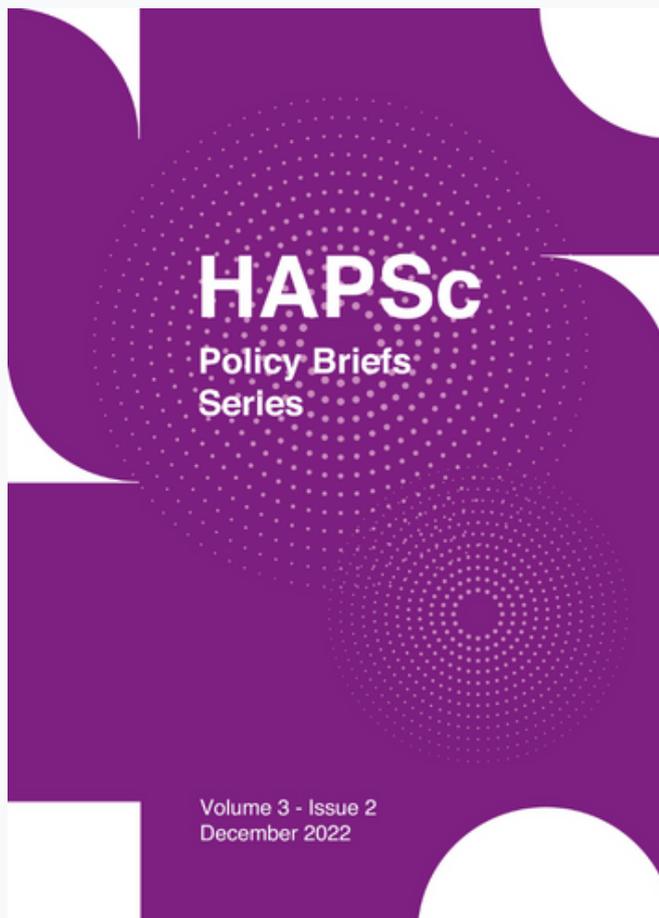


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### Taking Over the Role of Law Enforcement by National Television: The Case Study of Women's Strike Protests in Pandemic-Ridden Poland

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# Taking Over the Role of Law Enforcement by National Television: The Case Study of Women's Strike Protests in Pandemic-Ridden Poland<sup>1</sup>

Kamila Rezmer-Płotka<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract<sup>3</sup>

The study aims to show how the media took over the role of law enforcement by categorising who and how broke the law during women's protests. These protests took place during the second wave of the pandemic. It all started with the judgment of the Constitutional Court, which decided to restrict abortion law in Poland. The method used in the study is a qualitative analysis of sources published on Typ.info. The analysis made it possible to answer the question of how public television assessed and categorised the activity of protesters and why it is possible to talk about taking over the functions of the security services. As a result, the way the protests were reported became a form of mediated control of protest. The research hypothesis is that National Television, as the ruling party's propaganda tool, was enabled in order to take over the police function of ensuring public order and security in crisis situations in relation to the protests. Based on the analysis, the paper introduces recommendations to the ruling party and subordinated national television in order to restore neutrality and realise the original functions of national television.

**Keywords:** Women's Protest; Poland; police; public television; abortion.

## Introduction

National television in Poland operates under the Broadcasting Act of 29 December 1992, which stipulates, inter alia, that "Public broadcasting carries out a public mission by offering, on the terms set out in the Act, to the whole society and its parts, diverse programs and other services in the field of information, journalism, culture, entertainment, education and sport, characterised by pluralism, impartiality, balance and independence as well as innovation, high quality and integrity of the message" (Act of 29 December 1992). Since 2015, the national media in Poland have been completely subordinated to the ruling party. Accordingly, they began to act solely in its interest. Public television has started to play the role not only of creating public opinion but also manipulating information in such a way as to discredit opponents and even make them seem as enemies of the democratic system (Rak, 2021). National television uses specific techniques for propaganda purposes. Including gatekeeping, it allows presenting only this information that promotes the ruling party, with the

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omission or dedication of little attention to the positive actions of the opposition. Secondly, framing is used, thanks to which control over the content of the message and the way it is presented. This makes it possible to propose a way of interpreting the phenomenon. The last technique involves manipulating the viewers' emotions (Sobczak, 2017: 140–152).

During the second wave of the pandemic (contractually: the period from September to December 2020) in Poland, there were mass protests related to the judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal that a premise for abortion about severe and irreversible handicap or incurable life-threatening illness is not constitutional. So far in Poland, the issue of abortion has been regulated based on the Act of 1993, the so-called abortion compromise that allows abortion to be carried out in three defined cases. These cases are: pregnancy with a risk to the woman's health or life; a high likelihood of irreversible foetal impairment and incurable life-threatening disease; suspicion that pregnancy results from a criminal act, such as rape (Act of 7 January 1993). In this way, a decision was made to tighten the existing law. Due to the importance of this event and the mass protests of citizens, mainly women, during the pandemic, when the right to assembly was significantly limited (Rezmer-Płotka, 2020; Osiewicz, 2020), the media reported in detail on their course.

However, how national television reported these events indicated that it had taken over the role of the police in the field of ensuring public order and security in crisis situations. In a democratic state, the costs of repression are higher than in the case of other regimes, hence the need to legitimise one's own actions (Davenport, 2007: 10). In Poland, one of the tools allowing to obtain legitimacy for decisions taken by the ruling party has become national television.

If police control of protests can be treated as an indicator of state authorities' general approach to controlling particular dissident groups, then there is a possibility that politicised national television may also be such an indicator (Earl, Soule & McCarthy, 2003: 582). The media took over the role of law enforcement by categorising who and how broke the law, which is the competence of the police. Stigmatisation through the use of terms such as "anti-patriotic" or "communist" by the government and police stimulates repression (Combes & Fillieule, 2011: 8). In the proposed study the level and the means of stigmatization from the government through the media is examined as well as the way that the latter have taken the role of security services in Poland.

The study aims to show how the media took over the role of law enforcement by categorising who broke the law. The method used in the study is a qualitative analysis of sources published on Tvp.info (TVP.info). The study included all materials directly related to the protests in the period from 22.10.2020 to 30.10.2020. As a supplement, the later effects of the police actions from that period (until

December 2020) were also indicated. The data was collected according to key words such as: protest, women, pandemic, police, abortion, women's strike, women's protest, protests, Warsaw, Constitutional Tribunal, abortion compromise. In addition, news was limited to the indicated time period only and the following research assumption was adopted: how did the media take over the functions of the police and how did they perform them? The analysis made it possible to answer the question of how national television assessed and categorised the activity of protesters and why it is possible to talk about taking over the functions of the security services in area of ensuring public order and security in crisis situations. The research hypothesis is: National Television, as a propaganda tool of the ruling party, is enabled in order to take over the police function of law enforcement in relation to the protests.

### **Women's protests against the restriction of abortion law**

Abortion law in Poland has constantly aroused many emotions, and attempts have been made to change it. One of the more severe attempts occurred in 2016, a year after Law and Justice party won the elections. Then there was the so-called black protest or umbrella protest because citizens protested on the streets of Polish cities dressed in black and holding umbrellas in their hands (Chmielewska, Druciarek & Przybysz, 2017). However, there were no changes in the so-called abortion compromise at that time.

Another attempt at change was successful, and the compromise on abortion was violated. The protests that took place after the verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal were organised in many Polish cities. Their common denominator, apart from expressing their lack of acceptance of change, was the symbol of red lightning. Over time, spontaneously organised protests turned into an organised women's protest movement headed by Maria Lempart. Women expressed their opposition in various forms, including social media, on the streets, in the residences of hierarchs of the Catholic Church, at the entrances and exits from the Sejm building, and before the house of the ruling party's leader.

The most important protest was held under the slogan "Everyone in Warsaw", which took place on 30.10.2020. On that day, thousands of citizens marched through the streets of the capital city, calling on the ruling party to resign and loudly advocating respect for human rights, a secular state (the Catholic Church in Poland is an important actor in social life) or independent courts. After this protest, there were others, but none were so significant and attractive of such media attention. At the end of November 2020, demobilisation and a significant decrease in the frequency of protests could be observed.

## **National Television as the police against protesters**

National television discredited the protesters and assessed their actions at various levels. Based on the analysis, the following main sections were distinguished: categorising protesters; demonstrating activity that threatens the stability and integrity of the state (including anti-patriotic activity); identifying risks to the health and safety of citizens; assessing the activity of protesters.

Within the "Categorising protesters" section, the following can be distinguished: use of terms commonly considered offensive or biased, pejorative, e.g., "abortion supporters", "feminists", "crude boss"; and discrediting the opposition, which was supposed to blend in with the crowd and manifest aggressive behaviour.

The section that deals with activities "threatening the stability and integrity of the state" concerns mainly: anti-patriotic actions, e.g. demanding a change in the name of the roundabout, which refers to "one of the fathers of independence", vulgarity, attacks on the Polish state, anarchist inspirations, abuses by comparing the current situation with martial law in Poland; attacking the police by protesters, violating their bodily integrity and threats, scuffles, aggression; vandalism manifested by the desecration of religious symbols, songs and the devastation of church buildings by protesters; pointing to the illegality of organised assemblies.

In the section "Identifying threats to the health and safety of citizens", news regarding the protests during the pandemic and an increased risk of infections are classified.

The last section, "assessing the activity of protesters", concerns news designed to show: lies and scandalous statements of people associated with the demonstrations; linking the leader of the women's movement and her controversial statements with the opposition; guided by hate speech by protesters; recalling examples of people supporting protests who have so far performed carols (religious songs) during holidays or planned to perform them; pointing to the decline in citizens' interest in the demonstrations and their illegality, and to polls that showed little support for the liberalisation of abortion and so-called abortion on demand.

The actions of the police towards the protesters, about whom information appeared in the media and were to be an adequate response to the behaviour considered dangerous. In addition, later examples of well-known protesters who were punished for their actions were indicated, such as „grandmother Kasia”, who was sentenced by a court sentence to a fine for violating bodily integrity and insulting the police (Typ.info, 2022).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The paper's main purpose was to demonstrate how the media took over the role of law enforcement by judging who broke the law. The classification was created based on the analysis of information placed on tvp.info. It presents ways of portraying and categorising protesters and includes: categorising protesters; demonstrating activity that threatens the stability and integrity of the state (including anti-patriotic activity); identifying risks to the health and safety of citizens; assessing the activity of protesters.

Since 2015, the national media in Poland have been completely subordinated to the ruling party. Consequently, the message was designed to consolidate the ruling party's position on the political scene and maintain a stable electorate. This is possible due to the creation of recipients' views and interpreting the phenomena in a way beneficial to the party. It was manifested, among other things, in relation to assemblies and protesters against restricting abortion laws. The Law and Justice essentially identifies with Christian values and the Catholic Church, so generalising and labelling protesters as supporters of abortion by National TV is not surprising. Moreover, it presents a critical attitude towards the opposition and discredits it by highlighting specific incidents and statements or looking for connections with, for example, the controversial leader of the women's movement. The way protests and protesters are presented is very biased, unambiguous and negative. As a result, how the protests were reported and the protesters described became a form of mediatised control of protest. Creating such an image of protests and participating people contributes primarily to their discrediting in the eyes of public opinion. Secondly, it forces television viewers to accept these interpretations as their own. Thirdly, people are strengthening their conviction that the government is striving for protection, stability and security in the state and that the protesters are creating chaos and threaten social order. In a country where the Church plays a significant role, presenting protesters as undermining Christian values or being anti-patriotic, makes them an internal enemy. In addition, selective citation of controversial statements and behaviours adversely affects the image of those taking part in the protests, and thus the importance of the cause for which they are fighting loses its importance. The study contributes to our understanding of the takeover of police functions by the mass media subordinate to the ruling party. It is important from the perspective of propaganda studies and the meaning of the media for the political system. The media are becoming a tool in the hands of the government, which allows, for example, to legitimise undemocratic actions.

The recommendations that can be proposed based on the analysis should primarily include re-creating regulations that would prevent the monopoly on national television. It would be in line with the Broadcasting Act of 29 December 1992 and the initially assumed function of national television,

which was to educate citizens crucial for a stable democracy (Rak & Rezmer-Płotka, 2022). A significant factor is the actions aimed at enabling citizens to create their own opinions based on providing information devoid of emotions and biased opinions of journalists. It is worth considering that those responsible for the Framework Programme should represent different political views and be able to conduct a constructive dialogue. The protests revealed that the image of the police in the eyes of the public has also deteriorated significantly (Rak, 2022). It eventually enabled National Television to take control of them and make evaluations, to enter the role of security services. For this reason, action should be taken to rebuild the authority of the police and restore its social role, which is to be an apolitical service between the government and citizens. Thus, the police should not duplicate political discourse and lead to the social marginalisation of citizens with particular views but act as an independent state administration body that ensures the safety of all citizens, without using excessive force against people with different political views than the ruling party. In a democratic system, political interests cannot be pursued by taking over selected police functions.

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