

Róża NORSTRÖM 

University of Wrocław

roza.norstrom@uwr.edu.pl

Paulina BARCZYSZYN-MADZIARZ 

University of Wrocław

paulina.barczyszyn-madziarz@uwr.edu.pl

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND WOMEN IN POLITICS IN THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE POLISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF 2023 BY FOREIGN MEDIA

ABSTRACT

The 2023 parliamentary election in Poland was very dynamic, and women's rights and participation in politics were among the most important topics discussed by domestic experts and media. Many foreign politicians, commentators and journalists followed the election campaign in Poland and discussed the state of Polish democracy. This article aims to present how eight European and international media outlets covered the Polish parliamentary election, especially the subject of women's rights and participation in politics, and to investigate what kind of image of Poland these media outlets created in their materials. The authors use content analysis and comparative analysis to check whether the above-mentioned issues were the subject of coverage by foreign media and, if so, what specific topics were discussed in the materials.

Keywords: parliamentary election, media coverage, political participation, women's rights, international news

INTRODUCTION

The voting in the Polish parliamentary elections took place on 15 October 2023. The ruling United Right alliance (pol. Zjednoczona Prawica) received 35.38% of the votes, which gave them 194 mandates in the Sejm (eng. Polish Parliament).¹ This was not enough to form a majority government. Therefore, the opposition parties (Civic Coalition – pol. Koalicja Obywatelska, Third Way – pol. Trzecia Droga and The Left – pol. Lewica), which achieved a combined total vote of 53.71% (248 mandates in the Sejm), managed to form a majority coalition government. The parliamentary campaign was observed not only by voters, but also by domestic and foreign experts and media. Since women's rights and women's participation in politics were important and widely discussed issues in Polish public debate, it seems interesting to check if and how these issues were also presented in materials created by foreign media, affecting the way the elections and Polish politics were portrayed abroad.

The aim of the article is to present how foreign media covered the issue of women's rights and women's participation in politics during the Polish parliamentary elections in 2023 and, as a result, what kind of image of Poland these media outlets created in their materials. This is important because the international community, including foreign media organisations and often political actors, derives its knowledge about other countries and their politicians from local or national media.² Therefore, within the framework of empirical research (content analysis and comparative analysis), we analysed materials published in eight European and international media outlets during the election period to examine how these media outlets presented the parliamentary elections in Poland to their audience and how they explained the sociopolitical context of the event.

In the past years, nationwide women's strikes and demonstrations, as well as a series of "black protests",³ have been widely commented on in foreign media, contributing to the discussion on the state of democracy in Poland. The research is an attempt to answer the question: Are these types of issues still covered by European and foreign media or not?

This article is organised as follows. First, we describe how national elections are covered by foreign media and discuss whether gender can influence the way such events are presented. Next, we characterise the research methodology and discuss the results of our analyses. Finally, we answer the research questions and summarise our study.

¹ "Polish Parliamentary Elections 2023," *National Electoral Commission*, 15 October 2023, at <https://sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat/2023/en>, 25 May 2024.

² M. Kolczyński, R. Norström, "Polarized Disinformation. The Coverage of US Presidential Election by Polish TV," *Horyzonty Polityki*, vol. 13, no. 44 (2022), pp. 105-119.

³ 'Black protests' is the term describing women's protests in Poland, which have been organised nationwide since October 2016 as a sign of opposition to attempts to tighten abortion law. It was inspired by the Polish Women's Strike.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW. THE COVERAGE OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS BY FOREIGN MEDIA

A foreign event might be covered by the national media if it contains specific features that will make journalists find it interesting for the domestic audience. These features include negativity (the conflicting nature of the event and its negative effects), timeliness (the topicality of the event), unexpectedness (rare events), personalisation (focusing on specific actors and their stories) and familiarity and proximity (e.g. geographical, cultural or political/ideological).⁴ The last three factors seem to be the most important. Personalisation can create an emotional bond between the actor portrayed in the news and the media audience. In the case of typically political events, personalisation may also be associated with elitism. Journalists usually focus on elite nations and politicians familiar to the domestic audience, which often become the media's main source of information about the event covered.⁵ In the case of proximity, it is indicated that countries with which the covering country has close cultural, economic or geographical connections can be more newsworthy than countries that are somewhat distant.⁶ In this way, the recipient of the news may believe that the covered event somehow concerns them directly because it affects the functioning of their country. Golan and Wanta⁷ conducted research on the factors that determined the interest of US network news in covering international elections, and listed such variables as: "foreign relations [between states] (geographic, cultural and economic proximity)" and "importance: impact, deviance" as those influencing whether or not national media will be interested in covering a foreign event. As part of the "impact" factor, the US researchers considered variables such as the status of the country (population size, position on the international arena) and the type of elections held.⁸ It is assumed that the presidential elections, mainly due to their more candidate-oriented nature, enjoy greater media interest, both nationally and internationally.⁹ The "deviance" factor can be associated with the negativity of the event. In the case of elections, it may be related to the political conflict between candidates or political parties and between voters.

In the media coverage of foreign elections by national media, one can observe similar mechanisms used by journalists when presenting electoral rivalry in their own country. The research conducted so far on this topic highlights that media mostly use

⁴ J.P. Shoemaker, D.S. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, Austin 1996.

⁵ M. Kolczyński, R. Norström, "Polarized Disinformation...", p. 106.

⁶ G. Golan, W. Wanta, "International Elections on US Network News. An Examination of Factors Affecting Newsworthiness," *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, vol. 65, no. 1 (2003), pp. 25-39.

⁷ *Ibidem.*, pp. 26-29.

⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 28.

⁹ P. van Aelst, R. Vliegenthart, A.E. Boydston, "The Whole World is Watching: Comparing European and United States News Coverage of the U.S. 2008 and 2016 Elections," *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 12 (2018), pp. 4731-4753.

game frames (horse race coverage; focusing on the winners and losers of the election), conflict frames (which are expressed through the brutalisation of the coverage and the use of the language of war) and more candidate-oriented strategic frames.¹⁰ Kolczyński and Norström,¹¹ in their research on the coverage of the US presidential elections by Polish TV, observed that Polish journalists used all mentioned types of frames to increase the attractiveness of the foreign event for the domestic audience, simplify the coverage and express support for individual candidates with whom they sympathised. This shows that the attitude of society, local public opinion and local politicians may also influence how foreign elections and politicians are presented by the national media. This is also confirmed by the research of Strömbäck, Painter and Fernandes,¹² and Vliegthart, Boomgaarden, Van Aelst and de Vreese,¹³ in which a correlation was observed between the public perception of Barack Obama and his positive coverage and, at the same time, a more negative portrayal of his rivals in the media. This confirms the importance of proximity as a factor determining how foreign events and politicians are presented by the media. It is assumed that countries and politicians considered our allies are usually portrayed positively, and those defined as enemies negatively.¹⁴

The literature on the coverage of foreign elections by national media also emphasises that there is almost no difference between foreign and national coverage of certain events. In studies on the coverage of the US elections in 2008 and 2016 by European and US media, no significant differences were noted, indicating that: (...) *a negative tone towards the main candidates and the campaign in general is more common than a positive one.*¹⁵ Whether this is the case in the coverage of the Polish parliamentary election (2023) by foreign media, the analyses conducted in this article will seek to answer this question.

¹⁰ T. Aalberg, J. Strömbäck, C.H. de Vreese, "The Framing of Politics as Strategy and Game: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings," *Journalism*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2012), pp. 162-178; P. Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*, Cambridge 2000; H.A. Semetko, P.M. Valkenburg, "Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2000), pp. 93-107.

¹¹ M. Kolczyński, R. Norström, "Polarized Disinformation...", pp. 116-118.

¹² See: J. Strömbäck, D.L. Painter, J. Fernandes, "International Media's Love Affair with Barack Obama: Anti-Americanism and the Global Coverage of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Campaign," in M.S. McKinney, M. C. Banwart (eds), *Communication in the 2008 U.S. Election: Digital Natives Elect a President*, New York 2011, pp. 275-294.

¹³ R. Vliegthart, H. G. Boomgaarden, P. Van Aelst, C. H. de Vreese, "Covering the U.S. Presidential Election in Western Europe: A Cross-National Comparison," *Acta Politica*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2010), pp. 444-467.

¹⁴ W. Kempf, "Peace Journalism, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, the German Press and the German Public," *Bulletin du Centre de Recherche Français à Jérusalem*, vol. 23 (2012), pp. 1-14.

¹⁵ P. van Aelst, R. Vliegthart, A.E. Boydston, "The Whole World...", pp. 4746-4747.

ELECTION COVERAGE FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

There is a huge body of literature dedicated to media coverage of elections, but only in recent years has a growing number of studies on election coverage from a gender perspective been published. We observed an increase in studies on media framing of women and men in a comparative perspective as well as on women in election campaigns. Gibbons¹⁶ who studied the 2020 US presidential election claimed that the news media consolidate and create new stereotypes for women who run for political office. The scholar also pays attention to women of colour, which aligns with the trend of a growing number of studies that simultaneously include gender and other factors, such as race.

In the context of framing female candidates, scholars also pay attention to objectification. Funk and Coker¹⁷ created an experiment that shows aspects of credibility and suitability for office were impacted by objectifying commentary. Stereotypical framing is evident not only in traditional media, but also on the internet and social media. The researchers found that during the 2016 US presidential race, gendered frames used in memes against Hillary Clinton were: (...) *based on female biological/physical traits (weak, ill, unattractive), anti-feminine traits (dishonest, untrustworthy) and negative female politician traits (dictatorial, unqualified) that were incongruent with the perceived role of the presidency.*¹⁸

Analyses of election coverage from a gender perspective are still mostly conducted in Western countries. An example is the large number of analyses regarding how Hilary Clinton was presented by the media during the 2016 presidential campaign.¹⁹ In addition to studies based on the United States, the literature also includes analyses of media coverage of male and female candidates in Europe. For example, there is a comparative analysis of 25 EU member states during the European Parliament election campaigns²⁰ and a study that compares visual gender stereotyping in campaign communication from

¹⁶ S. Gibbons, "Gender on the Agenda: Media Framing of Women and Women of Color in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election," *Newspaper Research Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2022), pp. 102-128.

¹⁷ M.E. Funk, C.R. Coker, "She's Hot, for a Politician: The Impact of Objectifying Commentary on Perceived Credibility of Female Candidates," *Communication Studies*, vol. 67, no. 4 (2016), pp. 455-473.

¹⁸ R.C. Nee, M. De Maio, "A 'Presidential Look'? An Analysis of Gender Framing in 2016 Persuasive Memes of Hillary Clinton," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 63, no. 2 (2019), pp. 304-321.

¹⁹ R. Neville-Shepard, J. Nolan, "She Doesn't Have the Stamina: Hillary Clinton and the Hysteria Diagnosis in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2019), pp. 60-79; R.C. Nee, M. De Maio, "A Presidential Look?...", pp. 304-321; M. Conroy, D. Joesten Martin, K.L. Nalder, "Gender, Sex, and the Role of Stereotypes in Evaluations of Hillary Clinton and the 2016 Presidential Candidates," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2020), pp. 194-218; E. Harmer, H. Savigny, O. Siow, "Trump, Clinton, and the Gendering of Newspaper Discourse About the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election Debates," *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2021), pp. 81-101.

²⁰ M. Lühiste, S. Banducci, "Invisible Women? Comparing Candidates' News Coverage in Europe," *Politics & Gender*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2016), pp. 223-253.

28 EU member states.²¹ Meanwhile, there are fewer studies on election coverage from a gender perspective beyond the Western world. This is also the case when it comes to research aimed at explaining the relationship between gender and electoral processes. We already have quite a lot of knowledge about how gender influences voting decisions in the United States, European Union, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, but we know little about how it influences voting decisions in small, underdeveloped or conflict-ridden states.²²

In the literature, we can also find some meta-analyses of gender differences in media coverage of political actors. Van der Pas and Aaldering²³ pointed out: *Thus, the findings of this study lead to the conclusion that the media cover men and women politicians differently. The effect of this gender bias in media coverage is highly likely to be detrimental for women politicians...thus, the media bias likely contributes to the almost universal descriptive underrepresentation of women in politics that still exists worldwide.* The researchers also noticed that the electoral system could have an impact on the amount of coverage of politicians – gender bias was visible in the amount of coverage of politicians in proportional electoral systems, but this gender bias was absent in majoritarian electoral systems. It also shows us that there are many research gaps and areas or factors that should be studied in the future.

ISSUES OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND WOMEN IN POLITICS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN POLAND

Equal participation of women and men in political life in Poland is guaranteed by the Polish Constitution. Article 32²⁴ of this document clearly states that: *Women and men have equal rights in family, political, social and economic life, in particular (...) to hold positions, perform functions and obtain public dignities and distinctions.* In 2011, a quota mechanism was introduced, requiring at least 35% of representatives of both sexes to be included on electoral lists.²⁵ This was intended to counteract the exclusion of

²¹ M. Jungblut, M. Haim, "Visual Gender Stereotyping in Campaign Communication: Evidence on Female and Male Candidate Imagery in 28 Countries," *Communication Research*, vol. 50, no. 5 (2023), pp. 561-583.

²² P. Żukiewicz, P. Barczyszyn-Madziarz, "Introduction: Between global and Local Contexts of Research on Gender and LGBTQ Issues and Elections," in P. Barczyszyn-Madziarz, P. Żukiewicz (eds), *Gender and LGBTQ Issues in Election Processes: Global and Local Contexts*, London 2022, p. 5.

²³ D.J. van der Pas, L. Aaldering, "Gender Differences in Political Media Coverage: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 70, no. 1 (2020), p. 134.

²⁴ Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 2 kwietnia 1997 roku, Dz.U. z 1997 r. nr 78, poz. 483 z późn. zm. [Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2nd April 1997 as published in the Journal of Laws No. 78, item 483].

²⁵ A. Szypulska, A. Szerba, "Równy udział kobiet i mężczyzn w życiu politycznym w świetle przepisów prawa polskiego, międzynarodowego i europejskiego," in A. Bodnar (ed.), *Kwoty i co dalej? Udział kobiet w życiu politycznym w Polsce. Analiza i zalecenia. Biuletyn Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich*, Warszawa 2020, p. 9.

women from political life. However, it should be noted that this mechanism does not regulate the allocation of women to specific positions on electoral lists or the alternating placement of candidates – women and men – on the lists.²⁶ This may, therefore, lead to a situation where women, despite legally provided solutions, will in fact have fewer chances than men to be present in the political and public sphere and to hold significant political positions. According to the Global Gender Gap Report of 2023,²⁷ Poland ranked 73rd out of 146 countries in the category of “political empowerment”, indicating a significant advantage for men over women when it comes to parliamentary seats and women in ministerial positions (including prime ministers). This confirms that *women are [still] a minority group in the Polish political world*²⁸ which may additionally determine the frequency with which women politicians are presented in the media and how they are covered. Research conducted so far on this topic confirms that media content regarding Polish female politicians mainly focuses on their private lives or conflicts between women, and less often on presenting women as experts and leaders.²⁹

The scale of the presence of women's rights issues in public discourse is largely determined by political, economic, cultural and social factors. Śleziak,³⁰ who studied the specificity of women's political slogans from the period 1918-2020, noticed that in the 21st century the function of the slogan as a genre giving voice to women was recognised, and it became an expression of women's aspirations, demands and opposition to government discourse and changes in the law. She also observed changes in the intensity of women's presence in political and public discourse. The last decade witnessed an increased role of women's rights in public discourse (where previously these issues were not widely discussed), and one of the main reasons for this is the “black protests” organised since October 2016 by the Polish Women's Strike. According to CBOS,³¹ a majority of people in Poland have heard about the “black protests” – nearly 90% of all respondents knew about them. The report also showed that “black protests” are perceived by the public primarily as an expression of opposition to possible tightening of abortion regulations or as a form of women's fight for equal rights, but attitudes towards the protests are correlated with political sympathies.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 10.

²⁷ “Global Gender Gap Report,” *World Economic Forum*, June 2023, at https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf, 25 May 2024, p. 303.

²⁸ M. Druciarek, M. Fuszara, A. Niżyńska, J. Zbieranek, “Women on the Polish Political Scene,” *Institute of Public Affairs. Law and Democratic Institutions*, 2012, at <https://www.isp.org.pl/en/publications/women-on-the-polish-political-scene>, 25 May 2024, p. 5.

²⁹ S. Rojeska, “Gender Imbalance in the Political Landscape and Mainstream Media Landscape in Poland,” *Civitas Hominibus. Prace studenckie*, vol. 14 (2019), p. 119.

³⁰ M. Śleziak, “Jako obiekt, jako subiekt. Kobiety w polskich hasłach politycznych XX i XXI wieku,” *Forum Lingwistyczne*, vol. 9 (2021), p. 10.

³¹ “Polacy o prawach kobiet, „czarnych protestach” i prawie aborcyjnym,” *Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej*, komunikat z badań [Research report] 2016, no. 165, at https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2016/K_165_16.PDF, May 2024, p. 6.

Issues of women's rights were more emphasised during the campaign preceding the parliamentary elections in October 2023. In their programmes regarding gender equality and women's rights, electoral committees for the 2023 parliamentary elections primarily addressed the issues of reproductive health and the right to terminate a pregnancy. Researchers noticed that for the first time in parliamentary elections, all main committees appealed to female voters and their needs, at least to some extent.³² Therefore, in relation to this growing public interest in women's rights and women in politics in public discourse in Poland, it seems that the next step may be to verify whether foreign media also recognise the significance of these issues in the context of the parliamentary elections in Poland.

MATERIALS AND RESEARCH METHODS

This article aims to present how eight European and international media outlets covered the Polish parliamentary election, especially the subject of women's rights and participation in politics, and to investigate what kind of image of Poland these media outlets created in their materials. We used content analysis and comparative analysis as the main research methods, and also desk research as an additional method when defining the main analytical categories relating to the catalogue of women's rights in Poland. These categories were created based on Article 32 of the Polish Constitution.³³ To fulfil the research objectives, we created the following research questions:

RQ1: How often was the participation of women in Polish politics the subject of media coverage?

RQ2: How often was the topic of women's rights in Poland covered by foreign media?

RQ3: What issues regarding women's participation in politics and women's rights in Poland were the subject of the coverage?

RQ4: Did the media highlight sociopolitical polarisation in Poland?

We conducted manual (non-automated) content analysis of eight European and transnational media such as Euronews, Politico EU, Euroactiv, BBC News, CNN, Al Jazeera, The Guardian and Deutsche Welle. These media outlets are well recognised, English-speaking and widely used and can, therefore, not only shape the opinions of domestic media users, but also of foreign audiences, including other external media.³⁴ The chosen research method seems suitable to our analyses due to its specificity. Hansen and Machin³⁵ indicated that the popularity of content analysis derives from a com-

³² M. Druciarek, A. Nizińska, I. Przybysz, "Kampania wyborcza 2023 z perspektywy równości płci: prawa kobiet w dyskursie medialnym i programach komitetów wyborczych," *Instytut Spraw Publicznych*, 2023, at <https://www.isp.org.pl/pl/publikacje/kampania-wyborcza-2023-z-perspektywy-rownosci-plci-prawa-kobiet-w-dyskursie-medialnym-i-programach-komitetow-wyborczych>, 25 May 2024.

³³ Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej...

³⁴ J. Galtung, M. Holmboe Ruge, "The Structure of Foreign News," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1965), pp. 64-91.

³⁵ A. Hansen, D. Machin, *Media and Communication Research Methods*, London 2019, p. 88.

bination of characteristics such as being systematic, quantitative, highly flexible and adaptable, easy to use and *well suited for revealing trends and patterns in the large quantities of communications and symbolic content characteristic of modern societies*.

We analysed materials about the Polish parliamentary election published from 8 October (a week before the election) to 22 October 2023 (a week after the election). We expected the highest level of media coverage during this period. We observed an increase in coverage a week before the election date and also noticed a decrease in its intensity after 22 October, which justifies the choice of the research period. During the two-week research period, 89 unique materials were published on the websites of the analysed media. A detailed list of selected media along with the number of materials published during the studied period is as follows: Euronews (14 materials), Politico EU (12), Euroactiv (8), BBC News (8), CNN (7), Al Jazeera (5), The Guardian (23), Deutsche Welle (12). When qualifying the materials for analysis, we followed the criterion of the topic – the Polish parliamentary election. All research units were analysed using a codebook consisting of single-choice, multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The questions concerned issues such as the main topic of the material, the presence or absence of the topic of women's rights in Poland in the material (and whether the topic was dominant or secondary in the material),³⁶ the presence or absence of the topic of women's participation in politics in the material (and whether this topic was dominant or secondary), the specific issues discussed in the material, the sources used in the material, the scenario of the post-election situation in the country presented in the material, and whether the article mentions sociopolitical polarisation in Poland. The materials were analysed by two coders, and to test reliability, we conducted an inter-coder agreement test on a sample of nine research units (10% of all materials). In the test, we left out the open questions. Our agreement rate was over 80% for the ten categories we tested.

RESULTS. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN POLAND

Only 18% of materials from all analysed media concerned women's participation in politics in Poland, understood in the context of both passive and active electoral rights.³⁷ The number of materials dedicated to this topic may indicate a relatively low interest of foreign journalists in the issue, which is further confirmed by the fact that most of the studied media presented this topic as a secondary one (Table 1). Only twice (BBC News and CNN) was women's participation in politics in Poland the main focus of the coverage, for example in the context of Polish women's political preferences and ideological differences between generations, which could also serve to strengthen

³⁶ The factor determining whether a given topic was considered dominant or secondary was the length of the material devoted to describing a given issue.

³⁷ The passive electoral right is the right to run for political office, and the active electoral right is the right to participate in voting and vote for a given candidate by citizens.

the image of Poland as a sociopolitically polarised country.³⁸ Interestingly, the participation of Polish women in parliamentary elections and the topic of women’s political preferences were described much more often than the stories of individual candidates for the positions of senators and MPs. Journalists wrote about voters’ fatigue with the Law and Justice (pol. Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PiS) ruling, emphasising, for example, that the issue of abortion rights, demonisation of the LGBTQ+ community and migrants are among the main reasons why especially young people and women voted for opposition parties.³⁹ These electoral motivations were linked to the level of voter turnout, e.g. mentioning that (...) *exit polls actually show more women than men voted*⁴⁰ and that a high number of Poles living outside the country registered to vote in the elections. The Guardian presented the story of a woman living in London who took part in a Polish election for the first time because⁴¹ *this election feels more important (...) [and] the main reason I’m voting is because PiS limited abortion rights. It’s absolutely terrifying for young women now.*

Table 1. The topic of women’s participation in politics in Poland (dominant vs secondary)*

	Dominant	Secondary	Total
Euronews	0	3	3 (21,4%)
Politico EU	0	0	0
Euroactiv	0	0	0
BBC News	1	0	1 (12,5%)
CNN	1	1	2 (28,6%)
Al Jazeera	0	0	0
The Guardian	0	7	7 (30,4%)
Deutsche Welle	0	3	3 (25%)
Total	2	14	16 (18%)

Source: own study

*percentage in brackets is in reference to the total amount of materials for each medium

³⁸ R. Picheta, “Poland’s Opposition Has Path to Oust Populist Ruling Party, Exit Poll Shows,” *CNN*, 16 October 2023, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/15/europe/poland-election-voting-intl/index.html>, 20 May 2024.

³⁹ L. Bayer, “Poland Election: Opposition Claims Win after Strong Exit Poll Result – as It Happened,” *The Guardian*, 16 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/oct/15/poland-election-pis-hopes-to-win-third-term-and-fend-off-donald-tusk-led-opposition-follow-live?page=with:block-652c256f8f08b15971781a7a&filterKeyEvents=false>, 20 May 2024.

⁴⁰ “Poland Election: Opposition Eyes Power as PiS Falls Short,” *Deutsche Welle*, 16 October 2023, at <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-election-opposition-eyes-power-as-pis-falls-short/live-67106260>, 20 May 2024.

⁴¹ W. Strzyżyńska, “Record Number of Poles Abroad Register to Vote in Election,” *The Guardian*, 11 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/11/poles-living-abroad-register-vote-election>, 20 May 2024.

Women’s participation in politics in Poland, as presented in the studied media outlets, referred mainly to active electoral rights.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN POLAND

The collected and analysed materials allow us to draw conclusions on the topic of foreign media coverage of women’s rights in Poland. The topic of women’s rights in Poland appeared in 47 analysed articles, which constituted 52.8% of all materials. This seems like a lot, especially considering the complexity of the election as a topic, which resulted in the coverage of many different issues, such as the election campaign and its course, the result of voting, the state of democracy in Poland, scenarios of further relations with the EU, the future of relations with Ukraine, the participation of various social groups in elections, sociopolitical polarisation in the country, etc. Taking this into account, it can be concluded that the appearance of women’s rights in Poland as a topic in more than half of the materials indicates that this issue was considered important for the foreign media.

Table 2. The topic of women’s rights in Poland (dominant vs secondary)*

	Dominant	Secondary	Total
Euronews	0	9	9 (64,3%)
Politico EU	0	2	2 (16,7%)
Euroactiv	0	2	2 (25%)
BBC News	0	7	7 (87,5%)
CNN	0	6	6 (85,7%)
Al Jazeera	0	2	2 (40%)
The Guardian	1	14	15 (65,2%)
Deutsche Welle	0	4	4 (33,3%)
Total	1	46	47 (52,8%)

Source: own study

*percentage in brackets is in reference to the total amount of materials for each medium

At the same time, it is worth noting that women’s rights were almost always presented as a secondary topic in the analysed materials. The one exception is an article by The Guardian (Table 2). This medium presented the topic of women’s rights in Poland 14 times as a secondary topic and once as dominant. Therefore, it can be assumed that Polish women’s rights was an important subject of foreign media coverage and more than half of the materials discussed this issue, but the topic was treated as one of several important contexts of the Polish parliamentary elections and not as the primary one.

Analysing the issues related to women's rights and their participation in politics presented in the materials, we can clearly state that the most visible and dominant issue is reproductive rights, covered in 42 pieces of material, which is almost every other material (Table 3). Journalists often regarded this issue as an important element of the sociopolitical context of the parliamentary election in Poland. Some of them explain to their audience how abortion laws have been tightened and what the consequences of these changes are, like BBC News and Euronews in their materials:

But the party has faced anger over the 2020 tightening of abortion laws, which closed 'almost all avenues to having a legal abortion', according to Agnieszka Kubal of University College London.⁴²

Poland faces a huge democratic challenge with population growth flatlining since the early 2000s, meanwhile, many PiS policies limiting abortion rights drew fierce criticism.⁴³

We also notice that women's participation in elections was sometimes noticed and indicated as a significant context for the elections (the topic was raised in 13 pieces of material). Two examples can be found in Euronews and The Guardian:

Young people and women were among those who voted in droves to get rid of the Law and Justice party, which won in 2015 vowing to fight corruption and help even out economic inequalities.⁴⁴

Some were alarmed by opposition warnings that the anti-Brussels course of PiS might lead to 'Polexit'. As well as the increased youth vote, for the first time ever, more women than men voted in this election. Part of their motivation seems to have been the sight of a reactionary, patriarchal party imposing one of the strictest anti-abortion laws in Europe.⁴⁵

Other issues were raised occasionally: women's political preferences (five pieces of material), pro-turnout campaigns (three pieces of material), equal rights in family life and anti-violence solutions (one piece of material) and performing public functions and dignities (one piece of material). There were also some topics connected with women's rights and political participation that we did not anticipate and which were included in the category "other".

⁴² "Polish Elections: When Are They and Why is Europe Watching Closely?," *BBC News*, 8 October 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66992738>, 21 May 2024.

⁴³ J. Askew, "Berlin, Babies and Borders: What Issues Shaped Poland's 2023 Election?," *Euronews*, 19 October 2023, at <https://www.euronews.com/2023/10/05/five-critical-issues-shaping-polands-upcoming-election>, 21 May 2024.

⁴⁴ "Final Results Show Scale of Pro-EU Opposition Victory in Poland," *Euronews*, 17 October 2023, at <https://www.euronews.com/2023/10/17/final-results-show-scale-of-pro-eu-opposition-victory-in-poland>, 21 May 2024.

⁴⁵ T. Garton Ash, "With This Election Victory, Poland is Smiling Again – and That's Good for All of Europe," *The Guardian*, 16 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/16/poland-general-election-civic-coalition-donald-tusk>, 21 May 2024.

Table 3. Specific issues presented in the materials

	Euronews	Politico EU	Euroactiv	BBC News	CNN	Al Jazeera	The Guardian	Deutsche Welle	Total
Reproductive rights	9	1	1	7	5	1	14	4	42
Equal rights in family life and anti-violence solutions	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Performing public functions and dignities	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Women’s political preferences	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	5
Women’s participation in elections	2	0	0	1	2	0	6	2	13
Pro-turnout campaigns	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
Other	0	1	1	0	2	1	0	0	5

Source: own study

Almost half of all collected research materials highlighted sociopolitical polarisation in Poland (Table 4). Journalists paid attention primarily to the ideological division between the conservative right, represented by PiS and Jarosław Kaczyński, and the more liberal left, identified with the Civic Platform (pol. Platforma Obywatelska; PO) and Donald Tusk. In this way, the political conflict was also given a personalised, candidate-oriented dimension, which is consistent with the strategic game frames used in the coverage of elections and election campaigns.⁴⁶ It can be assumed that by narrowing the field of electoral rivalry to specific politicians and parties, journalists wanted to help foreign recipients better understand what the event being covered was about. It was also emphasised that the effects of ideological and inter-party conflict – mainly between PiS and the Civic Platform – can be observed at the societal/national level, leading to divisions between Poles, directly between PiS and PO voters, and indirectly between supporters of the then ruling party (PiS) and women and sexual, national and ethnic minorities. According to the journalists, the PiS government and party members were responsible for this situation. An example of this type of narrative can be found in an Al Jazeera piece, where director Agnieszka Holland describes Poland’s internal situation as *two Polands (...)* the Poland of Law and Justice and of hate and exclusion.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁶ T. Aalberg, C.H. de Vreese, J. Strömbäck, "Strategy and Game Framing", in C.H. de Vreese, F. Esser, D.N. Hopmann (eds), *Comparing Political Journalism*, London 2017, p. 37.

⁴⁷ J. Jackson, "Agnieszka Holland: Poland 'Orchestrated Campaign' against Green Border," *Al Jazeera*, 10 October 2023, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/10/agnieszka-holland-polish-film-maker-interview>, 20 May 2024.

Guardian, in turn, emphasised the use of public television (TVP) *in the bitterly polarising campaign (...) used to promote the interests of the party and to attack and denigrate its critics*.⁴⁸ This type of rather anti-PiS narrative was dominant in the materials of the British daily and in the other studied media, which confirms the use of conflict frames by foreign journalists.⁴⁹

Table 4. The topic of sociopolitical polarisation in Poland

	Yes	No	Total
Euronews	2	12	14
Politico EU	1	11	12
Euroactiv	2	6	8
BBC News	2	6	8
CNN	7	0	7
Al Jazeera	4	1	5
The Guardian	18	5	23
Deutsche Welle	7	5	12
Total	43	46	89

Source: own study

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We found that the studied foreign media, when covering the parliamentary elections in Poland (2023), paid more attention to women’s rights (52.8% of all materials – RQ2) than to their political participation (18% of all materials – RQ1). The topic of women’s rights was almost three times more often presented in the media than the topic of women’s participation in politics, which seems like a significant difference. However, both topics rarely had the status of a dominant subject (see Tables 1 and 2), instead complementing other issues – for example, regarding the course of the elections, the policy of the then ruling party (PiS) or the electoral programme of the opposition. It seems that the topic of both women’s participation in Polish politics and women’s rights in Poland was used by journalists to place the covered event in a certain sociopolitical context, allowing the foreign audience to better understand what the political rivalry in Poland was about and which actors were involved in it. The foreign journalists

⁴⁸ S. Walker, “Poland’s TV’s ‘Propaganda’ under Scrutiny as Bitterly Polarised Election Looms,” *The Guardian*, 8 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/08/polands-tvs-propaganda-under-scrutiny-as-bitterly-polarised-election-looms>, 20 May 2024.

⁴⁹ H.A. Semetko, P.M. Valkenburg, “Framing European Politics...,” p. 106.

often used conflict⁵⁰ and game frames⁵¹ to highlight sociopolitical polarisation in Poland (RQ4), increase the interest of the audience in the presented topic and to simplify it. Similar mechanisms have been discussed in other studies devoted to the coverage of foreign elections by national media,⁵² which may indicate some kind of trend. We observed in our analyses that the studied media paid special attention to ideological divisions between PiS and opposition parties, as well as between their voters. Moreover, it was emphasised that political rivalry in Poland does not occur only between political parties, but above all between the leaders of the two main political camps, PiS and the Civic Platform, represented by Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk. This is an example of journalists using more candidate-oriented strategic frames.⁵³ It should be noted that when describing sociopolitical polarisation in Poland, the journalists used an anti-PiS narrative and often criticised the policy of the then government, especially towards sexual and national minorities, and – above all – towards women. Many of the analysed materials were dedicated to strict anti-abortion policy and the tightening of those laws by the PiS government. This is confirmed by the dominance of reproductive rights as a specific issue presented by foreign journalists when discussing women's rights and their political participation in Poland (RQ3). Covering the parliamentary elections in Poland through the prism of a sociopolitical conflict, in particular emphasising the poor situation of women in the context of violations of their rights by the authorities, may be related to the “deviance” factor, i.e. the media focusing on the negative aspects of foreign events to attract the interest of their domestic audience.⁵⁴ It may also be the result of global trends in media coverage of elections, which is usually more negative than positive.⁵⁵ However, it seems that foreign politicians and media paying attention to the problems of specific countries and suggesting ways to solve them is important due to the external pressure imposed on local authorities, which may contribute to positive transformations in the political and social sphere. In this way, excluded groups and entities can also feel heard, which may ultimately motivate them to engage in further political activity.

The above considerations could be continued. In future research, it would be reasonable to verify if the topics of women's rights and women in politics are again discussed on the agendas of political parties and, consequently, by national media and possibly by foreign media. Research dedicated to media coverage of several subsequent election campaigns in Poland could provide an answer to the question: Is the interest of domestic and foreign journalists in the issues of women's rights and women's participation in politics only temporary (related to specific sociopolitical conditions

⁵⁰ T. Aalberg, J. Strömbäck, C.H. de Vreese, “The Framing of Politics...,” p. 95.

⁵¹ T. Aalberg, C.H. de Vreese, J. Strömbäck, “Strategy and Game...,” p. 37.

⁵² M. Kolczyński, R. Norström, “Polarized Disinformation...,” pp. 116-118.

⁵³ T. Aalberg, C.H. de Vreese, J. Strömbäck, “Strategy and Game...,” pp. 34, 37.

⁵⁴ G. Golan, W. Wanta, “International Elections...,” pp. 26-29.

⁵⁵ P. van Aelst, R. Vliegenthart, A.E. Boydston, “The Whole World...,” p. 4741.

in Poland in 2023), or have these issues begun to be treated as one of the important topics in public discourse during election campaigns?

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Róża NORSTRÖM – an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław, Poland. She has participated in several research projects funded by, among others, the Swedish Civil Contingency Agency and the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. Her research interests include political communication, international relations and conflict reporting.

Paulina BARCZYSZYN-MADZIARZ – an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław, Poland. She has participated in several international research projects funded by the European Union (European Commission 7th Framework Programme, Erasmus + Programme) and the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. Her research interests focus mainly on political communication. She is a member of the Polish Political Communication Association and the Polish Political Science Association.