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The Same Song, Different Melodies —A Comparative Analysis of TV Coverage of the Crisis on the Polish-Belarusian Border

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ABSTRACT

"The Song" is about the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, which began in the second half of 2021 and has been going on to this day. It is related to the unexpected appearance of newcomers from the Middle East and Africa (mainly Muslims) on the border. They tried (and are still trying) to cross the Polish border on their way to the West or to stay in Poland. There were thousands of them. Their appearance on the eastern border has triggered a crisis that we have known so far only from previous media reports on the southern border of the European Union. Due to the introduction of a state of emergency by the Polish authorities, it was also possible to follow their fate only through the media. However, these messages did not allow the recipient to obtain an integrated picture of the situation. Rather, they created quite contradictory narratives, different "melodies" about the crisis. In the text, I present the messages of two antagonistic television stations, i.e. TVP and TVN. On their example, I outline the rather schizophrenic social reality in which Polish citizens currently find themselves, its interpretations and proposals for overcoming the impasse. David Altheide's Ethnographic Content Analysis is used as a theoretical framework for the analysis. It emphasizes the interaction of the researcher with the collected research material, thus classifying such analysis as fieldwork. At that time, it was the only opportunity for a fieldwork.

KEYWORDS: crisis, Polish-Belarusian border, television broadcasts, comparative analysis, ethnographic content analysis, transcultural dialogue

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Song and Method

Why is it justified to use metaphors such as “song” or “melody” in scientific research? There are several arguments. Firstly, as Linka (2018) points out, there is a division of society that is difficult to overcome when it comes to accepting refugees in Poland. It is an “us-them” opposition and is used by the parties to the dispute to build their own identity. In such disputes, rational arguments often prove to be insufficient. Therefore, there is a need to search for emotional, spiritual or non-rational arguments, which can be provided by creative expression. This type of approach is close to transcultural pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of different ways of cognition; including intuitive or non-rational cognition (Bylica, 2019). Therefore, the use of musical metaphors is intended to strengthen the form of the message, to open up an additional channel, and thus to make it more probable to cross the border, which in the current Polish reality seems to be difficult to cross.

The analysed borderland is the Polish-Belarusian border, and the theoretical framework for the analysis of television broadcasts is the *ethnographic content analysis* (hereinafter: ECA). ECA is a combination of traditional, objectivist content analysis with participant observation, emphasizing the importance of the researcher’s interaction with the research material, specifically with a document of some type (Altheide, 1987). A document exists independently of the researcher, but its relevance to research depends on the mindset of the researcher who transforms the document into data. Basically, there are three classes of documents. The first are *primary documents*, which are usually the main subject of study. In the case of media analysis, these can be, for example, newspapers, television programmes, or Internet sources. The second are *secondary documents*, which contain provisions about basic documents. This class includes field notes, published reports on primary documents, and other relationships that are intermediate to the original data sources. In this text, *secondary documents* are the main subject of study, as the researcher’s work consisted in systematically following the media coverage of two antagonistic television stations (TVP and TVN) and taking notes. This type of purposive selection allows for comparing and contrasting research material. The last class of documents are *auxiliary documents*, which are not the main track of the study, but can be helpful in understanding its aspects. In this study, the supporting documents are other (apart from TVP and TVN) data sources (e.g. PolsatNews or Internet sources). Altheide conceptualizes document analysis as fieldwork, and the research itself as field research. Thus, the media space is understood as a kind of research area. The category of emergence, which refers to the gradual formation of meanings through ethnographic analysis of documents and their interpretation, is crucial in understanding the image of social life contained in media messages.

Time frame of the presented analysis is the period from September 27th, 2021 until July 27th, 2023. In order to organize the collected research material, the principle of its presentation in individual years was adopted.

Year 2021

In the first phase of the crisis in 2021, TV coverage of the crisis appeared daily in the leading news part and usually lasted from 2 to 5 minutes. At the end of November and in December TV coverage of the crisis at the border appeared in other parts of the TV news services and became shorter, sometimes not appearing at all. On the one hand, it involved getting used to the crisis situation, and on the other hand, it meant de-escalating it. The starting point of the analysis is the conference of the Minister of the Interior and Administration, Mariusz Kamiński, which took place on September 27th, 2021. During the conference people on the border were presented as terrorists and criminals with paedophilic and zoophilic tendencies. Photos taken from their mobile phones were presented as proof of this (MSWiA, 2021). Two days later on TV24, MP of the Civic Coalition and former head of Ministry of the Internal Affairs, Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz, stated: "We witnessed a scandal and emotional blackmail inflicted on Poles, which after 24 hours turned out to be simply a lie and manipulation" (TVN24, 2021). The point was that the evidence presented came from publicly available online sources, and not from the phones of people at the border. This discrepancy in the narrative is characteristic of the entire cycle of analysis.

TVP Melody

Assaults on the Polish border are taking place with the participation of Belarusian services. These attacks are inspired from Moscow and are of hybrid nature. The situation on the Polish-Belarusian border and the concentration of Russian troops on the border between Belarus and Ukraine are all elements of one strategy. However, attempts to cross the border are thwarted and migrants are turned back. Faced with the ineffectiveness of mass assaults, migrants are changing tactics and trying to cross the border in small groups. Some of them are placed in centres that they leave of their own free will. They demolished the centre in Wędrzyn. This is how they repay the help. They are dangerous, as evidenced by the pseudo-conversions of Muslims to Christianity in Great Britain. Eventually, the planes with them return to Iraq and Syria, where they inform their kinsmen that they have been deceived. Appreciation for uniformed services for their service comes from all over Poland, and TVP, together with the Ministry of National Defense, in response to voices critical of them, organizes a concert "Support for the Polish uniform". Support for Poland's actions is coming from all over Europe,

thanks to the Prime Minister's diplomatic offensive, and the presence of engineering troops from Estonia and Great Britain on the border is a sign of European solidarity. Therefore, the introduction of a state of emergency, the law on border protection and the construction of a barrier are necessary in the current situation. At the beginning of December, a press centre was opened in Kuźnica, enabling reporting on the conflict. Allowing journalists to enter the border earlier was impossible, as it would have caused discomfort to the border guards.

TVN Melody

TVN's broadcasts are largely focused on breaking the law both at the Polish and international level. They present the example of three journalists who were detained by the services outside the zone of the state of emergency. Their phones and photos were taken away. Minister Błaszczak and superiors praise the soldiers, which is criticized by Radosław Sikorski, because one cannot reward people for breaking the law. On the Belarusian side, CNN and BBC are broadcasting, so Lukashenko is winning in terms of media. According to Sikorski, Poland is behaving isolationistically by not allowing Frontex to enter². And the Border Act is passed against the opinions of the Parliament Legal Office, that is why humanitarian organizations are disappointed. Janina Ochojska³ is not allowed to enter the border, which in her opinion violates human rights. Grupa Granica⁴ present the matter in similar tone in the report. It points out that Poland is „pushing” refugees, which is a clear violation of international law. According to its representative, the government controls the border, and the press center is located outside the zone. The media will go where the Border Guard takes them. So we know what the authorities want to show us. In Lithuania, on the other hand, accreditation is sufficient. The group's interpreter is attacked by Territorial Army soldiers, who claim that he was violent. On the other hand, near Gródek, volunteers helped migrants in a crisis intervention centre run by the Catholic Intelligentsia Club. In connection with the help provided, the volunteers were interrogated until 7:00 a.m. A representative of the Catholic Intelligentsia Club describes it as another attempt to intimidate humanitarian organizations. And almost 600 policemen were sent to pacify the centre in Wędrzyn. In the opinion of the Ombudsman, the centre did not meet the criteria for the protection of the rights of foreigners. The following de-escalation of the

2 Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is jointly responsible for “operational activities at the external borders of the European Union and for responding to emerging challenges”. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/language/pl/>

3 President of the Board of the Polish Humanitarian Action, member of the European Parliament of the Civic Coalition.

4 “Grupa Granica (GG) is a social movement opposing the government's response to the events taking place on the Polish-Belarusian border.” <https://hfhr.pl/o-nas/sieci-wspolpracy/grupa-granica>

situation results from talks between Chancellor Merkel and Lukashenko and President Macron with Putin. The most important thing is that there are expulsions of people at the border, and the state of emergency and its extension are there so that we do not see it. The cold kills, many people are hypothermic. In response to this, the artists organize the action "Nobody deserved to die in the forest".

Year 2022

In 2022, TV broadcasts on the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border were no longer shown on a daily basis, they became shorter (on average 1 to 3 minutes long) and were usually located in the middle of the services. Despite the lower intensity of the media reports, however, there was a lot of it, as the unit of analysis here is the entire calendar year. Compared to the previous year, the reports have also become more dramatic. The lower intensity of the messages resulted from the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the influx of millions of refugees from this country to Poland, what dominated media reports.

TVP Melody

The strategy of trying to cross the border in small groups is continuing. Stones and tree branches are used in the attacks, and the Belarusian services use lasers and stun grenades to blind the border guards. In the Podlaskie Voivodeship, the border is patrolled by about 10 thousand soldiers and the Territorial Defense Forces. The inhabitants of the borderland can therefore feel safe. According to Jarosław Kaczyński, we have defended ourselves. The problem is the smuggling of migrants to Germany, as well as human trafficking. Through social media, Belarusians are recruited as drivers. Poland, together with Europol, is fighting against the practice. Once again, the fact that migrants are dangerous is confirmed. The Swedish Prime Minister admitted that the increase in crime in the country is due to uncontrolled migration. The police are helpless and migrants do not assimilate into society. Iraq has refused to take in 96 returnees on suspicion of terrorism, and Angela Merkel's open-door policy has not worked. Meanwhile, the director of Frontex admits that sometimes the behaviour of migrants at the border is illegal. So we do not want any emigrants or scoundlers here. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, border guards have been helping real refugees. In turn, EU has not developed coherent solutions on migration, will not finance a construction of the barrier on the border and does not recommend such solutions. The debate in the European Parliament against Poland concerns the fact that the barrier being built is allegedly harmful to animals, although special passages have been prepared for them. In 2022, the state of emergency was also lifted, so 180 towns in Podlasie and

partly in the Lublin region have been reopened to normal traffic. However, due to the construction of the barrier, a ban to approach the border at a distance of less than 200 meters was introduced. The barrier, which has been criticised by opposition politicians, is effective and the border is tight. If it wasn't for the barrier, we would have a repeat of Melilla.⁵ Contrary to other countries, the Polish services act firmly but humanely. Other countries, following the example of Poland, want to strengthen the protection of their borders against illegal migration. People's statements about migrants wandering in the forest and suffering are manipulations by TVN.

TVN Melody

TVN's broadcasts focus to a large extent on the tragic situation of people at the border. A resident of Białowieża points out that people in the forests suffer from frost and the situation is catastrophic. On Christmas Eve, residents provided help, and before Christmas Eve a group of 8–9 people was "moved back into the cold". The soldiers lie and threaten, and we are fighting 60 people a day with thousands of troops. They're crossing the line anyway, and we're going to write about it in the history books. We play unfair, lying that they don't exist—it's a shame that we didn't pass the test of humanity. The group "Medics at the border"⁶ indicates that it has provided assistance to more than 200 people, including 70 children. More than 20 people have died, and miscarriages are occurring. In the popular narrative, a „pushback” appears, and soldiers call a „window of life” or a „parcel locker” the hole through which people are „pushed” back to Belarus. According to the representative of the group, this situation is a blasphemy of the Episcopate, which is silent, and Poland is the executioner in this crisis, not the victim. Due to the trauma, the medics had to use the help of a psychotherapist. In the opinion of one of them, this should be the border between Western and Eastern civilization. Maria Ancipuk, Chairwoman of the City Council in Michałów, speaks in a similar vein. She appeals to residents to help as these people are freezing. evokes the image of a woman howling in pain, people running in the forest to warm up, families with children being taken back outside Poland. However, over time, the number of attempts to cross the border decreases with temperature. Detention centres, on the other hand, resemble prisons (2 square meters per person). The Deputy Ombudsman points to the hunger strike of one of the people in response to this situation. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court ruled

5 On June 25th, 2022, about two thousand migrants in Melilla tried to enter Spain illegally. As a result of the chaos, trampling and falling from the fence, 23 people lost their lives, although human rights organizations estimate that the number of victims may be higher. <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/hiszpania-maroko-migranci-zgineli-przy-probie-przedostania-sie-do-melilli-5763978>

6 A group of people with medical education who, despite the lack of permission from the Minister of the Interior and Administration to enter the zone covered by the state of emergency, helped people arriving there from Belarus. <https://www.prawo.pl/zdrowie/medycy-na-granicy-kim-sa-i-co-robia,511159.html>

that entry to the border could not be prohibited because it prevented the collection of information. In the context of the construction of the barrier, we learn that it will be 186 km long, 5 m high and 0.5 m of barbed wire. In addition, it is to be equipped with video surveillance. The estimated total cost is PLN 1,000,600,000. It requires the felling of trees, creates a barrier to animal migration, and is built without the supervision of the Ministry of Environmental Protection. 1,400 scientists from all over the world are writing a letter to the European Commission to halt its construction. Due to the extension of the state of emergency until 30th, 2022 entrepreneurs have no guests in hotels and are on the verge of financial strength.

Year 2023

In 2023, media coverage becomes sporadic, short-lived, and is still usually located in the middle of the news. There are also fewer of them due to the fact that, according to the assumed research procedure, the analysis is completed in July. The main motif of the messages is the issue of the death of people trying to cross the border.

TVP Melody

TVP attacks Janina Ochojska, who claims that almost 300 people died at the border. According to her account, some of them are to be placed in a mass grave, in the preparation of which Polish foresters took part. This is an attack on the Polish uniform, and similar information can be found in one of the German magazines. It says that pushing people back into the sea or a cold forest is a murder, and a society that accepts such a situation also consists of murderers. According to Ochojska, migrants fall from the barrier, breaking their legs. The Border Guard denies these words, claiming that they help such people by distributing, among others, thermal blankets.⁷ Ochojska also organizes an exhibition in the European Parliament on the situation at the border, which is a slander of the good name of Poland. In 2023, the border is strengthened due to the presence of the Wagner Group in Belarus. In July, 2,000 migrants tried to cross it, and 16,000 since the beginning of the year. According to Kaczyński, the situation is unsettled, which is why the barrier will be expanded and the border on the Bug River will be strengthened. You can't skip on security.

7 Perhaps the most well-known media dissonance in this regard is the image of a migrant hanging upside down on a fence in Białowieża, who at one point falls from a height of several meters onto the Polish side. On October 8th, 2022, TVP informs that he was helped. On the same day, Polsat News shows that instead of helping, the services are taking pictures and filming him with the use of a mobile phone. In online comments, the migrant is referred to as the "Batman of Podlasie". <https://natemat.pl/441376,skandaliczne-zachowanie-funkcjonariuszy-na-granicy-jak-wam-nie-wstydz>

TVN Melody

TVN informs about the ban on a lecture at the University of Warsaw for Hanna Machinska, former deputy Ombudsman, in whose opinion about 30 people lost their lives in the forests on the border. According to the authorities, these are Lukashenka's victims, and asylum applications are submitted at the border crossing, not in the forest. In Machinska's opinion, *pushback* violates basic human rights, and the wall is a lobby and money for some companies. On the other hand, in the opinion of Adam Bodnar, the former Ombudsman, Poland will have to pay compensation to the families of the victims in the next few years.

Interpretations

It is worth noting that although the case concerns the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the motifs have already appeared in the literature on migration or refugees. This is the case, for example, with the issue of presenting migrants/refugees as a threat to the host society, which took place in TVP broadcasts in 2021 and 2022. In the criminological literature, Aas (2006) points to the figure of the "deviant-immigrant" present in the European space, reflecting the process of identifying migrants with deviance and criminality. In this way, society distances itself from the Others who have arrived, and social and institutional reactions take on an exclusionary character. They include the placement of migrants in closed centres, which, due to the conditions prevailing there and their isolation, are referred to as "the new carcelar archipelago". This situation was clearly presented in TVN broadcasts in 2022. Recently, World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) issued recommendations to use alternative solutions to closed centres, such as locating migrants in local communities (*community placement*) and to apply an individualised approach to each situation (*a case management approach*). Fear of Islamization is also a European issue (Briks, 2018). In fact, the refugees at our border have also been part of this theme, which has only strengthened the narrative of the threat. Noteworthy is the position of Huntington (2018), who indicates that the 21st century will be a century of civilizational conflicts. Huntington outlines our border with Belarus as the border between East and West, and therefore as a natural and potential axis of conflict. This question appears in TVN broadcasts in 2022. Indeed, in the crisis at the border, we are dealing with references to the standards of Western civilization (Human Rights, humanitarianism) and their violation, which is not unusual for some Eastern civilizations, which often do not recognize them, understand them differently or point to different priorities.

Taking into account the above, broader contexts, it is necessary to outline the rhythm of the media messages analysed in the text concerning the situation in Poland.

It seems that the melody of TVP, which talks about being attacked, the effectiveness of the border defense and the built barrier, placing (often dangerous) refugees in centres, the exemplary service of soldiers and victims of Lukashenko sounds like a military march. In turn, a multi-threaded, contrasting melody by TVN, dealing with breaking the law (also in closed centres), the ineffectiveness of actions, soldiers behaving inhumanely, refugees in need of help, suffering and dying in the forest, is like a dramatic rhapsody.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Is any synthesis of a military march and a dramatic-sounding rhapsody possible, or are we, as Poles, forced to live in two separate, hostile worlds? As Rymśa (2018) points out, so far in Europe we have been encountering a polarization of positions, and thus attitudes of hospitality—hostility towards refugees/immigrants. These attitudes are reinforced by opposing media messages, which is also currently the case in Poland. In his opinion, the solution is to build an ethical compromise between the two extremes. He postulates a model of coexistence of cultures, based on a mutual “yes”, both on the part of the host society and on the part of migrants. The proposed model of coexistence can therefore be described as a multicultural solution. On the other hand, Linka (2018) points out that “(...) We are strangers to ourselves. For us, “the Other” is another Pole with a different worldview” (p. 115). She emphasizes an intrapsychic view of the refugee problem. In order to welcome the newcomer, one must first accept the Stranger within oneself. The basis for broader cultural integration is therefore integration at the family, neighbourhood, local and regional levels. However, according to the author of the text, the obstacle on this path in Poland is the mental legacy of communism, because in the debate the parties are usually convinced of the only right, their own truth, and the adversary is treated with superiority. So how do you build a bridge or a compromise in such conditions? If we treat military march and rhapsody as synonyms of two different cultures, then transcultural dialogue may be the solution. It is a dialogue that does not antagonize, but seeks to build a third space (Bhabba, 2004), different from the cultures that originally interacted with each other. This hybrid, third space is therefore a postulated melody and formula. Of course, in the current situation of division in which Polish society finds itself, such a dialogue seems impossible or... almost impossible. However, it is better to have an “almost impossible” dialogue than to further antagonize. The construction of this dialogue cannot be left in the hands of politicians. This is a task for representatives of universities, especially inter- or transcultural educators. As university staff, we are called to do the “impossible”. Because if not us, then who?

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