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POLISH ‘CREEPING COUP D’ÉTAT’

(CONSPIRACY) TROPES AS A RESEARCH PROBLEM OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

The article is divided into two parts: the first examines discourse analysis as a research method, while the second focuses on the study of Polish political culture. Initially, the article discusses the potential of discourse analysis for political science and related social sciences. The distinction between actor, problem and structure-oriented political discourse analysis is introduced. Special attention is paid to exploring the utility of the poorly researched structure-oriented discourse analysis and the concept of tropes in public discourse. In this context, a case study of the conspiratorial motive of a creeping coup d'état in Polish political discourse is conducted. In conclusion, the article states that the trope has constituted a significant element of Polish political culture over the last two decades, as conspiracy narratives have become institutionalised in mainstream politics as a byproduct of culture wars and deep polarisation. Therefore, it is claimed that a study of tropes, not only those related to conspiracy narratives, offers a promising perspective for understanding political cultures.

Keywords: discourse analysis, political culture, trope, conspiracy theory, Poland

One of the significant trends in social research over the past decades has been the *discursive turn*. This shift entails reorienting scholarly attention from the direct description of objective reality to the analysis of how that reality is discussed and represented. Such discourse-oriented research is closely aligned with constructivist theories that seek to grasp how social reality is constituted through various forms of communicative action. The philosophy of the 20th century, with its growing emphasis on language – tracing its roots to the distinction of the *langue* and the *parole* in linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein¹ – has become a significant source of inspiration in the social sciences. The analytical and interpretive tools developed within these humanities' domains have enabled scholars to describe phenomena across social sciences. However, given the distinct objects of inquiry in various disciplines, the transposition of descriptive categories, analytical tools, and their applications is necessarily partial and selective.

This selective transposition is evident in the adoption of discourse analysis in political science and sociology. Within these fields, two primary approaches to discourse analysis can be distinguished. The first focuses on the discourses of specific political (or social) actors. It may involve the discourse analysis of a political party, ideological group, government, organisation, media outlets, or individual figures. Illustrative examples include research on populist or multicultural discourses,² analyses of the National Front in France,³ and the rhetoric of Donald Trump. A widespread method in this domain is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which not only describes communicative practices but also seeks to deconstruct problematic, often unspoken, assumptions embedded in the discourse of political actors. The actor-oriented analysis is not necessarily holistic and may focus on how a given actor addresses a particular issue. For example, Ruth Wodak analysed just one speech by David Cameron on the United Kingdom and Great Britain.⁴

The second type of political discourse research centres on studying political debates. Here, the primary focus is the issue and how different political actors frame and communicate it. Whereas the first approach typically uses the logic of a case study, the second tends toward the logic of comparative analysis. Problem-oriented discourse analysis enables researchers to juxtapose differing discourses on a particular issue and characterise the debate as a whole – its degree of emotional intensity or polarisation, for example. This category includes analyses of parliamentary debates⁵

¹ F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, transl. by R. Harris, London 1983 [1916]; L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. by G.E. Anscombe, Oxford 1958.

² J. Jagers, S. Walgrave, "Populism as Political Communication Style. An Empirical Study of Political Parties' Discourse in Belgium," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 46, no. 3 (2007), pp. 319-345.

³ P. Davies, *The National Front in France. Ideology, Discourse and Power*, London–New York 2012.

⁴ R. Wodak, "'We Have the character of an Island Nation'. A Discourse-Historical Analysis of David Cameron's 'Bloomberg Speech' on the European Union," in M. Kranert, G. Horan (eds), *Doing Politics. Discursivity, Performativity and Mediation in Political Discourse*, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 27-58.

⁵ T.A. Van Dijk, "Political Discourse and Racism. Describing Others in Western Parliaments," in S.H. Riggins (ed.), *The Language and Politics of Exclusion. Others in Discourse*, Thousand Oaks 1997, pp. 31-64.

or the divergent media portrayals of specific topics.⁶ The boundary between actor-oriented and problem-oriented approaches is fluid and depends more on the objective of the analysis than the unit of study. For instance, an investigation into how Polish political discourse frames democracy could fall into both categories: if it reveals a shared communicative schema among political actors, it belongs to the first type; if it highlights irreducible differences and tensions among them, it aligns with the second.

A third, less commonly pursued approach in research on political, media, and public discourse focuses on the rhetorical devices, persuasive techniques, and culturally embedded motifs and stereotypes that constitute the communicative repertoire of a given language. Unlike the first two types, this structure-oriented analysis of discourse is less concerned with reconstructing the views of particular actors or mapping debate positions. Instead, it seeks to uncover underlying linguistic structures and examine how these are mobilised across various communicative contexts. A prime example of this approach is Harald Müller's study of how liberal discourse defines the enemy, from Kant's 'unjust enemy' to the modern 'rogue state'.⁷ Another example is James G. Crossley's research on the use of biblical motifs in post-1968 British political discourse, which examines how references to Holy Scripture changed in prominence and meaning among the political class.⁸

The relative rarity of structure-oriented discourse analysis in political science and sociology may be attributed to its abstract character and weaker connection to current political events. It may be argued that such analyses are more often undertaken by scholars with linguistic or cultural interests who choose to study political discourse than political scientists or sociologists per se. This paper aims to demonstrate that structural discourse analysis can offer a compelling perspective within political science and sociology. It enables the identification of elements of political culture shared across conflicting political actors, thereby allowing for a more holistic description of the political community. This opportunity will be illustrated by analysing the conspiratorial motive of a 'creeping coup d'état' in Polish political discourse since 2005. As I will argue, this trope constitutes a conspiratorial motif, which allows us to capture a substantial feature of contemporary Polish political culture. Before proceeding, I will briefly define the concept of tropes as discursive elements, introduce the notion of conspiracy narratives, and sketch the relevant political context.

⁶ A. Pérez-Escoda, S. Boulos, M.J. Establés, L. García-Carretero, "Polarization in Media Discourses on Europeanization in Spain," *Politics and Governance*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2023), pp. 221-234.

⁷ H. Müller, "Evilization in Liberal Discourse. From Kant's 'Unjust Enemy' to Today's 'Rogue State,'" *International Politics*, vol. 51 (2014), pp. 475-491.

⁸ J.G. Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos. the Bible in English Political Discourse since 1968*, London 2016.

THE LANGUAGE OF OPPOSITION AND THE LANGUAGE OF POWER: TROPES AS AN OBJECT OF ANALYSIS

In linguistics, tropes can refer to recurring narrative motifs or themes that are accessible to all participants in discourse. They enhance communicative efficiency and bolster the persuasive power of messages. Many tropes have ancient origins, such as still invoked to express the sneakiness in the story of the Trojan horse or the tale of David and Goliath, which is commonly understood as the archetypal asymmetric conflict. These tropes are linked to archetypes representing recurring personality patterns or behavioural models. For instance, the archetype of the self-sacrificing hero, reminiscent of the Promethean myth, appears in many cultures across historical epochs. In this way, tropes contribute to the construction of group mythologies and the perpetuation of stereotypes about other groups. One such example is the figure of the Wandering Jew, who, according to legend, was condemned to exile for mocking Christ. This archetype reappearing in numerous narratives has fuelled antisemitic stereotypes by casting poor Jews in the diaspora as morally atoning for the evil of the archetypal ancestor, constantly sustained in the trope.⁹

In his pioneering exploration of archetypes, Carl Gustav Jung posited that specific motifs recur persistently in various cultural texts.¹⁰ While Jung analysed archetypes as culturally determined behavioural patterns, Russian folklorist and literary theorist Vladimir Propp focused on the structural components of narratives.¹¹ His analysis of folktales led to a typology of standard character types – such as hero, antagonist, helper, false hero, and ruler – and a catalogue of thirty-one narrative functions performed by these characters. These insights revealed that seemingly disparate stories often share a common narrative structure composed of rearranged familiar motifs. Tzvetan Todorov offered an even more concise model, suggesting that all narratives boil down to the disruption and restoration of equilibrium.¹² Whether in a fairytale like *Little Red Riding Hood* or the heroic narratives of the Red Army during World War II, the basic scheme of both narratives is the same and built on underlying topoi that reappear across various texts.

Specific motifs may gain or lose relevance in different cultural contexts and historical periods and undergo various transformations. While such motifs are primarily the domain of literary and cultural studies, they can also yield valuable insights into a society's political culture. For example, they can help identify features of the language of opposition or government characteristic of a given country and period, regardless of who holds power. Although the relationship between language and politics has been

⁹ R.I. Cohen, "The 'Wandering Jew' from Medieval Legend to Modern Metaphor," in B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, J. Karp (eds), *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, Philadelphia 2008, pp. 147-175.

¹⁰ C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An acausal connecting principle*, London 2013 [1955].

¹¹ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin 1968.

¹² T. Todorov, "The 2 Principles of Narrative", *Diacritics*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1971), pp. 37-44.

widely explored, scholars have tended to focus on rhetorical figures such as metaphors, analogies, or synecdoches rather than on motifs. This lack of interest in tropes within political science and sociology may stem from the fact that while metaphor analysis highlights the uniqueness of political communication, the study of motifs tends to reveal the *typicality* of statements as parts of broader discursive patterns. While this perspective may hold less appeal for researchers interested in individual political actors as unique agents, it offers considerable potential as a tool for mapping the structure of political discourse within a given political culture.

Nevertheless, the category of tropes has not been widely employed in political science or sociology. Some valuable inspiration can be found in John S. Nelson's *Tropes of Politics: Science, Rhetoric, Theory, Action*.¹³ In this article, I plan to demonstrate its usefulness for analysing a special type of political discourse, namely conspiracy discourse. Therefore, the next section is devoted to clarifying the notion of conspiracy theories.

CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES – DEFINITIONAL CLARIFICATIONS

Conspiracy theories have become a pervasive characteristic of public discourse in many countries, posing a significant challenge for researchers worldwide.¹⁴ Those popular explanations of politics constitute conspiracy discourses composed of numerous narratives marked by distrust toward specific groups. The whole story and specific arguments may differ a lot, but at the same time, they share profound structural similarities. Serge Moscovici argues that the content of a conspiracy mentality *is like a piece of clothing cut from the same material, according to the same pattern. The only difference is that it hangs on a different human clothes hanger*.¹⁵

Speaking of conspiracy-related concepts, I prefer to use the term 'conspiracy narrative' instead of the popular but misleading term 'conspiracy theory', which is widely used in a derogatory sense to describe false and irrational beliefs that can have dangerous consequences for democratic regimes. Many contemporary researchers challenge the popular understanding, showing that the problem is far more complex and that various conspiratorial beliefs differ substantially in their coherence, likelihood and impact on society and politics.¹⁶ Inspired by these developments in research on conspiracy theory, I use the term conspiracy narrative to underline that I am focusing on suspicions that are not necessarily false. The term denotes the idea that some information regarding public matters remains hidden due to activities undertaken by a group to achieve

¹³ J.S. Nelson, *Tropes of Politics. Science, Theory, Rhetoric, Action*, Madison 1998.

¹⁴ M. Butter, P. Knight (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theory*, Abingdon 2020; see J.E. Uscinski, J.E. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, New York 2014.

¹⁵ S. Moscovici, "The Conspiracy Mentality," in C.F. Graumann, S. Moscovici (eds), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, New York–Berlin–Heidelberg–London–Paris–Tokyo 1987, p. 157.

¹⁶ See P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*, London–New York 2000, M. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories. Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minnesota 2008; J.E. Uscinski, J.E. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories...*

benefits at the expense of the community's overall interests. In other words, conspiracy narratives do not refer to every suspicion about secrecy, but only to an allegation that someone has broken the rules of public life for their benefit. The image of the public sphere and the actors present in conspiratorial narratives – both true and false – may have a substantial social impact, as they define untrustworthy public actors and simultaneously consolidate a self-image of an in-group that is identified as a victim. This is why conspiracy narratives interest social scientists, regardless of their actual status. However, *the social dynamics discussed above are possible only when certain suspicions are socially expressed and find recipients. In other words, the suspicion of someone's dishonesty must become a narrative. If someone mentally formulates a theory explaining some undesirable phenomenon without telling anyone about it, this is not a conspiracy narrative yet.*¹⁷

Before moving on to the analytical section, one methodological remark needs to be made, as definitional choices imply a research design. For instance, social psychologists and political scientists interested in conspiracy attitudes and thinking usually cannot observe them in natural conditions. Thus, their research is typically based on generated data and standardised procedures of experiments and surveys. On the contrary, conspiracy narratives refer to various stories circulated in society and are generally researched using different qualitative text analyses and strategies. Historically and culturally oriented scholars employ sociologically oriented discourse analysis frameworks to understand conspiratorial texts in broader cultural and political contexts. This type of inquiry, inspired by methodological insights proposed by qualitatively oriented scholars in the interdisciplinary field of conspiracy theory research, is employed in the following sections.

CONTEXT: POLISH POLITICS AFTER 1989

In brief, discourse analysis examines texts within a broader context. Hence, to begin with the case study of the trope of creeping coup d'état, attention needs to be paid to the historical context of Polish politics. The collapse of the communist regime in 1989 introduced entirely new narratives and tropes into public discourse in Poland. Some of them can be described as conspiracy narratives. Not surprisingly, their functions and nature have evolved alongside the developments on the political scene. The creeping coup d'état trope became institutionalised in Polish politics after 2005. Institutionalisation means that the conspiratorial distrust cannot be limited to a single radical political party or movement. In other words, it is a routinised, durable, and essential feature of Polish mainstream politics after 2005.

Generally speaking, two distinct periods can be identified in Poland's political history following the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. The first phase started with the partially free election organised on 4 June 1989 and continued until Poland

¹⁷ F. Czech, "Saturation of the Media with Conspiracy Narratives. Content Analysis of Selected Polish News Magazines," *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne*, no. 2 (2019), pp. 151-171.

joined the European Union in 2004. It was a period of democratisation or systemic transformation, as it was often named. The Small Constitution (1992) and the Constitution (1997), among many other acts, have shaped the political system. Negotiations with the EU and NATO were initiated and concluded. Although most people and parliamentary politicians supported those strategic aims, the political scene was fragmented and unstable. Until 1997, there were seven different Prime Ministers, and none of the numerous parties ever won more than 25% of the electoral votes. As a result, in 1991, as many as 29 out of over a hundred political parties won seats in the Sejm. The fragmentation was much more advanced on the right wing of the political scene, dominated by post-Solidarity parties.

More or less at the same time as the country finally joined the European Union in 2004, numerous politically severe scandals broke out. The biggest among them was the Rywin affair, tagged as 'Rywingate', after intermediary Lew Rywin, who on behalf of the unidentified members of the governing party offered the leading Polish daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* to arrange a change in a draft media law in exchange for a bribe of 17.5 million USD. Although Leszek Miller's government survived to usher Poland into the EU in 2004, the situation changed dramatically the following year in the elections. The SLD was effectively marginalised. From then on, two parties dominated the Polish political scene: Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) and Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO, which later became the biggest party of Koalicja Obywatelskiej, or Civic Coalition), both established at the beginning of the twenty-first century upon a basis of previous post-Solidarity political groups and promising a profound change.

In such a situation, the second period in Poland's political history began after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. Every election after 2005 was won by PiS or by PO. From 2005 onwards, every government coalition was led by PiS (2005-2007 and from 2015 until 2023) or by PO (2007-2015 and from late 2023 onwards), and all four presidents of Poland elected in the twenty-first century were supported by one of these parties. In other words, a fragmented, multi-party political system transformed into one with two leading parties. The role of older parties, such as the SLD, PSL, or populist Self-Defence (Samobrona), has gradually diminished. Most new parties trying to challenge the political duopoly, such as the nationalist League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin – LPR), progressive Your Movement ('Twój Ruch – TR) or liberal .Modern (.N – .Nowoczesna) quickly lost their initial support. Simultaneously, with the transformation of the political scene, the axis of political conflict is transfigured. In the first period, the main line of political conflict ran between post-communist and post-solidarity parties after 2005, the axis divided liberals and conservatives.

PiS and PO, citing the Solidarity legacy, were widely expected to form a common government before the 2005 parliamentary elections. After the elections, they even negotiated a coalition agreement. Eventually, the coalition government was never established, and ideological polarisation started. PiS stands for traditional, conservative values, a strong state and economically statist ideas. Conversely, although

originally self-defined as a liberal-conservative party, PO is more progressive or economically and socially liberal. Consequently, both would-be coalitionists become belligerents in a broader culture war of modernising Polish society. Moreover, the clash of values became more significant since a cross-party consensus to join the European Union was reached, and the transformation process of the 1990s successfully concluded with Poland being recognised as a stable democratic member of the European Community.

CREEPING COUP D'ÉTAT – CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AFTER 2005

If, in the 1990s, the most prevalent criticism of mainstream political parties was primarily related to corruption or a lack of competence, after 2005, the accusation of plans to overthrow democracy became significantly more prominent. After Kaczyński twins and PiS gained power in 2005, influential liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* became the harshest critic of their government. For example, in 2007, Michnik wrote: *Poland is becoming the state of a creeping coup d'état. Its final stage is to be a system that will deprive existing institutions of democratic substance and make them a fiction.*¹⁸ A month later, he declared: *I also do not feel safe. No one knows if I will not be included in some conspiracy-crime >system< in the sick imagination of the rulers [...] Rubicon has been crossed. Rubicon, which separates the democratic state of law from the state of a creeping coup d'état. No one can no longer have doubts – the milieu of the Kaczyński brothers will use all the tricks and ways to hide the truth about their grim secrets.*¹⁹ The above quotations clearly show how conspiratorial distrust became the new normal in Poland after 2005. Furthermore, it demonstrates that conspiratorial narratives about the actions of political opponents can be easily conflated with condemnation of conspiracy thinking.

Somewhat unexpectedly, after Tusk narrowly lost the presidential election to Lech Kaczyński and PiS won the parliamentary elections by a narrow margin, PO made a sudden turn and launched fierce attacks against PiS. Although, contrary to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, initially the idea of creeping coup d'état was not crucial in the rhetoric of Donald Tusk: *Unlike some commentators or leaders on the left, today I would not come up with a quite hysterical and probably a false thesis, that some totalitarianism is born, that you [Law and Justice] are some black riders, that you build authoritarian state. No. You know what, in a sense, you are bigger trouble for Poland, because your sin is not some imagined totalitarianism or authoritarianism, your sin is extreme ineptitude.*²⁰ The position of Tusk will substantially change in future, but his words prove that the trope was already a recognised element of public debate.

¹⁸ A. Michnik, "Modlitwa o deszcz," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 30 July 2007, no. 176, at <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,4349070.html>, 29 July 2025.

¹⁹ A. Michnik, "Uczciwe wybory bez Kaczyńskiego i Ziobry," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 31 August 2007, no. 203, at <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,4447686.html>, 29 July 2025.

²⁰ D. Tusk, "Speech at the Sejm," 7 September 2007, at <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata5.nsf/851e81387c160e4fc125745f00379393/2e947c726255f061c125746600409358?>, 10 December 2024.

In 2007, Kaczyński broke up the coalition with Samoobrona because Andrzej Lepper was charged with graft. PO won the snap election and remained in power from 2007 up to 2015. Friction and open hostility between President Lech Kaczyński and Prime Minister Donald Tusk were present from the very beginning. Even during the first debate on the vote of confidence, Jarosław Kaczyński said: *Mr. Donald Tusk is the only significant politician who, 15 years ago, was ready to state publicly that he is willing to sacrifice democratic values for transformation. Someone may say: Well, the mistakes of youth, a story that is not worth coming back to. However, if we analyse everything that is proposed here (...), the question is whether Polish democracy will not again become, as it was 10 or a dozen years ago, highly defective. In addition, you can imagine worse scenarios. (...) Our party will not, of course, support the government of Mr. Donald Tusk.*²¹

The real game-changer in the PiS-PO relations was the crash of an airplane with President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others on board near Smolensk on 10 April 2010. As is usually the case in such unprecedented catastrophes, conspiracy narratives became highly popular. Some blamed President Vladimir Putin, who was boldly challenged by Kaczyński in Tbilisi, when the Russian-Georgian conflict was on edge two years earlier. But some commentators and politicians also suggested that Donald Tusk was involved in the alleged plot to kill Kaczyński to eliminate the president and get full power (the speaker of the Sejm, Bronisław Komorowski from PO, became the acting president).²² This narrative illustrates how deep distrust had already divided the Polish political scene. Additionally, partly due to governmental mistakes following the catastrophe, conspiracy narratives became highly popular, and trust in the government declined. For example, Minister Ewa Kopacz vowed that she assisted the Russians while putting the corpses in coffins, but later on, it turned out that some bodies or their parts were placed in the wrong coffins. As a result, according to many surveys, over 20% of Poles believed that the assassination of the president at least could take place in Smolensk, and even 2/3 of them were convinced that the crash would never be fully explained.²³

If one considers that a political rival might be implicated in a plot against the president, it is quite easy to imagine that he also secretly breaks democratic principles. When Komorowski, as an acting president, won the presidential election in 2010 and the PO remained in power after the 2011 parliamentary elections, PiS launched conspiratorial speculations against Donald Tusk and his circle, suggesting that he was patiently consolidating power to prepare a coup d'état. For example, in a conference on the quality of Polish democracy, Jarosław Kaczyński claimed that Poland is a 'façade democracy', where the promise of 'annihilation of opposition' is realised, and pressure on the media and journalists is growing. Several signals indicate that the Polish secret service, Urząd Ochrony Państwa (UOP), is intensifying its activities in the political sphere.

²¹ J. Kaczyński, "Speech at the Sejm," 23 November 2007, at <http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata6.nsf/cf6cd6bc70d259a4c125738c004d6617/472bf9c55af275a2c12573ad0041f8c8?>, 10 December 2024.

²² F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, pp. 173-176.

²³ Ibid.

As evidence, he brought news that the late President Lech Kaczyński's phone had allegedly been eavesdropped on while he was in office.²⁴

In 2014, another wiretap scandal appeared. Waiters working for shady individuals in business have recorded dozens of businessmen and politicians, most of whom are from the ruling PO, in Warsaw restaurants over the course of almost a year. The recordings, themselves illegal, published over many months, gave insight into confidential talks of the ruling party: gossip about corruption, exchange of information with influential businessmen, admissions of problems and failures, and, last but not least, the often vulgar and scornful language of liberal elites. Even though the records suggested that the PO does not cope with many problems (*The Polish state exists only theoretically*, as a minister of interior claimed in one of the most famous quotations), the topos of creeping coup d'état was still in use by the opposition. Adam Hofman, spokesman of PiS, commenting on one of the leaks, accused the government in the Sejm: *You wanted to make a creeping coup d'état! You wanted to make a closed circuit only to rule in Poland on dictatorial principles!*²⁵ This atmosphere of distrust toward elites, among others, led to a double victory of PiS in the 2015 elections: Andrzej Duda became the president of Poland, and PiS was the first party to gain an absolute majority in the Polish parliament.

The new term was tense from the very beginning. At the end of the previous term, the PO-led coalition, on the very last day, appointed five Constitutional Tribunal judges in advance, even though their term was going to expire after the elections. PiS responded by amending the law and appointing an additional five judges. The European Commission criticised the actions of both sides for Democracy through Law. Nevertheless, the heavy criticism was centred on PiS, which was in power and reluctant to normalise the situation. Moreover, the implementation of the promised judicial system reform, strongly criticised by the opposition, exacerbated the tension. In less than a month after the election, Sławomir Neumann, the head of the PO parliamentary group, warned amid the constitutional tribunal crisis: *We are dealing with a creeping dictatorship that appropriates the state.*²⁶ Following statements on 'creeping coup d'état', 'stepping coup', 'hybrid coup' or just 'threat to democracy' were repeated by journalists, intellectuals and many members of opposition, including Grzegorz Schetyna, leader of PO after Tusk became President of European Council²⁷ – and Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz – the

²⁴ MJ, "Nic o Nas bez Nas. Kaczyński broni demokracji," *Newsweek*, 26 February 2011, at <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/konferencja-nic-o-nas-bez-nas-kaczynski-broni-demokracji/9l0lqfy>, 10 December 2024.

²⁵ "Hofman grzmi w Sejmie: Chcieliście zrobić pełzający zamach stanu!," *Dziennik*, 9 July 2014, at <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/464115,hofman-o-rozmowie-belka-sienkiewicz.html>, 10 December 2024.

²⁶ IAR, "Neumann krytycznie ocenia ruchy PiS: Pełzająca dyktatura," *Dziennik*, 26 November 2015, at <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/506678,szef-klubu-po-slawomir-neumann-krytycznie-ocenia-ruchy-pis-pelzajaca-dyktatura.html>, 10 December 2024.

²⁷ "Schetyna: To kroczący zamach stanu (...) Będziemy budzić emocje społeczne poza parlamentem," *Wprost*, 1 December 2017, at <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10089792/schetyna-to-kroczaczy-zamach-stanu-bedziemy-budzic-emocje-spoeczne-pozaparlamentem.html>, 10 December 2024.

president of Warsaw supported by PO.²⁸ In the context of the crisis over the Constitutional Tribunal, 33% of Poles claimed that it was *'another political conflict'* and 29% that *it was a 'real threat for democracy in Poland'*,²⁹ although according to another poll, over half of the population were afraid that it was a threat to democracy.³⁰ What was new was that the over 10-year-old discourse on the 'creeping coup d'état' entered the European public sphere. Although the first public hearing on democracy in Poland was organised in the European Parliament by PiS in 2014, it ultimately became a serious issue in the European Parliament and the European Commission after PiS formed the government. However, Polish politicians brought to the EU the old, well-known scripts. For example, Janusz Lewandowski, a member of PO in the European Parliament and a close friend of Tusk, mentioned a 'creeping coup d'état' during a debate on the state of Polish democracy in Strasbourg in December 2016.³¹ On the other hand, Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Gliński (PiS) used the exact phrase two weeks later to criticise opposition members of parliament for blocking the floor in the Sejm.³² Consequently, the discourse of creeping dictatorship became omnipresent and used simultaneously by both sides of the political dispute as a routinised reaction to relatively unimportant political events. Even one episode of the satirical political show *Ucho Prezesa* (The Chairman's Ear) was titled *The Creeping Dictatorship*.

In subsequent years, the diagnosis of an ongoing creeping coup d'état continued to resurface. In 2021, editor Adam Michnik, speaking as a public authority on a television programme, returned to the theses he had already articulated in 2007. He stated: *I proposed the hypothesis that this is a creeping coup d'état, or – as Hungarian communist leader Mátyás Rákosi put it – a salami tactic: slicing off thin pieces one by one. Or, as Madeleine Albright described it, plucking the wings off a chicken one at a time rather than all at once. It is the logic of building in Poland first an authoritarian state, which is a direct path toward a totalitarian regime.*³³ Michnik predicted that this process was likely to continue, arguing: *Authoritarian systems are like bicycles. They must keep moving forward.*

²⁸ dam, "HGW: Mamy pelzający zamach stanu, żyjemy jak w komunie!," *Frona*, 24 October 2017, at <http://www.frona.pl/a/hgw-mamy-pelzajacy-zamach-stanu-zyjemy-jak-w-komunie,101442.html>, 10 December 2024.

²⁹ "Kolejny konflikt podobny do innych czy zamach na demokrację?," *TVN24*, 4 December 2015, at <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/polacy-o-sporze-wokol-sedziow-trybunalu-konstytucyjnego,600164.html>, 10 December 2024.

³⁰ A. Stankiewicz, "Sondaż IBRiS dla 'Rzeczpospolitej': Polacy widzą zagrożenie dla demokracji w kraju," *Rzeczpospolita*, 13 April 2016, at <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art11091881-sondaz-ibris-dla-rzeczpospolitej-polacy-widza-zagrozenie-dla-demokracji-w-kraju>, 10 December 2024.

³¹ S. Skarżyński, "'To jest pelzający zamach stanu'. Janusz Lewandowski celnie o polityce PiS," *OKO.press*, 16 December 2015, at <https://oko.press/pelzajacy-zamach-stanu-janusz-lewandowski-celnie-o-polityce-pis/>, 10 December 2024.

³² "Gliński o 16 grudnia w Sejmie: pelzający zamach stanu," *Onet*, 28 December 2016, at <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/gliniski-o-16-grudnia-w-sejmie-pelzajacy-zamach-stanu/tsz6h4x>, 10 December 2024.

³³ A. Gardulska, "Michnik w TVN 24: Jarosław Kaczyński się po prostu pogubił," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 21 July 2021, at <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,27352795,michnik-w-tvn-24-jaroslaw-kaczynski-sie-po-prostu-pogubil.html>, 10 December 2024.

*If a bicycle stops, it falls over.*³⁴ On the final day of 2021, summarising the year on TVN, the *Gazeta Wyborcza* editor reiterated that *what we are currently witnessing is something akin to a semi-dictatorship, a creeping coup d'état.*³⁵ In the following year, the leading left-leaning weekly *Polityka* celebrated its 65th anniversary. Even in its programmatic editorial entitled *What Do We Stand For?*, the publication stated its opposition to *actions taken by the authorities that amount to a creeping coup d'état.*³⁶ These examples demonstrate that this conspiratorial narrative is not characteristic of fringe political actors or those considered radicals. Instead, it has become a standard element in the discourse used to describe the country's political situation.

In 2023, the political landscape in Poland underwent a substantial shift when, after eight years of rule by the Law and Justice Party (PiS), Donald Tusk became Prime Minister following the parliamentary elections, and the Civic Platform (PO) emerged as the key party within the new governing coalition. It is worth noting in passing that, as in all parliamentary elections of the past two decades, the lead-up to the 2023 election was accompanied by more or less popular claims that the ruling party was hindering the opposition's campaign efforts in various ways, with assertions circulating that the polls might not be fair and that the ruling party is going to fake an election to keep the power.

Nevertheless, immediately after the election and the change in government, the narrative of a creeping coup did not disappear but instead shifted its direction. As a convenient rhetorical tool, it was now adopted by members of the newly formed parliamentary opposition, many of whom had served as ministers in the previous administration. For instance, former Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński, reflecting on the political situation nearly a year after the elections, stated: *We are witnessing a systemic transformation, a kind of creeping coup d'état. It is a practice aimed at installing in Poland a type of hybrid dictatorship.*³⁷

A more radical step was taken by Bogdan Świączkowski, President of the Constitutional Tribunal, whom President Andrzej Duda appointed upon the recommendation of the previous parliamentary term. At the beginning of 2025, he submitted a 60-page notice to the public prosecutor's office, alleging a suspected criminal act of coup d'état by Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his associates. Świączkowski reportedly asserted that *this is not a coup involving tanks in the streets, but rather a creeping, systemic coup d'état.*³⁸

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ T. Jakubowski, "Adam Michnik: Jarku, życzę ci, byś odszedł i przestał udęrczać Polaków pomysłami twojej ekipy," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 31 December 2021, at <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,27963591,adam-michnik-ta-wladza-nie-moze-byc-uznana-za-legalna-nie-tylko.html>, 10 December 2024.

³⁶ J. Baczyński, M. Janicki, "O co nam chodzi? 65 lat POLITYKI. Przypisy jubileuszowe," *Polityka*, 22 February 2022, no. 9 (3352), p. 6.

³⁷ Zespół *wPolityce*, "Prof. Piotr Gliński: Mamy do czynienia z sytuacją zmiany ustroju, czyli rodzajem pelzającego zamachu stanu," *wPolityce.pl*, 3 October 2024, at <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/708589-tylko-u-nas-glinski-to-jest-pelzajacy-zamach-stanu>, 10 December 2024.

³⁸ "Prezes Trybunału Konstytucyjnego: Trwa pelzający zamach stanu," *Do Rzeczy*, 5 February 2025, at <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/686348/swieczkowski-skladam-zawiadomienie-trwa-pelzajacy-zamach-stanu.html>, 28 July 2025.

However, the issue quickly subsided in the context of the presidential election scheduled for May. Just when it seemed that the most far-reaching version of the creeping coup narrative had already been articulated, even more radical suspicions emerged. Following the narrow defeat of the liberal candidate Rafał Trzaskowski, voices among his supporters began calling for a recount of the votes. The face of these protests became Roman Giertych, a former leader of the right-wing League of Polish Families, who had since become an opponent of Kaczyński and was elected to parliament from the Civic Coalition's list. On his social media platforms, Giertych expressed the belief that the opposition party Law and Justice (PiS) had rigged the election and that democracy was in mortal danger: *Did PiS rig the 2025 election? Of course. They didn't amend the electoral code for nothing. (...) A minimum condition for preserving democracy in Poland is an independent recount of the votes cast in this election.*³⁹ It is difficult not to see this as yet another example of what Hofstadter described as a characteristic feature of the conspiratorial style: the insistence that the political community stands at a turning point and that our future depends on whether we choose to believe in suspicion-laden conjectures and take action accordingly.⁴⁰

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The diagnosis of Polish political culture presented in the previous sections is evident: a whole conspiratorial discourse has formed around the trope of a creeping coup d'état since 2005. The two most important political groups, as well as the media block supporting them in the Polish version of the culture war, employ the same narrative in a mirrored manner. Hence, the motif of creeping coup has become institutionalised and is a standardised way of talking about the political situation in Poland. In other words, the language of conspiratorial suspicions has become the *lingua franca* – to borrow Knight's⁴¹ classic description of conspiracy culture in the United States – among the leading political players and ordinary citizens in Poland. In this context, the trope of a creeping coup d'état is part of the standard repertoire of mainstream political opposition discourse (and not only). The traditional claims that political opponents are ineffective or corrupted are substantially extended and substituted by the view that they act on purpose to destroy democracy in Poland.

Paradoxically, concentration on the local actors in Polish conspiracy narratives popularised after 2005 seems to be a symptom of a specific modernisation of conspiracy thinking in Poland. Conspiracy theories in the most advanced democracies, as Knight in the case of the U.S. demonstrated, tend to focus on legacy of authorities or 'enemies

³⁹ B. Lis, "Giertych: Czy PiS fałszował wybory w 2025? Oczywiście," *Wiesci24*, 19 June 2025, at <https://wiesci24.pl/2025/06/19/giertych-czy-pis-falszowal-wybory-w-2025-oczywiscie/>, 28 July 2025.

⁴⁰ R. Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in R. Hofstadter (ed.), *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Cambridge 1996 [1964], p. 36.

⁴¹ P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture...*, p. 2.

within', instead of sinister 'them'.⁴² Arguably, the most recurring conspiratorial motives were related to imagined threats to Jews and Germans. Surveys showed the growing wave of 'anti-Semitism without Jews' in Poland, as in other post-communist new democracies, where Jews were almost absent after the Holocaust, which began to fade at the end of transformation period and in 2008 for the first time more Poles declared positive than negative attitudes toward Jews.⁴³ Also, the fear of German influence, fuelled by conspiratorial beliefs, although still present in a slightly transformed form, reached its peak before Poland joined the European Union. Symptomatically, the contemporary narratives focus more on Polish elites favouring German interests over local ones than on Germans themselves. External threats appealed much better to the people in a country perceived as weak and poor, in the process of transformation toward democracy. The trope of the creeping coup d'état expresses the fear of democratic backsliding and, as such, it can develop only in a country generally perceived by its citizens as, at least to a certain extent, a valuable democracy. Accession to the European Union, perceived as a generational achievement alongside rapid economic development and an improving quality of life, made Poles sufficiently satisfied to give way to the emotion of anxiety, expressed in the trope of a creeping coup.

Drawing comparisons with the 1990s yields one further conclusion. Conspiracy narratives, which concentrated on external enemies and were occasionally vocal, were relatively marginalised in the public sphere. For example, other members of parliament did not treat populist Samoobrona, which, as the first group in the Polish parliament, used conspiracy rhetoric extensively, as a regular party. Instead, they established a cordon sanitaire after Samoobrona won the Sejm mandates for the first time in 2001. Moreover, the mainstream media put much effort into avoiding the popularisation of conspiracy narratives. The situation changed in the new political reality in 2005. Symbolically enough, this very year, when PiS-PO led the political system, or the duopoly, as Poles sometimes refer to it, was formed, Samoobrona joined the governing coalition. Moreover, the same year, the trope of the creeping coup d'état began to gain momentum as distrust within elites grew after the consensus to join the European Union lost its unifying power and culture wars over ideological issues gained significance.

It should also be taken into account that the institutionalisation of the creeping coup d'état motive accelerated in the age of social media, which started in 2004 with the establishment of Facebook. Mainstream media could limit the range of some narratives fairly easily in the 1990s, but this is no longer the case when bold interpretations catch on through social media. Politicians involved in fierce political conflicts and journalists fighting for attention in challenging times for traditional media also tend to present bold or shocking theses, which are also popular on social media. An illustrative instance here is the wording 'creeping coup d'état'. It is a neat oxymoron (as actions to unseat incumbent elites are usually swift), which is emotional enough to attract the

⁴² Ibid., p. 3-4.

⁴³ A. Sułek, "Zwykli Polacy patrzą na Żydów," *Nauka*, no. 1 (2010), s. 7-23.

attention of spectators and suggest that there is a hidden, dangerous pattern behind the supposedly routine actions.

The fact is that varying levels of plausibility characterise different stories contributing to the discourse on a creeping coup. Without a doubt, some of them are true or at least probable. One can assume that some politicians exert undue influence on judges or the media. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the European Commission criticised the actions of both main political parties in Poland regarding the Constitutional Tribunal as legally unjustifiable. This means that the problem with the creeping coup conspiracy is not at the stage of data, but at the stage of interpretation. This well-known mechanism of inductive accumulation of facts needed to prove a thesis without its falsification is commonly used in media and politics. It leads to exaggerated outlook in a way, which was already aptly characterised by Richard Hofstadter: *The typical procedure of the higher paranoid scholarship is to start with such defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts (...) What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts (though it is occasionally the that in his extravagant passion for facts the paranoid occasionally manufactures them), but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events. (...) what is missing is not veracious information about the organisation, but sensible judgment.*⁴⁴ The creeping coup d'état is such a product of a leap in imagination. Beyond the tough political fight, there is no real evidence of a planned coup, although both political camps firmly mobilise their followers to defend democracy, which becomes increasingly exhausting and frustrating for many citizens.

The main problem is the trope of a creeping coup d'état, which has negative consequences. It not only expresses but also amplifies distrust toward the public sphere and political actors. It contributes to a general distrust, which is also traditionally low in Poland. In consequence, negative attitudes are transferred to common supporters of political opponents. The Internet is flooded with hate speech aimed toward politicians and their supporters. In a somewhat obsessive manner, virtually everything (e.g., news about a local football match or a weather forecast) can be interpreted in relation to the political situation and used against political enemies. It brings a specific over-politicisation of Polish society. There are many accounts (in the media, arts, and everyday conversations) that politics has become a perilous and explosive topic among family members, colleagues, or friends. According to research conducted by the Centre for Prejudice Research at Warsaw University, negative attitudes toward political opponents are at least as strong as those toward traditionally disliked groups in Poland.⁴⁵ Finally, the hate crimes, such as the assassinations of Marek Rosiak, an employee in PiS's office, and Paweł Adamowicz, the president of Gdańsk from PO, might be seen as an ultimate consequence of extreme conspiratorial polarisation.

⁴⁴ R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style...*, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁵ P. Górka, *Polaryzacja polityczna w Polsce. Jak bardzo jesteśmy podzieleni*, Report of Centre for Prejudice Research, Warsaw University, 2019, p. 16, at <http://cbu.psychologia.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/410/2021/02/Polaryzacja-polityczna-2.pdf>, 10 December 2024.

It is hardly surprising that, under such conditions, political research on conspiracy theories has been developing within the social sciences in Poland. Naturally, these studies encompass a wide range of manifestations and aspects of conspiratorial thinking, yet they have proven to be a useful analytical tool for understanding the complexities of Polish politics. One might even question whether any account of Polish political culture since 2005 could be considered not so much complete, as no account ever is, but adequate, without reference to the category of conspiracy theories and related concepts. Structure-oriented discourse analysis enables us to grasp this feature of Polish political culture, but it is also applicable to many others.

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