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## Media Coverage of the European Parliament Election Campaign in the Polish Media. Analysis of Thematic Agenda and Media Bias

**Abstract:** The article presents research findings on the thematic agenda and political bias of Polish television newscasts during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign in Poland. The authors analyzed the content of the three most popular Polish television newscasts: TVP's "19.30", Polsat's "Wydarzenia", and TVN's "Fakty", focusing on broadcasts from the month preceding the European elections. The collected data was used to characterize the agenda of issues presented in television newscasts and to calculate the Media Political Bias Index, a measure that enables comparisons of bias across different newscasts. The presented results provide insights into which news programs were the most and least biased, and the nature of European news agenda during the election campaign across various Polish television news services.

**Key words:** European elections, European Parliament, election campaign, television newscasts, media bias

### Introduction

The understanding of how the European Union works, including its operational procedures and the role of democratic representative bodies, among Europeans, much like their knowledge of national politics, is largely shaped by the media (Klepka, 2018, pp. 9–10). There is no doubt that, in the two decades since Poland's accession to the European Union, Poles have grown accustomed to the presence of EU-related topics in the



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media and in daily political discussions. In many countries, elections to the European Parliament were initially viewed as second-order elections, considered less important than national elections. However, with the increasing significance of decisions made at the EU level, researchers are increasingly highlighting the growing prominence of European elections, which are becoming more central in the minds of both politicians and voters (Gattermann, de Vreese, van der Brug, 2021, pp. 423–430).

The subject of European elections can be academically explored from various perspectives. The most common approach, as with any election, typically involves analyzing the competition among electoral actors, their leaders, platforms, or specific issues raised during the campaign (Kelly, 1983, pp. 65–72; Norris, 2002, pp. 127–131). However, a valuable research perspective can be gained by focusing on the electoral arena as a topic of interest to the media sphere, examining how election-related content is publicized and reported by the media (Walgrave, Aelst, 2017, pp. 2–15).

Many researchers analyzing media coverage during European Parliament election campaigns question whether there is a Europeanization of media discourse (Cremonesi, Seddone, Bobba, Mancosu, 2019, pp. 669–674). These discussions revolve around whether the media portrays European affairs as external and somewhat detached from domestic politics, or whether European issues are presented as integral to political matters within member states, interdependent with national political agendas (Grill, Boomgaarden, 2017, pp. 578–579).

Studies of media coverage concerning European elections also raise important questions about how the activities of individual election participants are reported, with particular focus often given to anti-European and populist candidates and parties (Negrine, 2017, pp. 64–82). Equally significant are inquiries into the relationship between the media's attention to Eurosceptic parties and voter turnout (Nai, Medeiros, Maier, Maier, 2022, p. 37), as well as the degree to which elections are personalized and the extent to which media coverage emphasizes the demands of the parties participating in the election (Richter, Stier, 2022, pp. 309–329).

Researchers are also interested in the selection of topics associated with European elections in the media. Whether in relation to specific countries, media outlets, candidates, or parties, questions arise about the extent to which election themes are linked to issues such as climate change, migration, economic growth, or European solidarity. The thematic agenda presented by the media during elections is considered by many

researchers to be crucial for electoral mobilization (Braun, Schäfer, 2022, pp. 125–133). Analyzing media coverage of European elections also allows for the identification of patterns in the sources used by the media to present information about the election, political parties, or specific candidates (Strömbäck et al., 2013, pp. 46–48).

The research results presented in this article align with the ongoing trend of analyses related to television coverage of European election campaigns, a subject that has been studied for years (Leroy, Siune, 1994, pp. 47–69). They focus on how the European Parliament election campaign in a single country is portrayed on television, examining both public and commercial broadcasters (de Vreese, 2001). Specifically, the research aims to determine the thematic agenda in each of the analyzed media outlets and assess any bias in the media coverage of electoral participants (Castro-Herrero, Hopmann, Engesser, 2016, pp. 571–593). The objective of this article is to analyze the three television news broadcasts with the largest audiences during the month leading up to the June 9, 2024, European election day in Poland.

### **Methodology**

The survey was conducted using manual content analysis (Idzik, Klepka, 2019, pp. 11–28; Klepka, 2016, pp. 32–41; Pisarek, 1983). The research sample consisted of the main editions of news programs, aired after 6 pm, on three national television channels. The role of television and its place within the Polish media landscape has been undergoing continuous change in recent years (Nowak, 2019, pp. 245–274). Given the specific characteristics of the audience and the prominence of TV news programs, the broadcasts with the highest viewership in May 2024, when the research data collection began, were selected for analysis. Based on Nielsen Audience Measurement data (detailed results are shown in Table 1), the selected programs were the “19:30” by the public broadcaster Telewizja Polska S.A. (TVP), “Wydarzenia” from the commercial Polsat station, and “Fakty” aired by the commercial broadcaster TVN.

The analysis covered the content of all editions of TVN’s “Fakty,” TVP1’s “Wiadomości” (“19:30”), and Polsat’s “Wydarzenia,” broadcast between May 9 and June 8, 2024. A total of 93 broadcasts were recorded, with 31 editions from each channel. The unit of analysis was a single news item, or a piece of information (material), featured in the broadcast.

Table 1

**Number of viewers of evening television  
news broadcasts in May 2024**

Title	Audience
“Fakty” TVN	2,086,777
“19:30” TVP1	1,329,041
“Wydarzenia” Polsat	1,203,530
“Panorama” TVP2	471,268

**Source:** Own compilation based on Nielsen Audience Measurement data, <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/fakty-liderem-w-maju-teleexpress-o-wlos-przed-wydarzeniami>, 12.09.2024.

The tool used for the study was a categorization key. In the first part, it was employed to determine the characteristics of the materials under examination. This included identifying the duration of each broadcast, the number of news items, and the number and duration of those that made any explicit reference to the European Parliament elections. The second part of the key was used to focus on a narrower corpus of news items specifically related to the election campaign. For these items, the main issue covered in relation to the ongoing campaign was identified, along with which election committees were mentioned in the news and which committee was mentioned first. Additionally, each instance in which a candidate from a particular committee appeared or a committee was mentioned was assessed in terms of the news coverage’s tone toward that committee. The tone could be categorized as favorable, unfavorable, ambivalent, or neutral.

The results were then aggregated for each news broadcast. This data allowed for identifying the most common themes related to the European elections in the analyzed broadcasts. The data on the visibility, exposure, and overtones of the election committees were subsequently used to calculate quantitative measures in the form of indicators. The construction of these indicators and the calculation rules are detailed in Table 2. A crucial part of the coding process involved a check conducted by a second coder on 30% of randomly selected broadcasts from the total analyzed sample. This check aimed to determine the extent to which the first coder’s perception of the news aligned with that of another viewer of the news service. The concordance rate for visibility and exposure indicators was over 98%. For overtones, the agreement was 95%, which allows the results to be considered highly consistent.

Table 2

**Construction of visibility, exposure and media overtones indicators**

Indicator (abbreviation)	Values	Calculation method
Media visibility (Wim)	0, 1	Media visibility of a committee (number of news items)
		Media visibility of all committees (number of news items)
Media exposure (Em)	0, 1	Media exposure of a committee (first in news)
		Media exposure of all committees (news)
Media overtones (Wm)	-1, 1	Total news with positive overtones about a committee
		All news about a committee
		Total news with negative overtones about a committee
		All news about a committee

**Source:** R. Klepka (2021), *Polityka w krzywym zwierciadle mediów: Stronniczość polityczna mediów w relacjonowaniu parlamentarnych kampanii wyborczych w 2015 i 2019 roku*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, Kraków.

The indicators calculated for each broadcast and each election committee were used to construct the Media Political Bias Index (Klepka, 2021). This tool aims to measure bias by utilizing a set of indicators, which enhances the accuracy of the assessment compared to evaluating the phenomenon through individual indicators alone. The index provides a synthetic evaluation of the level of political bias in each news service analyzed, allowing for a comparison of which TV stations broadcast news services with more or less bias. Bias, understood as a consistent tendency to present a particular subject more frequently, emphasizing information about it, and consistently favoring or criticizing it, can therefore be expressed through the following formula:

$$ISPM = 0.3 * Wim_{\max(Wim)} + 0.1 * Em_{\max(Wim)} + 0.6 * |Wm_{\max(Wim)}|.$$

The equation emphasizes the strength of each of the sub-indices. All three sub-indices refer to the election committee that had the highest media visibility rate in a given television newscast. It was assumed that the election committee most frequently present in a broadcast best reflects the degree of bias. The media visibility index of the entity most often featured in the broadcast was assigned the second-highest weight in constructing the index, contributing 0.3 of the value to the final measure. It is important to note that the lower the visibility index for the most frequently presented committee, the more space was allocated to other participants in the European election within that particular news service.

The media exposure index of the election committee with the highest media visibility index was assigned the lowest weight, at 0.1, in the overall index. This variable was deemed important enough to be included, but its relatively low weight is due to the strong correlation between exposure and visibility, which is already reflected in the index.

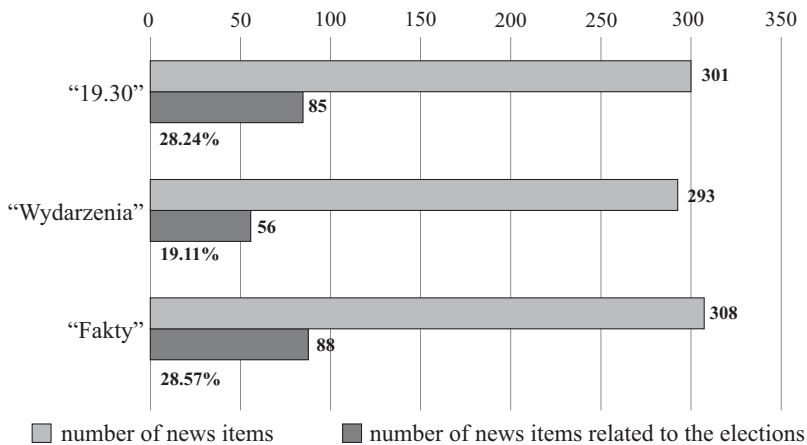
The highest weight was assigned to the media overtone indicator of the election participant with the highest media visibility index, with a weight of 0.6. This is based on the assumption that consistent praise or criticism of a committee or candidate represents the strongest mechanism for biased electoral coverage. To construct the index, the absolute value of the media overtones index, which ranges from  $-1$  to  $1$ , was used. The focus is on measuring the intensity of the overtones, specifically the distance from 0, which represents fully neutral coverage. In assessing media bias, it is irrelevant whether the participant was consistently evaluated positively, resulting in a positive score, or negatively, resulting in a negative score.

The research procedure outlined enables us to meet the study's objectives, which include determining the percentage of time and number of news items in the analyzed broadcasts that were devoted to election topics, as well as identifying the thematic agenda of the news items related to the European elections. Furthermore, the study allows for an assessment of the visibility, exposure, and tone of the news coverage concerning each election committee across the various news outlets. It also provides insights into which outlet exhibited the greatest and which the least political bias in covering the 2024 European election campaign.

## **Results**

In the analyzed TV news broadcasts, a total of 902 news items were coded, with the research material spanning just over 43 hours. Of these, 229 news items referenced the ongoing European Parliament election campaign, amounting to more than 12 hours of coverage. The analysis of the news structure, as presented in Figure 1, revealed that two broadcasts dedicated a relatively similar percentage of their news to the European election campaign. Both "19:30" (TVP) and "Fakty" (TVN) allocated slightly more than 28% of their news content to election-related topics. In contrast, "Wydarzenia" (Polsat) devoted a smaller portion, with less than 20% of its news items focusing on the campaign.

**Fig. 1. Number of news items focused on the European election campaign in relation to the total news coverage**



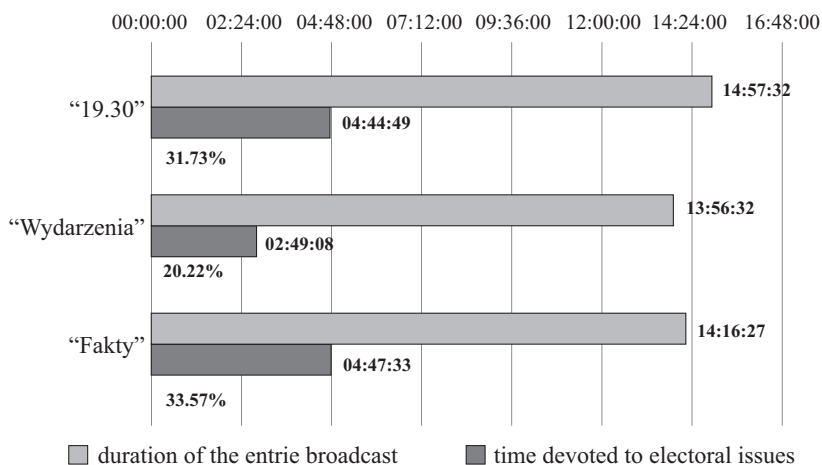
Source: Results of own research.

The percentage of news items related to the European elections was closely mirrored in the share of broadcast time devoted to this topic. Detailed data is presented in Figure 2. In "19:30" (TVP) and "Fakty" (TVN), the percentage of time dedicated to European election coverage exceeded 30%, while in "Wydarzenia" (Polsat), it was lower, amounting to just over 20%. This contrast suggests that both TVP and TVN regarded the European Parliament elections as a more significant topic, deserving of greater attention, compared to Polsat, which focused more on other issues during the critical pre-election period in Poland.

A detailed analysis of the content classified as relating to election topics allowed for the division of the news corpus into two main groups. The first group included materials primarily focused on presenting campaign events, European issues, and the activities of various actors involved in the election. This group consisted of 28 out of 85 news items from "19:30" (TVP), 24 out of 56 from "Wydarzenia" (Polsat), and 25 out of 88 from "Fakty" (TVN). Overall, news from this group represented less than 34% of all items that referenced election topics. "Wydarzenia" had the highest percentage of such news, while "Fakty" had the lowest.

The topics of these election-related news items varied, as shown in Table 3. Notably, relatively little attention was given to the specifics of the European Parliament elections, such as their organization in Poland com-

**Fig. 2. Number of news items devoted to the European election campaign in relation to the total news coverage**



Source: Results of own research.

pared to other EU countries, the agenda of current EU problems and challenges, or the activities of candidates with explicitly anti-European views. In the case of the latter, there appeared to be a form of boycott across all broadcasts, with their positions receiving minimal to no coverage.

Table 3

**The thematic agenda of the news for which the main topic was the European elections**

Topics	Number of news items		
	“19:30”	“Wydarzenia”	“Fakty”
1	2	3	4
Election campaign, candidates’ meetings with voters, election bid	15	15	14
Election polls	2	5	1
European Union climate policy	1	1	2
Rules for organizing elections, silence on elections	1	1	1
Turnout		2	2
Security of the European Union	3		1
Prospects of adopting the Euro	1		
Slovakia and the European elections after the assassination attempt on Robert Fico	1		2



1	2	3	4
Russia's interference in European elections	1		
Campaign spots	2		1
Issues of Europe's future, cohesion, future, challenges, visions	1		
The extreme right in Europe			1

**Source:** Results of own research.

The second group of materials dealt with a range of current political issues, with the election topic being addressed only in passing. This was done by situating events within the election timeline, such as describing them as happening “a week before the election,” “a few days before election day,” or “still before the election.” Additionally, politicians running in the election were often labeled in news graphics as representatives of election committees, even when the topic of the news item or the politician’s statement had no direct connection to the upcoming election. In several instances, the news focused on specific events in domestic politics, such as government reshuffles or efforts by the ruling party to hold its predecessors accountable, with the added remark that the mentioned politician was a candidate in the European elections. In some cases, it was even suggested that the news being reported could negatively impact the committee’s chances of securing a seat in a particular constituency.

The next component of the study involved calculating the indicators of visibility, exposure, and media overtones for each electoral committee participating in the 2024 European Parliament elections. The results of these calculations are presented in Table 4. The indicators show that the two largest election committees, Law and Justice (PiS) and the Civic Coalition (KO), were the most visible across all news broadcasts. The concentration on these two main competitors was highest in “Fakty” (TVN), where they were referenced in nearly 60% of all broadcasts, slightly less in the “19:30” (TVP) broadcast, and lowest in “Wydarzenia” (Polsat).

Additionally, the analysis reveals that “Wydarzenia” provided the most coverage of smaller committees, such as the Nonpartisan Local Government Committees and Polexit. In contrast, “19:30” (TVP) offered slightly less coverage of these smaller parties, while “Fakty” (TVN) did not report on Polexit’s participation at all. The Third Way and Left committees received almost the same level of visibility across all news services. However, the WiN Confederation’s visibility differed significantly,

with “Fakty” devoting far less attention to this committee compared to the other broadcasts.

Table 4

**Media visibility (Wim), media exposure (EM) and media overtones (Wm) indices calculated for the surveyed news broadcasts**

	Indicators	Law and Justice	KO	Third Way	Left	WiN Confederation	Non-Partisan Local Governments	Polexit
“19:30”	Wim	0.27	0.26	0.17	0.18	0.10	0.01	0.01
	Em	0.49	0.39	0.06	0.05	0.01	0.00	0.00
	Wm	-0.24	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
“Wydarzenia”	Wim	0.26	0.25	0.17	0.16	0.11	0.03	0.02
	Em	0.44	0.40	0.07	0.07	0.02	0.00	0.00
	Wm	0.00	0.00	-0.03	-0.03	0.00	0.00	0.00
“Fakty”	Wim	0.30	0.29	0.19	0.20	0.01	0.01	0.00
	Em	0.49	0.35	0.10	0.05	0.00	0.01	0.00
	Wm	-0.60	0.09	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

**Source:** Results of own research.

In terms of exposure, the two main participants in the electoral contest, Law and Justice (PiS) and the Civic Coalition (KO), also enjoyed the highest rates. It was most often their representatives or activities that led the news stories in the main editions of the analyzed broadcasts. Law and Justice recorded the highest visibility and exposure rates, with the Civic Coalition coming in second. There was little variation in exposure rates across the different news broadcasts. Notably, no broadcast began a news item by focusing on the Polexit election committee. Additionally, neither “19:30” (TVP) nor “Wydarzenia” (Polsat) featured a single story that started with a mention of the Nonpartisan Local Government Committees, and “Fakty” (TVN) did not open any segment with a reference to the WiN Confederation Committee.

In terms of overtones, the Law and Justice (PiS) committee was most frequently portrayed unfavorably by both “19:30” (TVP) and “Fakty” (TVN). However, the extent of this negative portrayal differed significantly between the two broadcasts. In “Fakty,” over half of the news items that referenced PiS carried negative overtones for the committee, while in the public broadcaster’s “19:30”, roughly one in four news items portrayed PiS unfavorably. It’s also noteworthy that although “Fakty” was highly critical of PiS, it did not offer equally positive coverage of

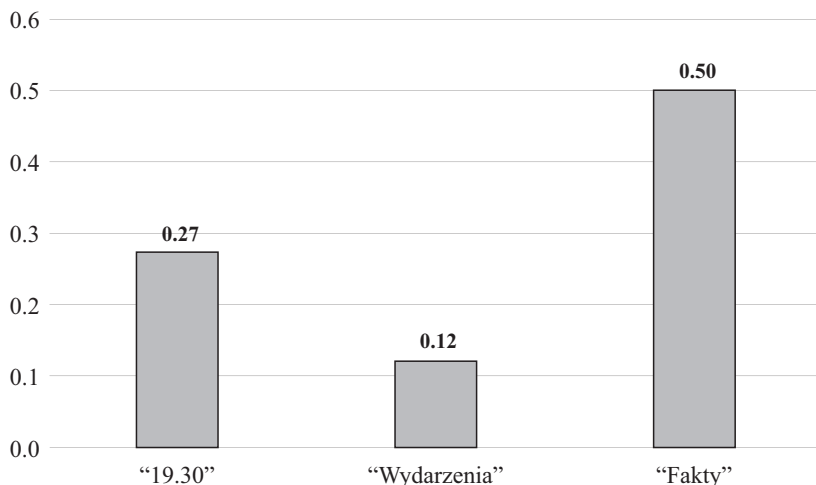
the Civic Coalition (KO), with only a small portion of its coverage being favorable. In contrast, “19:30” presented KO in an almost neutral manner, showing little overt bias in either direction.

In contrast to the other broadcasts, the results of the media overtone indicator in “Wydarzenia” (Polsat) stood out for its clear effort to maintain neutrality between the two main participants in the electoral competition. Unlike “19:30” and “Fakty,” no news item in “Wydarzenia” valued either Law and Justice (PiS) or the Civic Coalition (KO) unequivocally favorably or unfavorably.

The overtone patterns for the other electoral committees in the analyzed newscasts revealed results that largely approached full neutrality. However, “19:30” (TVP) stood out in this regard, maintaining complete neutrality towards all committees except for the two largest, Law and Justice (PiS) and the Civic Coalition (KO). In contrast, “Wydarzenia” (Polsat) displayed a critical stance toward the Third Way and the Left in several broadcasts, while “Fakty” (TVN) presented the Third Way in a favorable light on multiple occasions.

The presented indicators enabled the calculation of the Media Political Bias Index for each broadcast, with the results displayed in Figure 3. As previously mentioned, the index values range between 0 and 1.

**Fig. 3. Media Political Bias Index calculated for the TV news broadcasts analyzed**



**Source:** Results of own research.

$$\mathbf{ISPM} = \mathbf{0.3 * Wim}_{\max(\text{Wim})} + \mathbf{0.1 * Em}_{\max(\text{Wim})} + \mathbf{0.6 * |Wm}_{\max(\text{Wim})}|$$

$$\text{ISPM}_{19:0} = 0.3 * 0.27 + 0.1 * 0.49 + 0.6 * 0.24 = \mathbf{0.27}$$

$$\text{ISPM}_{\text{Wydarzenia}} = 0.3 * 0.26 + 0.1 * 0.44 + 0.6 * 0.00 = \mathbf{0.12}$$

$$\text{ISPM}_{\text{Fakty}} = 0.3 * 0.30 + 0.1 * 0.49 + 0.6 * 0.60 = \mathbf{0.50}$$

Among the analyzed news broadcasts, the highest Media Political Bias Index was recorded by “Fakty” (TVN) at 0.50, followed by “19:30” (TVP) with a score of 0.27. The least biased was Polsat’s “Wydarzenia,” with an index of 0.12.

## Conclusions

The research results demonstrate that the main editions of television news broadcasts during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign shaped their agenda of topics in a relatively similar manner. A notable simplification of the issues presented was apparent, as the European elections were often framed in the context of current domestic events or portrayed as merely another recent election in Poland. When comparing the level of media engagement in covering the European election campaign to the coverage of the parliamentary elections, it supports the assumption that, from a media perspective, the European elections were considered less important. Similar studies conducted using the same methodology on the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections showed a significantly higher percentage of news items and airtime dedicated to those elections (Klepka, 2021).

At the same time, an analysis of the thematic agenda of the news materials led to the conclusion that the most popular news broadcasts effectively legitimize the European elections, framing them as a natural and unquestionable political procedure, twenty years after Poland’s accession to the European Union. Notably, all news outlets showed reluctance to give significant airtime to Euroskeptics. When critical voices on EU policies – such as climate policy, values, or Poland’s potential entry into the Eurozone – were aired, they were often presented with a tone of irony, highlighting their marginal and seemingly irrational nature. However, a closer examination of the broadcasts reveals subtle signals that point to a division between domestic affairs and “distant Europe.” European institutions and the role of Polish politicians elected to the European Parliament were occasionally depicted as being

removed from Poland, with these politicians exercising their functions from afar.

The surveyed news services displayed varying degrees of political bias. Notably, the most biased program was “Fakty” on the commercial station TVN, rather than the public broadcaster’s “19:30”, which is often expected to exhibit greater bias. Both of the most biased broadcasts shared a common approach, offering unfavorable portrayals of the main opposition party and its candidates for the European Parliament. However, the results from the “19:30” (TVP) broadcast were somewhat surprising, particularly in how it handled election committees tied to the ruling coalition. Despite the public broadcaster’s reputation for favorable coverage of ruling party candidates, this time it portrayed Law and Justice (PiS) politicians unfavorably, without extending particularly positive or favorable coverage to other ruling party candidates.

This is significant given the wealth of research showing the persistent bias in public media’s presentation of government and opposition figures after 2015. The findings from this study indicate a clear shift away from the extreme bias that has typically characterized public media (Klepka, 2017a, pp. 244–253, 2017b, pp. 155–172, 2017c, pp. 157–175, 2023, pp. 173–190). While these results deserve further exploration, they contrast sharply with previous election campaigns, during which the “19:30” broadcast, the predecessor of the current “19:30” service, consistently favored the ruling parties and their candidates (Dworak et al., 2019; Krajewski, 2019; Nowak-Teter, 2021, pp. 41–66).

The conclusions and further research questions drawn from the analysis of Polsat TV’s “Wydarzenia” present interesting results. The broadcast’s low Media Political Bias Index and the relatively small percentage of news items devoted to election topics offer at least two possible interpretations. The first suggests that “Wydarzenia” did not consider the European elections important enough to warrant detailed analysis or in-depth evaluation of the political actors involved. The second interpretation suggests that “Wydarzenia” may have sought to present politics in a more detached manner, deliberately avoiding portraying politics as a sphere of conflict and power struggles. Instead, the broadcast may have opted for a safer approach, emphasizing politics as a domain of consensus-seeking and cooperation.

Summarizing the study, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations inherent in any research procedure and methodological approach, which also apply to the present analysis. The study operates under an assump-

tion, characteristic of realism, that the media's task is to reflect reality, and the researchers' aim is to evaluate how well the media succeed in representing the complex, multidimensional political landscape. However, it is important to recognize that the media do not merely reflect reality but rather construct it. Additionally, a simplifying assumption is made that a typical attentive viewer will perceive media content similarly to how researchers analyze it. This assumption is idealistic and overlooks the fact that many viewers consume media content inconsistently and in fragmented ways, rather than systematically and comprehensively, as researchers do. Factors such as the average viewer's knowledge, their focus on European issues, or varying levels of attention to the news can result in media content being perceived in ways that differ significantly from the perspectives captured in this study.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the presented research results offer valuable insights and should be compared with the way future campaigns preceding European elections are covered. Considering the extent of bias in news broadcasts, it would be particularly beneficial to continue monitoring changes in the thematic agendas reported during these elections, examining the Europeanization of political discourse in Poland, and analyzing how anti-European and populist positions are publicized.

### **Interesy konkurencyjne:**

Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieje konflikt interesów.

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## **Medialne relacje z kampanii wyborczej do Parlamentu Europejskiego w polskich mediach. Analiza agendy tematycznej i stronniczości mediów**

### **Streszczenie**

W artykule przedstawiono wnioski z badań nad agendą tematyczną i stronniczością polityczną polskich telewizyjnych serwisów informacyjnych nadawanych w okresie kampanii wyborczej do Parlamentu Europejskiego w Polsce w 2024 roku. Autorzy zaprezentowali wyniki analizy zawartości trzech najpopularniejszych polskich telewizyjnych serwisów informacyjnych: „19.30” nadawanego przez TVP, „Wydarzeń” Polsatu i „Faktów” telewizji TVN, emitowanych w okresie miesiąca poprzedzającego dzień wyborów do Parlamentu Europejskiego. Zebrane dane posłużyły do scharakteryzowania agendy zagadnień prezentowanych w przekazach telewizyjnych oraz do obliczenia miernika – Indeksu Stronniczości Politycznej Mediów, który pozwala na porównanie skali stronniczości różnych materiałów medialnych. Zaprezentowane wyniki pozwalają ocenić, która audycja informacyjna była najbardziej, a która najmniej stronnicza oraz wskazać, jak wyglądała agenda tematów europejskich w trakcie kampanii wyborczej w różnych serwisach informacyjnych nadawanych w wybranych polskich stacjach telewizyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wybory europejskie, Parlament Europejski, kampania wyborcza, telewizyjne serwisy informacyjne, stronniczość mediów

