Delegitimization strategies as a means of policing protesters online during the pandemic in Poland

Joanna Rak[I] iD
[1]Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland.

ABSTRACT **Introduction:** This paper identifies delegitimization strategies that illustrate a range of attitudes of the Polish police towards individuals who resist the government and challenge the state legitimacy. **Materials and Methods:** The research is embedded in the theories of macro-strategies of delegitimization, out-casting micro-strategies, and is based on qualitative intertextual analysis of police statements in order to explain how the police responded to social opposition and shaped their relations with protesters during the pandemic periods. The study covers the following data: entries on official websites, statements to the public broadcaster TVP Info, and tweets released by the Polish Police Headquarters and the Warsaw Police Headquarters. **Results:** At the macro-strategy level, the research illuminates the online dimension of the protesters' discipline process, as well as the policing of protests based on out-casting. These are the predominant resources of delegitimization of the cause. It is argued that its use was based on the categorization of protesters as violators of both law and social norms. In turn, the main micro-strategy applied within out-casting was criminalization formulated in reference to COVID-related law. Delegitimization strategies revealed the nature of moral justifications for negative attitudes towards protesters, as well as threats from and effective use of force. They also allowed the police to legitimize themselves in the public eye and to place their roles as protectors of human life, health, property, public security and order. **Discussion:** Unconditional acceptance and enforcement of the unconstitutional law established by the government revealed the political bias of the police. The delegitimization of the participants of the anti-government protests and the active and unquestionable acceptance of the pro-government demonstrations confirmed their political favoritism.

I. Introduction[1]

The electoral success of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc, hereafter "PiS") in 2015 triggered a democratic backsliding of Poland towards authoritarianism (Tworzecki, 2019, p. 98). This process consisted in the state-led weakening and elimination of the political institutions sustaining the existing democracy (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5). By first paralyzing the Constitutional Tribunal and then transforming it into an active supporter of the government, as well as the subordination of courts and judges, public media, limitations of individual and political rights, the right to assembly, privacy, and the freedom of the press (Sadurski, 2018, p. 1), this transition led to the attenuation of institutional challenges towards the government. The coronavirus pandemic provided the Polish authorities with justification for further changes in the political regime. Despite lacking power to curtail human and political rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, the government restricted freedom of assembly, religion, and movement by using preventive anti-pandemic measures as a pretext. Although protest activity considerably decreased during the pandemic, delegalization of public gatherings did not discourage protesters from opposing democratic backsliding.

The police enforced the COVID-related law, in accordance with the Code of Offences, newly amended by the ruling party. According to what is stated under Article 65a, whoever intentionally refuses to comply with orders issued by a police officer on the basis of law and commands related to some specific behavior, prevents or significantly hinders the performance of official duties, shall be subject to arrest, restriction of liberty or a fine (Code of Offences, 1971). Prior to

the amendment, experts alerted the public and decision-making subjects about the risks associated with these gradually implemented provisions. As they stated, it might have threatened the constitutional civil rights (Tumidalski, 2020). Although police unionist had demanded the amendment before the pandemic, the police were at that time unprepared to apply it (Tumidalski, 2020). Moreover, the legislative bills proposed to offer no legal definition of "preventing" and "hindering", whereas the consequences of not following an order were potentially severe. Thereby, the code left room for malpractices, resulting from inaccurate information about its implementation and enforcement.

As the experts expected, the adaptation of the COVID-related law led to social contestation over the policing of public gatherings. Extreme manifestations of resistance included hate crimes and direct threats against police officers, employees of the police, and their families (Szymczyk, 2020). Protest participants and journalist accused officers of abusing powers, physical force, unlawful usage of tear gas, unequal treatment, and pointed to their impunity (Slawinski, 2020). While anti-government demonstrations were blocked as illegal, and their participants punished, pro-government initiatives were accepted and supported (Policja Warszawa, 2020, April, 10; TVP Info, 2020, April, 10). The police faced an enormous wave of criticism in social media. They were labeled as the PiS Militia and compared to the Motorized Reserves of the Citizens' Militia, or Citizens' Militia, the national police organization of the Polish People's Republic that was the means of policing in Poland until its transition from a communist state to a liberal democratic political system on 10 May 1990 (Danielewski, 2020). These forces were completely subordinated to the ruling communist party.

Moreover, protest participants created and distributed internet memes highly critical to police, Facebook photo filters with police officers imposing fines on users, and burlesque Tik Tok cabarets. The civic movement, the Citizens of the Republic of Poland, organized a center of legal aid "MayHelp" ("ObyPomoc") to assist the victims of police repression. Activists released guides on how to refuse to accept fines handed out by the police, how to behave during protest and arrest, what to do upon arrest and release from police custody, how to act while in hospital, during police questioning, during verification of identity papers and searches. These guides and the arrest forms were distributed by the organizers of public gatherings.

These observations became the focal point to research on how the police delegitimized the participants of public gatherings to control their image during the pandemic. The research aims to identify delegitimization strategies that illustrate a range of police attitudes towards protesters, including individuals resistant to the government and challenging its legitimacy. It explains how police responded to social resistance and shaped their relationships with protest participants. Delegitimization strategies reveal the nature of moral justifications for taking negative stances towards protesters and using threats and force (Pilecki et al., 2014, p. 285). They also serve the police to self-legitimate as protectors of human lives, health, property, public safety, security, and order (Aiello 2018, p. 89; Rosenbaum et al., 2011, p. 27). The research sheds light on the online dimension of disciplining protesters and, thus, protest policing.

Considering a classic model of protest policing by Donatella della Porta and Herbert Reiter (1998, p. 4), the study delves into communication with demonstrators to uncover the scope and specificity of using conventional and social media outlets to control the social reception of protesters (Colbran, 2020, p. 302; Gillham & Marx, 2018, p. 128; Procter et al., 2013, p. 415). Accordingly, the research contributes empirically to studies on protest policing by providing insight into the way Polish Police engaged with social and public media

to fulfill its social role and shape the public's view of relationships between civilians and police (Waddington, 2019, p. 5; Bullock, 2018, p. 345). On the one hand, it shows delegitimization as a means of reducing the costs of social repression and maintaining social control (Earl, 2011, p. 262). Focusing on protester portrayal, the study outlines the criteria for social exclusion. By exploring this aspect of police discourse, the research also contributes to the established field of studies on the Polish Police's role in defining public order (Skarzynska, 2002, p. 262).

On the other hand, the study reveals how stigmatization works as the mechanism of repression used to cause the demobilization of dissidents (Boykoff, 2007, p. 305). This kind of repression can trigger a specific process of criminal subjection. Criminalization involves expected punishment of predetermined political actors considered prone to commit crimes, focusing on potentially criminal subjects, selective discrimination of features associated with those actors so as to justify preventive strategies of social control, the lack of need of a link between actors and crimes, the social and institutional structuring of a relationship between the ruling's followers and enemies, and rationalization of splitting (Almeida 2020, p. 22; Misse 2010, p. 17). Falling into the pattern of criminalization, delegitimization demonstrates a political bias. Although police forces answer directly to the state government in Poland, they are formally, in terms of applicable law, an apolitical law enforcement service. The study contributes empirically to the studies on the political neutrality of the Polish police and democratic policing (Odeyemi & Obiyan 2018, p. 98) by exposing the extent to which the police acted as either loyal and active implementors of the authorities' will or impartial mediators between Poles and the authorities. Delegitimization strategies uncover the police engagement in the enforcement of the illegally imposed ban on public gatherings. They also indicate the extent of the equality of treatment in terms of dealing with anti- and pro-government activists.

The remainder of the article is organized into five sections. The second section introduces methodological assumptions, including methods, techniques, tools, materials, data gathering, and analysis procedures. It also provides theoretical grounds for the study of delegitimization macro-strategies and out-casting micro-strategies. The following section presents major research results concerning the configuration of delegitimization strategies. This discussion continues in the fourth section that analytically delves into delegitimization micro-strategies of out-casting: criminalization, evilification, and enemization. Then, the article moves on towards delegitimization macro-strategies to introduce the use of segregation, trait characterization, and political labeling by the police. Finally, the sixth section draws conclusions on the online dimension of disciplining protesters and gives insight into the political bias of the police in COVID-driven Poland.

II. Materials and methods

This study explores statements released by the Polish Police Headquarters and the Warsaw Police Headquarters. The Polish Police Headquarters published official stances on behalf of the Polish Police centralized and organized under the central command in the capital city. Since all anti- and pro-government public gatherings took place in Warsaw during the pandemic, Warsaw Police Headquarters was a relevant party in defining the relationships between protesters and the police. They commented on the activities from the police and protesters on an ongoing basis. Therefore, the Warsaw unit has to be considered a force directly engaged in the online policing of protesters.

The research uses the intertextual qualitative document analysis of three sources. First, the corpus of materials includes the police official websites (www.policja.pl and www.policja.waw.pl) because they are primary means of alerting the public regarding potential threats and providing information about police activity. The second type of sources are the police's official Twitter profiles (Polska Policja @PolskaPolicja and Policja Warszawa @Policja_KSP). Although Twitter does not belong to the category of major sources of information in Poland, it played an essential role during the pandemic (Drapala, 2020). Twitter served to direct communication between protest participants and the police. It provided records of exchanges concerning public gatherings. As the official and verified accounts of the state institutions, most journalists took them as reliable sources about the official police version of events (Drapala, 2020). The preliminary research has shown that the Polish Police Headquarters did not publish original tweets on public gatherings but retweeted the declarations of the Ministry of Interior and Administration and the Warsaw Police Headquarters, thus legitimating their contents.

Other social media was not included due to the unimportance in portraying an image of protesters. The police did not use Snapchat during the pandemic. In turn, the preliminary analysis of YouTube channels (Policja Warszawa and Polska Policja), Facebook (Polska Policja @PolicjaPL and Komenda Stoleczna Policji), and Instagram accounts (Policja @policja_kgp and Komenda Stoleczna Policji @policja_ksp) resulted in the exclusion of these sources because of the lack of references to public gatherings in posts and videos.

Third, the corpus includes the police statements for TVP Info, a Polish free-to-air television news channel controlled by the public broadcaster TVP. The television station had to be considered in the analysis because it has a large range of political influence that enabled police officers to reach out to a wider public. In 2015, PiS passed a media law bringing public broadcasting under direct government regulation, thus transforming public media into a pro-government propaganda center. The channel played a crucial part in the process of disseminating information regarding the current political situation. According to the Institute for Media Monitoring (2020), during the pandemic, television was the most significant information source in Poland. Furthermore, TVP Info was the most opinion-forming public media from March to May 2020. As a partisan media, TVP Info accurately presented the police press spokespeople's announcements and officers' comments. Finally, it was the only television station whose information on public gatherings was retweeted and thereby legitimated by the Polish Police Headquarters (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 24a; 24b).

The corpus covers materials released during the first wave of the pandemic, from 4 March 2020 to 31 May 2020, i.e., from the onset of COVID-19 in Poland until the first lockdown measures. It was a time of verification of the role of the police in the political system and the nature of their relationship with the government, as it coincided with the presidential campaign. The government tried to marginalize the ruling president's opponents to ensure the PiS candidate's re-election. The corpus contains all statements that referred to participants of public gatherings, including protests, demonstrations, manifestations, strikes, marches, pickets, rallies, and riots. The above criteria for source selection allow for the inclusion of 7 entries on official websites, 247 statements for TVP Info, and 84 tweets in the corpus.

The intertextual analysis is embedded in the theories of delegitimization that differentiate between macro- and micro-strategies. The first theory focuses on macro-strategies that define the general means of delegitimization that draw upon reasons for social exclusion from the ingroup. This study adopts Daniel Bar-Tal's definition of delegitimization as "the categorization of groups into

extreme negative social categories which are excluded from human groups that are considered as acting within the limits of acceptable norms and/or values" (Bar-Tal,1989, p. 170).

Bar-Tal formulated a classification framework that consists of five delegitimization macro-strategies and their qualitative indicators. The model covers dehumanization, out-casting, trait characterization, political labeling, and group comparison (Bar-Tal, 1990, pp. 65-66). Chiara Volpato's research group modified the framework by adding three macro-strategies of outgroup numerousness, segregation, and using the delegitimized group to delegitimize other groups (Volpato, 2010, p. 273).

When a reference to protesters possesses both defining features of delegitimization and the distinctive characteristics of a given macro-strategy, it is classified as one of the eight types. According to Bar-Tal's theoretical framework, dehumanization rests on the categorization of the delegitimized group members as having inhuman features, excluding them from the human race. Out-casting involves categorization into groups treated as violators of law and essential social norms. Trait characterization draws on the attribution of personality traits that are considered extremely negative and unacceptable in a particular society. The use of political labels is a form of categorization into political groups that are perceived as totally unacceptable by the subject performing a delegitimization. The labels come from the *repertoire* of political objectives, values, or ideology. Group comparison consists in attaching the label of the most undesirable group to the delegitimized people. The latter symbolizes malice, evil, and wickedness in a given society (Bar-Tal, 2000, pp. 122-123). In line with Volpato's definition, the vast numbers of outgroups highlight the power of the outgroup imagery to exacerbate feelings of impending threat or danger. Segregation involves discriminatory behaviors aimed at isolating the delegitimized group while deeming it unfit and unwilling to assimilate. Finally, the exploitation of the delegitimized to delegitimize others occurs when groups are devaluated by association with a despised group (Volpato, 2010, p. 273).

The preliminary analysis of police statements has shown that the dominant macro-strategy of out-casting was internally highly diversified. This empirical observation has supported the decision to delve analytically into delegitimization micro-strategies within out-casting to understand the multi-faceted process of setting protesters aside as outcasts (Lazar & Lazar 2004, p. 227). These strategies are essential for determining the exact definitions of the imagined public order developed normatively in relation to the enemy (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 227). The analysis is embedded in Annita Lazar and Michelle M. Lazar's theory of out-casting. The authors define out-casting as a macro-strategy encompassing four inter-related micro-strategies: enemization, criminalization, evilification, and orientalization (Lazar & Lazar, 2007, p. 46).

When a reference to protesters meets the definitional criteria for out-casting and has the distinctive characteristics of a given micro-strategy, it is classified as one of the four types. Enemization consists in the creation of the enemy who violates the ingroup's values. Determining the enemy is an element of defining, establishing, and maintaining public order (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 227). Whereas enemization concerns political aspects of relationships with the outgroup, criminalization refers to the law (Lazar & Lazar, 2007, p. 46). Criminalization draws on the presentation of the enemy's political actions as illegal. This strategy includes an image of public order and an ideal of answerability, against which the deeds of the enemy are read as deeply transgressive (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 231). In turn, evilification is based on a spiritual dichotomy between good and evil. It assumes the enemy's exclusion from the moral public order that is fundamentally good and godly (Lazar & Lazar, 2004,

p. 236). Finally, orientalization involves categorizing the enemy as a moral degenerate on the basis of historical and cultural arguments (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 234).

III. Research results

In March and April, the police neither commented on individual and sporadic public gatherings concerning pre-COVID objection to democratic backsliding nor their participants. No sooner than in May, protesters started to make new claims stemming from dissatisfaction with COVID-related precautions, social consequences of the pandemic, and further weakening of democracy. As the gatherings increased in number and their attendance grew, disputes emerged regarding the course of events and the nature of the police involvement in securing protests. It is then that police officers engaged in public discourse on protesters. The police used four out of eight delegitimization macro-strategies in order to create an image of protest participants. The dominant discursive means, out-casting occurred 349 times. Its share in macro-strategies amounted to 78% (Table 1). Accordingly, this strategy occurred at least once in each statement delegitimizing protesters. Considerably less popular was the segregation that emerged 76 times (17%). Trait characterization and the use of political labels were uncommon. While the former was in use 15 times (3%), the latter just 7 times (2%).

Out-casting involved the categorization of protesters into groups treated as violators of law and pivotal social norms. Police officers used three out of four out-casting micro-strategies. The dominant means was criminalization, which occurred 310 times (89% of out-casting expressions) (Table 2). Evilification and enemization had a significantly smaller share in delegitimization micro-strategies. While the former emerged 31 times (9%), the latter just 8 times (2%).

IV. Delegitimization micro-strategies of out-casting: criminalization, evilification, and enemization

The following part of the article discusses the delegitimization micro-strategies of out-casting used by the Polish Police within this dominant macro-strategy. Subsequently, the discussion proceeds to explain the application of abovementioned macro-strategies. The analysis finishes with conclusions on the use or lack of use of individual micro- and macro-strategies.

Table 1 - Delegitimization macro-strategies used by the Polish Police to create an image of protesters during the COVID-19 pandemic

Delegitimization macro-strategies	March 2020	April 2020	May 2020
Dehumanization	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Out-casting	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	349 (78%)
Trait characterization	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	15 (3%)
Use of political labels	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (2%)
Group comparison	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Outgroup numerousness	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Segregation	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	76 (17%)
Using the delegitimized group to delegitimize other groups	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	447 (100%)

Source: author's own study.

Table 2 - Delegitimization micro-strategies of out-casting used by the Polish Police to create an image of protesters during the COVID-19 pandemic

Out-casting micro-strategies	March 2020	April 2020	May 2020
Enemization	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (2%)
Criminalization	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	310 (89%)
Evilification	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	31 (9%)
Orientalization	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	349 (100%)

Source: author's own study.

IV.1. Criminalization

Criminalization covered references to the COVID-related law and was the most significant delegitimization strategy used by the police. In enforcing the law unconstitutionally established by the government, the police exposed their political bias. The use of the delegitimization micro-strategy consisted in portraying the enemy's political actions as illegal (Lazar & Lazar, 2007, p. 46). Criminalization contributed to an image of public order and an ideal of answerability, against which the enemy's deeds were read as transgressive (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 231). The adopted police mission was to restore public order violated by protesters slash criminals.

Protesters were depicted as the violators of the whole binding legal order (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 26b; 8a; 8c). These accusations, however, did not provide any details on the nature of these violations. By significantly overstating the scale of supposed transgressions, the police reflected the general condemnation of contentious public acts. Additionally, the police press spokesperson, Sylwester Marczak noticed an upward trend in breaking the law by activists (TVP Info, 2020, May, 8b). An indefinite catalog of serious offences and the increasing tendency to shift the blame and responsibility onto protesters might have built a sense of fear of contact with protesters. It highlighted the dangerous unpredictability of criminals.

The police also claimed that the participants of illegal public gatherings broke the law by the very act of participation (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 16c; 16d; 17b; 22b; 22c; 23a; 23f; 25a; TVP Info, 2020, May, 23b). As they indicated, the participants of the anti-government strike of business owners neglected regulations and restrictions aimed at preventing the development of the epidemic (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 9a) and thus perceived protesters' behavior as extremely disrespectful (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 8c; 12b). The focus was on the failure to maintain a safe social distance, lack of face masks, violation of the ban on staying in public places, and breaking traffic rules by protesters, all of whom came to Warsaw to participate in protests (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 23f; TVP Info, 2020, May, 7; 8a; 9; 24a). The police took preventive measures and detained participants of public gatherings because activists ignored their repeated calls to remain indoors (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 8b; 16a). They asserted that the Court of Appeal's decision, which the organizers of public gatherings relied on, concerned procedural issues. Therefore, the decision did not affect the current general ban on assemblies resulting from the Regulation of the Council of Ministers (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16e). The police ignored the court order because it ran counter to government regulation. The police ignored the constitutional incommensurability of their promoted position and chose instead to enforce the COVID-related law, turning it into a force for socially stigmatizing criminalization.

According to the police, even if the COVID-related law had not been imposed, they would have taken the same measures pertaining to public gatherings due to their participants' "aggressive stance towards police officers" (TVP Info, 2020, May, 9). The police considered protests not peaceful since officers were injured (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 8d), and described protesters as offenders, citing aggression, insults and attempts to physically prevent the performance of official duties (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 22a; 16b). The examples included an active assault on officers and violation of their bodily integrity, scuffles, pushing, throwing bottles, and firecrackers at officers (TVP Info, 2020, May, 17b; 23a; 23b; 24b; 25b; 25c; Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 8d). As the police continued, during the strike of business owners, one of its participants kicked a policewoman in the stomach. The communicator defined this behavior as "ordinary street thuggery" (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 9c; TVP Info, 2020, May, 12a). A few days later, the police announced that the activist who attacked the policewoman had a criminal record (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 12a; TVP Info, 2020, May, 12a). The police introduced a list of misconducts committed by protesters in the past to show that notorious criminals and rioters rather than business owners attended the strike (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 12a; 12b). The police announced a zero-tolerance policy towards these infringements of the law (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 22a; 22c; 23b; TVP Info, 2020, May, 8c; 27) and filed claims to punish the offenders (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 26a; 8a). Only a few offenders confessed and accepted the fines (TVP Info, 2020, May, 7). Unlawful actions reported by the police aimed to fuel fear of protesters. The latter supposedly posed a tremendous threat to innocent Poles and the police that performed public services at the risk of losing their lives.

Since the police found protesters' actions dangerous to Warsaw citizen's security, they used direct coercion measures to protect the population from these alleged criminals. Thus, the use of threat and physical force was legitimated. The means were selected appropriately to the given situation and the degree of aggression of the persons towards whom they had to be applied (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16g; TVP Info, 2020, May, 16b). These were direct coercion measures (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16b; 23b; 24; TVP Info 2020, May, 8b; 16a; 21). However, the police refuted the use of batons until activists and journalists documented it by means of visual materials (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 24; 28). Then, as the police explained, an officer who beat protesters with a baton did not inform superiors about the fact. The denial resulted in the firing of one officer (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 28). This excuse might have reduced the police credibility but did not impact the overall picture of the situation. Noteworthy, TVP Info did not provide any alternative commentary on these events, hence solidifying the version outlined by the police.

The police noted that the crimes were all the more severe since activists broke the law deliberately and with impunity (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16c; 23d; 23g). Participants of public gatherings were repeatedly informed they might face consequences for violating sanitary regulations and the ban on assembly. The police claimed no one should harbor grievances against the police for filing evidence to courts or providing relevant information to sanitary services (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 23d). The officers set out to punish alleged violators and maintain public order in congruence with previously passed regulation. Their actions were presented as a form of public service.

The main reasons for criminalization were violations of the COVID-related law, participation in anti-government gatherings, and the use of violence against officers. Criminalization provided police officers with legal arguments for precluding anti-government public gatherings and using violence to discipline their participants. This micro-strategy served as self-legitimization - the

police could maintain its image of guardians of public order and protectors of Poles who remain submissive to the government. The latter were defended against protest participants who were portrayed as hostile towards public order and the safety of other citizens.

One might suggest that criminalization stemmed from a fear of spreading the coronavirus. However, this is contradicted by an assembly the ruling party organized for the anniversary of the Smolensk plane crash, which claimed the lives of many important political figures. Although the participants of the pro-government assembly did not follow any sanitary measures (a transgression anti-government protesters were chastised for), they were in no way punished or criminalized. On the contrary, the police emphasized that the government had the right to do so because of the special nature of the event (Policja Warszawa, 2020, April, 10). Unequal treatment of pro- and anti-government public gatherings uncovered the political bias and a total subordination of the police to the government.

IV.2. Evilification

Evilification concerned violations of public order, which, unlike the macro-strategy of trait characterization, was not based on the images of protesters' characteristics but on their deeds. This out-casting micro-strategy covered the exclusion of the enemy from a moral public order that was deemed fundamentally good and godly (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 236). In contrast to criminalization, this distinction was a form of spiritual rather than legal evaluation of assemblies.

Regarding preventive detention, the police contended that they provided sufficient information to people with parliamentary immunity, journalists, and pregnant women on the applicability and legality of their enforcement measures. Although officers detained no parliament member, a Senator named Jacek Bury went in a police car and refused to leave it, despite police requests (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16a; 16f; 17b; TVP Info, 2020, May, 16c; 16d). Another protest participant, a Gazeta Wyborcza journalist Pawel Rutkiewicz was detained and had not informed the police officers about his press credentials until being booked at the police station (Komenda Stoleczna Policji, 2020, May, 11). The police argued that these strike participants intentionally incarcerated themselves.

A day after the statement about the senator, the police redacted their initial statements. They maintained the senator tried to enter the squad car based on his own choice (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 17c; TVP Info, 2020, May, 17a). Yet, they did not explain why the senator had the police car at his convenience. Moreover, they assumed that an officer may be blamed for using force against an individual with parliamentary immunity only if the officer is aware of who he is dealing with. Unfortunately, the officer did not possess such knowledge since appropriate papers were shown to other officers. The official police statement emphasized that officers need not to know the exact list of senators. Anyone who decided to participate in the protest took a conscious risk (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 17a; Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 17b). While defending the use of force against the senator, the police still maintained the self-detention scenario. In the second statement, police authorities steadfastly held the view that the strike participant intentionally and maliciously misled police officers in order to cause confusion. These statements inadvertently expose a lack of clearly-defined detention procedures related to COVID-19 regulation. Furthermore, there is an effort from the police authorities to frame themselves as victims of the events that became known in the wake of the senator's detention.

According to the police, protest participants manipulated video materials to discredit the police and disseminated fake news that officers employed physical force during the policing of the strike of business owners. This way activists allegedly completely distorted the actual course of events (Policja Warszawa 2020, May, 9b; 11b). Senator Bury used the Polish People's Republic period as a metaphor to characterize the way he was treated and detained. He used "inelegant vocabulary" and clearly distorted the facts related to the incident (Policja Warszawa 2020, May, 21a). The police blamed the senator for "a wave of internet hatred" that fell on police officers (Policja Warszawa 2020, May, 21a). However, video materials available on YouTube show that the police violated the senator's personal immunity and forcibly shoved him into a police car (Veto, 2020, May, 16). It confirms that the police version of events was false.

Furthermore, Rutkiewicz also availed himself to the history of the Polish People's Republic and its harsh reprisals against activists to describe his detention during the protest. Responding to his testimony, the police stated that the journalist was envious that some of his colleagues went through real-life reprisals during communism in Poland. As a result, he deliberately got arrested in order to pose as a victim of repression. According to the police, the journalist made up a story as a cautionary tale for his grandchildren (Komenda Stoleczna Policji, 2020, May, 11). It was speculated that emotions and some personal grievances lay at the heart of his behavior, and all this had an impact on the way he perceived intervening police officers (Komenda Stoleczna Policji, 2020, May, 11). The police juxtaposed their version of arrest with the journalist's article to explain why his account was unreliable. As they noticed, attention seeking took precedent over impartiality (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 11a). The police framed the protesters presenting their own versions of the strike as having hostile intentions. Different opinions were considered undesirable and harmful.

Evilification was the second most important out-casting micro-strategy. The police excluded the enemy from the moral public order that was fundamentally good and godly (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 236) by drawing on emotion-driven statements. An image of a clash between good and evil forces was based on emotional interpretations of individual situations. Nevertheless, it was employed at the expense of police credibility mainly due to discrepancies between the available versions of events during the protests. Protest participants were considered perfidious because they violated public order. Violations consisted in carrying out illegal self-detentions in order to slander police officers, misleading the police officers to cause confusion, and disseminating fake news about the relationships between parties involved in the conflict. Ample attention was devoted to the case of senator Bury, since it accounted for about a third of statements delegitimizing protesters. The re-legitimizing their own actions and efforts to redefine the situation revealed a high level of police powerlessness in maintaining an image of an evil Senator. The official police version was that they were oppressed by evil forces that stopped them from restoring order.

IV.3. Enemization

Determining the enemy is a component of defining, establishing, and maintaining public order (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 227). However, this extreme out-casting micro-strategy was of secondary importance in defining protesters because the police rarely used it to create an image of an enemy who violated the ingroup's values. Some situations described by the police as violations of the legal order (criminalization) were also portrayed as directly infringing social norms, hence contributing to creation of a more unified image of the enemy.

The participants of public gatherings were portrayed as anti-social elements who did not comply with the rules of peaceful coexistence (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 24b). By neglecting COVID-19 regulation, they supposedly spread thin police resources and made it difficult for the police to providing help to those who really needed it (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 26a). The police found that the main goal of protesters was to fight the police. Since protest organizers used terms such "hybrid" and "maneuvers" when talking about their assemblies, they obviously had no peaceful intentions (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 23a). As the police press spokesperson Mariusz Mrozek told TVP Info, officers were injured and taken to the hospital (TVP Info, 2020, May, 11). Furthermore, protesters damaged public property. One police car was damaged, another was dented (TVP Info, 2020, May, 9; 11). Activists infringed public order understood as a public space free of any protest and acts of violence.

Protesters intentionally put society in jeopardy, and this justified preventive detentions. Officers perceived the political right to peaceful assemblies as a public right. Nevertheless, protest participants violated it when attacking officers (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16d; TVP Info, 2020, May, 9). By misusing political rights, the former breached public order.

This extreme out-casting micro-strategy was a critical element of dividing and identifying all parties involved. Police officers used it to establish, and maintain public order in relation to the enemy (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 227). Public order hinged on exercising the right to peaceful assembly. During the pandemic, only the enemies of the society took to the streets and used political violence to make socially insignificant claims. As soon as demonstrations turned violent, the police extended the definition of the enemy by citing aggressive participation. It was impossible to negotiate the conditions of public order maintenance with protesters, which created an insurmountable tension between conflicted parties. Protesters were considered unpredictable, unruly and unable to live peacefully in society. The high level of hostility towards enemies stemmed from incidents which carried serious risk for police officers carrying out their duties. Public order could only be restored by undertaking direct and specific measures against protesters. This approach justified the use of coercive measures by the police.

V. Delegitimization macro-strategies: segregation, trait characterization, and political labeling

V.1. Segregation

Segregation was the second most important delegitimization macro-strategy. It consisted of creating a rift between protesters, police and society. The typical image of a protest participant as painted by police statements was that of an individual who did not express a desire to be assimilated with Poles who obeyed the COVID-related law (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 21b; 22b). Consequently, a division was created between "they-protesters," who broke the law, and "we-society," who observed it (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 22b). The division resulted from the judgment of the threat and attitudes towards precautions.

The willingness to gather was tantamount to a decision not to live in congruence with rules of social solidarity (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 24b). The police argued there was no social authority validating the need to hold and participate in public gatherings. Therefore, they had to secure them with means adequate to protesters' violent acts (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 8a; 23c; 23e). Thereby, the second division sprang from deliberate and purposeful self-exclusion from the ingroup.

The third division was supported by identified public roles and consequences of public activities. While the participants of public gatherings put human lives in danger, the police acted in favor of the whole society by precluding and securing protests. The police press spokesperson stressed that they detained activists because other measures were not sufficient. According to the police, the epidemic situation required a responsible and firm response they gave adequate to what was happening (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 24a). When officers were accused of detaining Senator Bury, the police representatives immediately and clearly referred to the group's professional identity. As the police stated, no one who had parliamentary immunity was detained during "our activities" (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16f). While the police averted and controlled protest actions, activists threatened individuals, social security, and traffic safety (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 7; 16d). Although officers appealed to participants of public gatherings to adapt social distancing measures and observe the law, the latter supposedly refused to do so. The police provided examples to further strengthen this division. First, police officers launched an anti-conflict team to show good will to protesters (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16c). The police appeals came from "our side," "we" organized talks by engaging the anti-conflict team, but unfortunately, no one responded to "our actions." From that point of view, protesters responded by calling names, pushing, and hitting officers (TVP Info, 2020, May, 17a). Second, the police cooperated with observers of the Commissioner for Human Rights during protests, which legitimated how they policed assemblies. However, the commissioner denied establishing any form of cooperation (TVP Info, 2020, May, 24a). By means of using the indicated division, the police, on the one hand, defined the protesters as enemies with whom negotiations were impossible. On the other hand, they described their own role as guardians of public order and security.

Segregation served the police to create an image of political conflict provoked by protesters. According to the police, protesters aimed to oppose the current public order and overthrow it. The consequences of the established divisions required the intervention of the police. A three-fold division, which structured the conflict, was based on a differentiation between protesters that acted contrary to the applicable law and the Poles who obeyed it, the imagined self-exclusion caused by anti-social lack of solidarity, and numerous reports on allegedly malicious acts by protests participants towards public servants. These three exclusion levels allowed police officers to maintain an image of conflict sparked by a consciously constituted outgroup that intentionally used political violence.

V.2. Trait characterization

Officers rarely credited protesters with personality traits which they considered extremely negative and unacceptable to the Polish society. They avoided making personal statements. When that occurred, however, these characteristics were treated as factors influencing violent and mindless participation in public gatherings. According to the police, protesters were irresponsible, prone to destructive and self-destructive behavior because they put their own and others' lives and health at risk by taking to the streets (Polska Policja, 2020, May, 22b; 24b). Protesters were aggressive, confrontational and malevolent because they intentionally hurt others and damaged public property (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 16b; TVP Info, 2020, May, 9; 10; 11). Thus, the police justified preventive repression and the use of physical violence as an adequate response to violence during assemblies. The process of social exclusion was carried out by creating a sense of fear of people who displayed above-mentioned characteristics.

Police officers ridiculed the protesters by providing individual examples. As they reported, one activist told an officer that he had been invited to the strike of business owners by a colleague "because he could heat up the situation" (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 12b). In turn, the colleague enjoyed taking pictures and hoped that the activists "would fool around" (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 12b). According to the police narration, the public gatherings could not have been peaceful because they were attended by activists who came to cause turmoil, not make any valid anti-government demands (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 12b; TVP Info, 2020, May, 14). By undermining activists' motivations, the police showed them as susceptible to manipulation, unreliable, and thoughtless. Such people's opinions and actions could not be taken seriously. When they behaved aggressively, they posed an unpredictable threat to which police officers had to respond.

The police challenged the intelligence of people who decided to protest during the pandemic. As they argued, protesters could not figure out the commonly understandable information about the assembly ban (Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 26b). The social exclusion from the society rested on protesters' intellectual level, recklessness, and inability to adapt to changing social and political conditions.

Trait characterization played a minor role in delegitimization. The image of protesters as aggressive and mindless people whose motivations differed from the official objectives of anti-government protests undermined their legitimation to fulfil the public roles of political opponents. At the same time, it legitimized the actions of police in so far as repressing any potential conflict. Infamous traits served to isolate protesters from the rest of society. By creating a specific image of protesters, the police persuaded the ingroup not to join and support the dangerous and unpredictable outgroup. Relatively durable character traits rather than individual acts distinguished protest participants from society.

V.3. Political labeling

The use of political labels had marginal significance for the created image of protesters due to the low percentage share in the delegitimization manifestations. The macro-strategy drew on a two-fold categorization into political groups that were perceived as totally unaccepted by the delegitimizing subject. First, police officers classified protest participants as belonging to particular political interest groups that opposed democratic backsliding. In a statement for TVP Info, the press officer, Robert Szumiata, indicated that protesters who did not accept fines and whose case was taken to court were the members of the Citizens of the Republic of Poland and supporters of the Green party (TVP Info, 2020, May, 7). Secondly, categorization drew on the identifications of activists known for their anti-government sentiments and opposition to democratic backsliding. The police press spokesperson, Sylwester Marczak, informed that the police also detained Pawel Tanajno, a presidential candidate not supported by the PiS party (TVP Info, 2020, May, 9; 12b; Policja Warszawa, 2020, May, 23b; 24).

The labels determining the social exclusion from the ingroup came from the *repertoire* of political objectives of the ruling party, which confirms the political partiality of the police. Political labeling led to the stigmatization of interest groups and individuals who were resistant to democratic backsliding and critical of the government. Elevating an image of political opponents as detrimental, dangerous, and mindless led to their social marginalization.

VI. Conclusion

The research sheds light on the online dimension of disciplining protesters and, thus, protest policing. The dominant delegitimization macro-strategy, out-casting, influenced the image of protesters created and distributed by the police. It drew upon the categorization of protest participants as violators of law and vital social norms. Within this macro-strategy, criminalization played a crucial role. The police unreservedly enforced the law unreservedly established by the government, which revealed their political favoritism. They referred to this law to describe protest participants as offenders and their actions as illegal (Lazar & Lazar, 2007, p. 46). As criminals excluded from the community, they were deprived of the right to make political claims. This indicates uncompromising denial of the right to perform social roles in the Polish community by protesters. Criminalization allowed police officers to produce an image of public order, against which the deeds of the enemy were read as transgressive (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 231). Delegitimization strategies revealed the nature of moral justifications for taking negative stances towards protesters and using threats and active force. They also served the police to legitimate their own public role as guardians of human lives, health, property, public safety, security, and order.

The supposed neutrality of police was undermined. Police forces acted more as loyal and active implementors of the government's will rather than impartial mediators between the ruled and the ruling. The analysis uncovers a subservient attitude of police towards the ruling order. No equality of treatment occurred in differentiation between anti- and pro-government activists. Delegitimization of anti-government protests participants and the active, unquestioning acceptance of the pro-government assembly confirmed the political bias of police authorities. Segregation revealed that the order promoted by the police was deeply flawed and divisive. It led to the ruthless social exclusion of protesters-opponents of the government. Although political labeling played a minor role in social exclusion, it would appear that those who opposed democratic backsliding were usually clustered under the label of enemies.

Orientalization was the only out-casting micro-strategy not included in the police discourse on protest participants. Officers avoided using historical and cultural arguments to categorize protesters as moral degenerates (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 234). It may be argued that the outgroup was perceived as an internal threat emerging from the Polish social structure. The police view remained unbiased and free of conspiracy theories about alleged external interference in Poland's internal affairs. According to them, mostly Russian and German agents of influence inspired anti-government protests to wreak havoc. These conspiracy theories were popular during the pandemic (Brzeski, 2020, May, 9). Nevertheless, police officers did not take advantage of the theories to define the external enemy via orientalization.

The police did not employ any extreme macro-strategies of dehumanization to categorize protesters as possessing inhuman features, different from the human race. This indicates that the police did not see participants of public gatherings as a direct threat to themselves. Exceptions were cases where the police officers were physically attacked. These, however, did not occur on a massive scale. Police officers did not prepare the ground for future harm, facilitate present harm, and justify past harm (Bar-Tal, 1989, p. 175; Haslam and Loughnan, 2016, p. 141). They also did not see the relationships established by assemblies as a fatally dangerous conflict (Bar-Tal, 1989, p. 175).

Additionally, the police eschewed manipulating attendance numbers. On one hand, they did not refer to the numerousness of the outgroup and thus

avoided escalating the perception of danger. On the other hand, they also did not undermine the protesters and their activities by stressing the relatively small size of the outgroup. Although the enemy was inside the social structure, the police believed that they had general control over them.

Finally, statements released by police authorities did not exploit one delegitimized group to delegitimize other groups nor provide comparisons. This confirms the real and imagined uniqueness of the relationships between protesters and police officers under the new COVID-related law. This unprecedented situation made it less viable to create an image of the enemy based on previous relationships. It was surprising that the outgroup, which had been ignored during the first two months of the pandemic, expanded and took to the streets. Nevertheless, the definitions of specific groups formulated in May might serve the police to develop an image of protest participants in the future.

Last but not least, the results concern the first wave of the pandemic, and the specificity and dynamics of delegitimization could change along with the change of the subject of the contentious politics. Successive waves of the pandemic coincided in Poland with a dispute over biopolitical issues between the ruling and the ruled. The ongoing wave of contestation requires continued research into the involvement of the police in the escalating conflict. The methodology presented in the text can be used to obtain comprehensive results on protest policing during COVID-induced further de-democratization.

Joanna Rak (joanna.rak@amu.edu.pl) is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at AMU and holds a PhD in Political Science from NCU.

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Estratégias de deslegitimação e policiamento *online* de manifestantes durante a pandemia na Polônia

Palavras-chave: polícia polonesa; estratégias de deslegitimação; democracia militante; política contenciosa; policiamento de protestos.

RESUMO **Introdução:** Identifico estratégias de deslegitimação que ilustram uma série de atitudes da Polícia polonesa em relação a indivíduos que resistem ao governo e desafiam a legitimidade do Estado. **Materiais e Métodos:** A pesquisa está embutida nas teorias de macroestratégias de deslegitimação, microestratégias de banimento, e se baseia em análise qualitativa intertextual das declarações policiais para explicar como a polícia respondeu à contestação social e moldou suas relações com os manifestantes durante a pandemia. O estudo abrange pesquisa em *sites* oficiais, declarações para a emissora pública TVP Info, e tuítes divulgados pela Sede da Polícia Policial Polonesa e pela Sede da Polícia de Varsóvia. **Resultados:** No nível da macroestratégia, a pesquisa ilumina a dimensão *online* do processo de disciplinamento dos manifestantes, além do policiamento dos protestos baseado em expulsões. Esses são os recursos predominantes de deslegitimação da causa. Argumenta-se que seu uso se baseou na categorização dos manifestantes como violadores tanto da lei como de normas sociais. Por sua vez, a principal microestratégia foi a criminalização da referência à lei sobre a COVID. As estratégias de deslegitimação revelaram a natureza das justificações morais para as posturas negativas em relação aos manifestantes, bem como as ameaças de e o uso efetivo da força. Elas também permitiram que a polícia se legitimasse aos olhos do público e assentasse seu papel como protetora da vida humana, da saúde, da propriedade, da segurança pública e da ordem. **Discussão:** A aceitação e aplicação incondicional da lei inconstitucional estabelecida pelo governo revelou o preconceito político da polícia. A deslegitimação dos participantes dos protestos antigovernamentais e a aceitação ativa e inquestionável das manifestações pró-governo confirmaram sua parcialidade política.