięcy obywateli. 50 razy więcej niż w 2015*). This statement uses the topos of number to highlight a dramatic increase in migration under PiS, suggesting an intentional and significant

² *Dlaczego Kaczyński równocześnie szczerze na obcych i na imigrantów, a równocześnie chce ich wpuścić setki tysięcy, i to właśnie z takich państw. Może potrzebna mu jest wewnętrzna wojna, konflikt, strach polskich obywateli. Bo wtedy lepiej mu rządzić, bo wtedy łatwiej mu będzie wygrać wybory.*

³ *Islamska Republika Iranu, Islamska Republika Pakistanu.*

policy shift. The focus on numerical comparisons underscores the scale of the change while reinforcing the criticism of PiS's migration management. The verb “pulled” (*ściągnął*) is used in rather informal contexts and implies an ad hoc action, carried out beyond procedures. As mentioned earlier, such framing portrays Jarosław Kaczyński as the main person responsible for what is framed by Tusk as an uncontrolled “flood” of dangerous people from culturally alien countries. Moreover, the high numbers mentioned by Tusk again imply the severity of the situation. It is worth mentioning that the “130,000 citizens from such countries” is a clear manipulation as it refers to the number of work permits issued, not migrants that came to Poland. The number of work permits is not synonymous with the number of people who came to Poland. The fact of having a work permit is a prerequisite for obtaining a visa, but only one of many. In practice, a large number of foreigners, despite having a work permit, do not receive a visa (Tomczak, 2023). In an attempt to demonstrate the alleged “lack of control over their country and its borders”, Tusk uses unreliable argumentation, relying on the topos of burden as well as the topos of threat.

Moreover, by referring to 2015 (PiS took power in November that year), Tusk tries to portray PiS as not being in control of the situation and putting Poles in danger as opposed to Poland's governments which were led by politicians of Civic Platform (from 2007 to 2015). What is not taken into account, however, are the multiple factors which have changed the political landscape of Poland (rapidly ageing population, sub-replacement fertility, negative net migration rate), which make bringing in workers from abroad a necessity in Poland (see e.g. Kindler, 2016). Neither was the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine mentioned, which has caused multiple refugees from Ukraine to find shelter in Poland (see Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022). This is yet another example of the unreliable argumentation used by Tusk.

The video ends with Tusk urging that “Poles have to take back control over their state and borders” (*Polacy muszą odzyskać kontrolę nad swoim państwem i jego granicami*), which bears striking similarity to the “Take back control” slogan, commonly used during the Brexit referendum campaign by the proponents of Great Britain leaving the EU (Keating, 2022; Ringeisen-Biardeaud, 2017). Overall, in Tusk's video, the regulations facilitating the employment of foreigners are portrayed as a “loss of control over Poland's borders”. One might therefore observe a recontextualization of a slogan associated with far-right into Polish political discourse by a politician perceived as liberal. This shows that Tusk swiftly switches between different discourses, not hesitating to use racist and xenophobic ones, which had been criticized by his party and the politician himself (Sierakowski, 2021).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis has shown that the discourse on migration of Civic Platform in the 2023 election campaign was consistent and unequivocally negative. Its dominant topics included invoking fear of people at the border among Poles and the delegitimization of PiS as a party that not only failed to ensure safety in Poland, but also was complicit in the smuggling of people across the border. A combination of methodologies grounded in visual (van Leeuwen, 2008) and linguistic analysis (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) allowed for a thorough investigation of the materials, which were interpreted through selected social theories.

Rather surprisingly, given its liberal profile and past attitude towards the border events, Civic Platform's discourse on migration is actually in many ways similar to that of PiS. The only significant difference between the discursive construal of people at the border between the two

formations can be identified in the basic strategies of nominalization – in (far-)right-wing discourse, one can often identify negatively-valenced naming of immigrants or refugees: they are described as invaders, terrorists or criminals (Ahmed & Pisiou, 2021; Stamatini, Archakis & Tsakona, 2021; Wollenberg, 2014). Instead, the analyzed materials mentioned “migrants”, “foreigners”, and “foreign citizens”. However, this does not change the fact that on a visual level their representation was extremely suggestive and pejorative. Moreover, regarding the verbal dimension, the other discursive strategies used to construct “immigrants” bear striking similarities to anti-immigrant discourse.

Overall, the depiction of the immigrant is stereotypical and based on clichés. In the discourse of Civic Platform, the issue of migration is reduced to Arabs storming the Polish border. Dark-skinned men are portrayed as committing crimes and posing a real threat to Poland’s security. The reasons why these people found themselves at the border are not addressed in any of the videos. Stripped of their humanity, people with no faces, no personal histories, no individual subjectivity and personhood, can be seen as unworthy and underserving and not quite human, therefore not worthy of international protection they might legally deserve. The viewer can only interpret the depicted as immigrants, not refugees.

In reality, at the Polish-Belarusian border there are not only young men Arab men, but also women and children of various nationalities. NGOs, such as the Border group, have reported on the deaths of refugees trying to enter Poland (Adler, 2021; Klimowicz, 2021). However, in the analyzed discourse, the humanitarian dimension of the border events is not mentioned. Instead, the materials induce fear and loathing towards people at the border. This pejorative portrayal even more significant given that leading Civic Platform politicians such as MEPs Michał Szczerba and Dariusz Joński have repeatedly engaged in humanitarian efforts on the Polish-Belarusian border, such as providing sleeping bags, water and food to those staying there (Bodalska, 2021)⁴. Further, the discourse of Civic Platform also deviates considerably from most European liberal discourses as they generally tend to represent immigrants and refugees as victims, portraying them positively in attempt to elicit positive feelings towards them (Troszyński & El-Ghamari, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2018; Kroon et al., 2016). Also, although recent research has shown a shift in liberal discourse on migration, finding that while the dominant theme among liberal media and politicians in recent years has ceased to be almost unconditional sympathy for asylum seekers, and has increasingly turned to economic or security concerns (Valente et al, 2023; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018), no mainstream liberal party has so far been observed to employ an explicitly racist discourse, presenting migration in a manner analogous to far-right discourses (Thiele et al., 2024; Turner & Bailey, 2022; Ganesh & Froio, 2020). The fact that this type of discourse has been observed in the electoral materials (aimed at a wide range of voters) of a party with a position such as Civic Platform may herald a change in the approach to the issue of migration not only in Poland, but also in Europe.

Overall, “immigrants” were constructed through the use of orientalist discourse. In the analyzed materials, the alleged cultural difference between the West and the East is highlighted, which is realized by showing representatives of the latter as bellicose and degenerate who, additionally, have to be restrained due to their unruliness (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, pp. 234–236). Emphasizing the ethnicity of the individuals at the border as being from Arabic countries, rather than just acknowledging their humanity, was used to bias viewers against them due to the stereotypical views held about people from Arab countries in Poland. Thus, Civic Platform relied on negative stereotypes which are spread among Poles. While research shows that PiS and its

⁴ It is worth noting that both politicians firmly support the migration policy of the current government.

aggressive negative campaign has significantly contributed to a shift in perception of Muslims and Arabs (cf. Gruszczak, 2022, pp. 117–118), Civic Platform reproduces discriminatory discourse, strengthening the negative portrayal of Arabs as outsiders or enemies, emphasizing the nationality and religion (Islam) of the people on the border, explicitly describing them as dangerous.

In addition to orientalism, in the discourse of Civic Platform migration on was subject to securitization. In the discourse of Civic Platform, Law and Justice failed to ensure the safety of Poles by allowing the country to be “flooded” by people from foreign cultural backgrounds who pose a potential threat. As Ibrahim (2005, p. 165) points out, securitization of migration discourse frequently rests on the belief that a diverse society, made up of various cultural groups, is likely to experience imminent collapse. The analysis of findings suggests that Civic Platform depicted the presence of individuals from culturally distant backgrounds as a danger to Polish and European identity, aligning with PiS’s strategy of instilling fear and leveraging racial stereotypes to gain political advantage (Potulski & Modrzejewski, 2024). In the context of just securitization (Floyd, 2022, pp. 249–250), one might question three out of five criteria of just initiation of securitization by the Polish liberal party: just referent (neither is Law and Justice a pro-Russian party, nor are all people at the border potential terrorists), right intention (the main intention of the election videos was in all likelihood a delegitimization of PiS, not a genuine desire to improve migration policy), and proportionality (the biased portrayal of Islam and Arabs could contribute to their further discrimination). In addition, one might also observe that Civic Platform did not meet the following criteria of just conduct in securitization (Floyd, 2022, p. 251): proportionality (people at the border were not an existential threat to Poland’s security) and discrimination (by portraying them as a disorganized mass devoid of individual features, Civic Platform did respect their human rights).

It should also be mentioned that Civic Platform’s discourse on migration and the events on the Polish-Belarusian border has not changed significantly after the party took power on December 13, 2023. NGOs continue to report on the deaths of refugees at the border, and the push-back procedure continues to be applied to them (TVP World, 2024). It is undeniable that the events at the Polish-Belarusian border are inspired by Russia and Belarus, whose goal is to destabilize security in European Union countries. Their actions can indeed be categorized as a form of hybrid warfare. Still, the involvement of Russia and Belarus is not mentioned in any of the videos. Instead, the videos place sole responsibility for the border events on PiS, even accusing the party of facilitating human trafficking. This selective framing, which omits the roles of Russia and Belarus, can be considered intellectually dishonest, as it disregards key geopolitical factors while focusing exclusively on domestic political blame. The destabilization of the EU security system by facilitating the arrival of large groups of people from Asia and Africa had long been planned by Belarus; the operation is known by the codename “Operation Lock” (Nitzske, 2023, p. 189). Although it should be noted that Law and Justice’s migration policy has been criticized by numerous humanitarian organizations (Caballero-Vélez, 2024; Vaagland & Chmiel, 2024), accusations against the formation of collaboration with Russian and Belarusian regimes or complicity in human trafficking are unfounded. Presenting events at the border as a threat to the security of Poland and the EU is warranted, but it must be done accurately and without resorting to manipulation. Similarly, the materials in question conflated “immigrants” with criminals or agents of Russian services. Such portrayal might lead to discriminatory practices and taint the perception of people escaping from war and persecution.

In conclusion, faulty argumentation on the migration policy of the then government as well as portraying people at the border in a stereotypical and extremely simplistic manner are not conducive to constructive debate and inspiring the development of solutions that are consistent

with international law. The post-2015 discursive change with regard to migration in Poland did not end with PiS losing power. The fact that a party that describes itself as liberal reproduces a discriminatory and stigmatizing discourse with regard to Asian and African people is concerning. As signaled earlier, future research could take into account the discursive portrayal of migration and immigrants by Civic Platform after 13 December 2023 (after Donald Tusk's government was sworn in by President Andrzej Duda). For example, on 17 October 2024, more than a year after the parliamentary elections, Donald Tusk's government published the document "Take back control. Ensure security", which discusses Poland's migration strategy for 2025-2030. In addition, in May 2024 the government launched the East Shield program, which aims to fortify Poland's eastern borders with Russia and Belarus in order to prevent attempts of their illegal crossings. Another significant event regarding the discussion on migration in Poland was the death of Mateusz Sitek, a Polish soldier who was killed by a migrant attack while on duty at the Polish-Belarusian border. All these events were widely discussed both in the media and in the Polish parliament, forcing the ruling coalition to present the topic of migration from a specific perspective and to take a clear position. It is worth investigating whether, as a ruling party, Civic Platform uses other mechanisms to present this phenomenon and whether it goes beyond the simple clichés of the topos of fear and threat or relying on racist innuendos. One may also analyze migration discourse through the prism of a recently developing field of raciolinguistics (Rosa & Flores, 2017), which aims to explore the relationship between language and race in historical contexts, investigating how hierarchies based on these two aspects are formed and legitimized. Finally, especially in the context of Poland, a comparison between the portrayal of immigrants and/or refugees from Ukraine and Asian/African people may yield interesting conclusions, given that the former have been represented by Poland's mainstream politicians and media mostly positively (see e.g. Zawadzka-Paluckta, 2023; Tomczak-Boczek, Gołębiewska & Górny, 2023), whereas the latter have been subject to discriminatory practices. A discussion on possible reasons of such differences (despite multiple similarities in their situations) through the lens of the afore-mentioned raciolinguistics or racial resentments (Böröcz, 2021) could shed more light on the issue in question.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The research is funded by NCN grant PRELUDIUM no.2023/49/N/HS2/00552.

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