

Political Reputation As an Analytical Category in Political Communication

A Comparative Analysis of the Political Reputations of the Civic Platform–Polish People’s Party and the United Right in Poland

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Abstract

The article analyses the political reputations of the two coalitions that ruled Poland from 2007 to 2023. Political communication is most often explored from the perspective of political marketing, less so from the point of view of political public relations, especially in its long-term-goal-oriented strategic dimension. This partially explains why analyses of political reputation are rare; yet reputation is worth considering in the study of political communication, not only that of individual political actors but also of institutions – political parties and governments.

The analyses presented in this article examine communication skills. They aim to determine the political reputations of the two coalitions and identify the factors that could have influenced them. Particular emphasis is placed on communication issues, especially the potential maintenance of political reputation. The analyses were carried out on data publicly available as part of CBOS reports and existing research on party political communication, the aim being to determine and compare the political reputations of the Civic Platform–Polish People’s Party, CP-PPP (Polish: Platforma Obywatelska – Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) and United Right (UR) (Polish: Zjednoczona Prawica) governments. The results reveal that the populist government of the United Right maintained a positive reputation for much longer than CP-PPP, despite facing many image-related threats during its tenure. The CP-PPP government could have been more effective in maintaining its political reputation, even though it started from a higher initial level.

Keywords: political reputation; political public relations; mediated political communication; populism communication

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1. Introduction

Political reputation is rarely discussed in the context of political communication and even less studied (Brodzińska-Mirowska, 2013; Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022; Schnee, 2015; Browning & Sweetser, 2020). This is mainly due to the advanced process of mediatizing politics. In everyday communication, political actors have primarily short-term goals, while reputation is the result of long-term activities. There is no broader reflection, either theoretical or empirical, on the usefulness of this category in analysing the process of political communication, its management or its effects. There are, however, several reasons for considering political reputation as an additional analytical category in political communication research. Firstly, it can help find ways out of the second wave of the crisis of political communication in social practice (Brodzińska-Mirowska, 2022) and from the kind of impasse in research on political communication that has been signalled for several years (Nielsen, 2014). Secondly, the importance of political reputation and its role will increase (as is happening in commerce), mainly due to the challenges of new communication technologies, artificial intelligence, information bubbles, micro-targeting, disinformation and neopropaganda. All these phenomena significantly affect the political and communication processes, reducing their quality. They were particularly prominent in the case of Brexit, Donald Trump's victory in the USA in 2016, the strengthening of populist movements in Europe and, finally, during the war in Ukraine in 2022. Thirdly, political reputation can be helpful to researchers analysing relations between voters and politicians, especially in the context of the aforementioned phenomena. Reputation in politics is of great importance because 'voters with particularly low issue or political involvement may rely on political party reputation as a heuristic cue to process issue information' (Browning & Sweetser, 2020, p. 2).

Reputation is also essential because of the requirements faced by politicians in the fourth era of political communication (Blumler, 2016). The attention paid to reputation changes the perception of permanent actions in political communication. Despite the ever-significant roles of traditional and online media, the permanent campaign of the fourth era of communication must go beyond the aspect of media activity. Finally, political reputation is important because of the low level of trust voters have for politicians, which is fundamental to the quality of both democracy and political communication in a crisis (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022; Brodzińska-Mirowska, 2013; Pfetsch, 2023).

The analyses presented in this article are exploratory. The considerations are therefore focused on the research problem related to showing the possibility of researching and analysing the issue of political reputation in Poland. The article aims to show the potential of reputation as a theoretical and analytical factor in political communication.

Studies of Poland offer an exciting contribution to the analysis of political reputation, as there it is mainly influenced by political and social issues and may present a useful comparative example when analysing political reputation in other Central and Eastern European countries. As a post-communist country, Poland has gone through a long and fruitful path of transformation, as have other countries in the region (Piatkowski, 2018). In addition to the epistemological aspect, the analysis aims to compare the political

reputation of the two coalition governments that ruled Poland from 2007 to 2023: Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska) in coalition with the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) – CP-PPP – and the United Right (UR) (Zjednoczona Prawica). Both the main parties of these governments, i.e., Civic Platform (PO) in CP-PPP and Law and Justice (PiS) in URs had the experience of holding two terms of government. To frame the objectives of the analysis, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1: What were the political reputations of the CP-PPP and UR government coalitions in 2007 to 2023?

RQ 2: What factors determined the political reputations of the two governments?

The following sections briefly indicate the socio-political context within which political reputation is analysed. Next, the theoretical framework of considerations is presented. In the methodological part, the analytical framework of the analysis is indicated along with a detailed description. The results of the study and its main conclusions are presented in the last part of the article.

2. The social and political context of researching the political reputation of parties in Poland

In this introduction, I briefly outline issues related to socio-political divisions in Poland to show the socio-political context, which is important in understanding the specificities of the political communication process and its effectiveness in shaping political reputation.

Law and Justice won the 2015 parliamentary elections with 37.5% of the vote (Markowski, 2016, p. 4). In a very coherent and consistent election campaign, the party effectively 'demobilised part of the electorate of the governing coalition' (Markowski, 2016, p. 2, see also Markowski, 2019). Law and Justice identified the needs and expectations of its electorate very well. This ability to diagnose and simply respond to voters' problems is common to many populist parties (Sawczuk, 2018). When in opposition, the party worked very consistently to consolidate the community, reaching its target groups very accurately with its message and political offer (Sadura & Sierakowski 2023; Gdula, 2020; Markowski & Kotnarowski, 2016). The period after 2015 is qualified as the fourth wave of populism (Stępińska et al., 2016).

Within a few years of the start of the PiS-led government, Poland consistently fell in democracy and media freedom rankings (Reporters Without Borders, 2022; the Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022). The CEE countries are diverse when it comes to the quality of democracy. As Ben Stanley points out, 'these differences notwithstanding, it is clear that the quality and durability of democracy in the region [was] more fragile and provisional than commonly assumed' (Stanley, 2019, p. 344; see also Pirro & Stanley, 2021) and in Poland 'led to a decline in the quality of democracy swifter and steeper than that observed in Hungary' (Stanley, 2019, p. 349). Law and Justice – the main party of the ruling coalition –

‘marries nativism and cultural conservatism with redistributive policies aimed at correcting social inequalities through state action, and thoroughgoing reform of Poland’s political-institutional architecture’ (Stanley & Stanley, 2020, p. 5). Violating the foundations of the liberal democratic order in Poland is a manifestation of the ‘hollowness and weak embeddedness of both liberal-democratic institutions and the norms that sustain them’ (Pirro & Stanley, 2021, p. 97; see also Sadurski, 2019).

The sources of the various crises of democracy, despite similarities, are different. The social, political, historical and economic context matters (see Klein, 2022; Kohut, 2022). As Tomasz Zarzycki (2000, pp. 851–873) emphasises, Poland stands out among the CEE countries (which have similar experience) in terms of its socio-political characteristics. Analyses of the process of shaping Poland’s electorates and political divisions after 1989 showed the importance of assessing the course of transformation and historical events (post-communism – post-Solidarity, left-right division). These factors were important in the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century (Zarzycki, 2000, p. 852). However, that decade was the time when the division into ‘liberal Poland and Solidarity Poland’ was established. This division proved to be very durable and supportive of social polarisation (Obacz, 2018). It is worth remembering that in this form the slogan of liberal Poland vs. Solidarity Poland appeared in the election campaign in 2005, in the competition between CP and Law and Justice (Kolczyński & Mazur, 2005; Cześnik & Kotnarowski, 2011).

Analyses by Bogusława Grabowska and Tadeusz Szawiel showed that electoral behaviour is explained most precisely by the cognitive relation hypothesis. First of all, this assumes, as the author argues, that people have knowledge of the party and its leaders, and that the party and its leaders send a clear and understandable message to the voters (Grabowska & Szawiel, 2001, p. 205). It seems that this hypothesis is of great interpretative importance to this day.

The left-right dimension used in the analysis of political divisions changes in character. However, it is still a noteworthy reference point because ‘it is associated with many beliefs about the world, values, political and social attitudes, and even experienced emotions’ (Skarżyńska, 2019, pp. 184–185). The value-oriented approach is becoming increasingly popular as an essential factor around which voters structure their attitudes towards politics. Much research and many analyses indicate that values allow organized political attitudes to a greater extent than ideologies (see also Borowiec, 2021; Borowiec, 2022; Kwiatkowska, 2018). Therefore, they are also an essential point of reference for political communication.

The characteristics of the electors in Poland after 2015 visible in the research indicate that the electorate of Law and Justice appreciates values such as ‘justice, discipline and loyalty’. The Civic Platform electorate leans towards such values as ‘openness, curiosity about the world, a sense of agency and effectiveness’ (Skarżyńska, 2019, p. 186). The electorates of the two largest parties differ in this regard. This perspective of political psychologists finds points of convergence with those of sociology, political science and communication science. Radosław Markowski and Ben Stanley defend the thesis that it was only in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, i.e., after 2005, that the ‘structuring of electoral preferences’ could be observed in Poland. Reserving caution, the researchers point to the loyalty of the electors towards parties that are close to them for various reasons (Markowski & Stanley 2016, pp. 35–36).

This proximity of electorates and parties is not ideologically conditioned but primarily emotional. Agnieszka Kwiatkowska emphasizes this relationship in her analyses. She indicates that the topics that evoke emotions and divide Polish society most are abortion, the European Union and issues related to the Catholic Church. In addition, in 2015, the issue of immigrants also became a divisive topic (Kwiatkowska, 2018, p. 31). In a democracy, civic quality is influenced by political knowledge. Voters with more excellent political knowledge are rather oriented towards programmes. On the other hand, those whose political knowledge is more complex do not refer to ideological issues but to thematic ones concerning cognitively accessible issues (Kwiatkowska, 2018, pp. 9–35). In Poland, research shows that the level of political knowledge is relatively low (see Żerkowska-Balas et al., 2017, pp. 7–31; Cześćnik & Wenzel, 2018, pp. 103–123).

Therefore, it is worth looking at both governments in this context, especially from the perspective of their reputation as a category explaining their political position. This may be a noteworthy point for comparative analyses of researchers in the field of political communication as well as political science, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

3. Theoretical background and analytical framework

The theoretical framework for my analysis was primarily derived from the political communication and public relations literature. Political communication is a very complex type of social communication (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Mancini, 1999; Schulz, 2014, Van Aelst et al., 2017; Wojcik, 2013, Blumler, 2016, 2019; Pfetsch, 2008). Richard Perloff defines this type of communication as ‘the process by which language and symbols, employed by leaders, media or citizens, exert intended or unintended effects on the political cognitions, attitudes or behaviours of individuals or on outcomes that bear on the public policy of a nation, state or community’ (Perloff, 2014, p. 30). It is a complex process, dependent on the context and political culture; the media significantly impact its course. Political communication is defined by researchers in two ways, either as a broad process or as a process of particular importance during an election campaign (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Blumler, 2016; Perloff, 2014; Powell & Cowart, 2018). The latter sense is still dominant in research. As a consequence, the analysis of political communication is dominated by the marketing perspective (Lees-Marshment, 2009; Ormrod, 2006; Newman, 1999; Scammell, 1999). Political marketing tools are useful when focusing on short-term communication and political goals. The long-term view when it comes to political communication research is much less frequently taken. From this perspective, it is about the transaction (choice) and about building trust and reputation among voters, as well as maintaining relationships with them. These public relations include focusing on a long-term goal, which is shaping relationships with the organisation, and these relationships translate into reputation (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015, pp. 63–74; Bronn, 2007; Wojcik 2013; for more, see Brodzinska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022, pp. 105–118). Public relations is defined here in the strategic paradigm of James Grunig. This means that ‘what an organisation does [...] has a strong influence on what people think and say about it (its

reputation) and the relationship they have with that organisation. [...] Public relations must play a role in managing the behaviour of an organisation through the strategic management process, to have an effective role in the “managing” of reputation or relationships’ (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015, p. 74). Following this line of thinking, I understand public relations in the context of the considerations undertaken here as communication activities aimed at such goals as:

- Qualitative ties between political parties and voters.
- Changing voters’ attitudes towards political parties.
- Building trust.
- Improving communication quality, including relations with the media.

These are essential goals for both the quality of political communication and the quality of democracy. Improving the quality of democracy and the quality of communication (especially journalism) in times of crisis are becoming among the most critical challenges today (see McNair, 2000, 2015; Pfetsch, 2023). A look at political communication from the perspective of PR raises questions about reputation in politics. Some theoretical remarks are in order.

The review of research positions reveals that reputation is understood primarily as the result of specific (1) ideas and (2) emotions concerning the organisation, as well as (3) expectations and (4) their implementation. Kerstin Liehr-Gobbers and Christopher Storck define reputation as: ‘the collective perception of a company or institution through its stakeholders. It is the result of the exchange of personal and shared experiences between the organisation, its stakeholders and third parties over time’ (Liehr-Gobbers & Stock, 2011, p. 18). Researchers agree that this is a multidimensional concept. This means that organisations have different reputations with different groups of people (Helm, 2006, pp. 4–8; Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015; Fiedler, 2011). Reputation is also a category that considers the long-term perspective of assessing the operation of an organisation and its communication (Helm, Gobbers & Storck, 2011; Lange & Lee, 2011; Gaultier-Gaillard, Louisot & Rayner, 2009). Therefore, reputation is the combination of effective action and strategic communication (Da Camara, 2011, p. 50). Sandra Helm and Christian Kolde explain: ‘reputation is an “umbrella” construct, capturing cumulative impressions of internal and external stakeholders beneath its “shield”’ (Helm & Klode, 2011, p. 99). In turn, as Steven Wartic emphasises, ‘the idea that corporate reputation is fundamentally a construct based on perceptions (even if there are problems) seems indisputable. [...] The empirical truth of corporate reputation comes from whatever the respondents say’ (Wartic, 2002, p. 375). Ronald Burke adds an important point: ‘reputation comes from direct experiences with an organisation, word of mouth, advertising and media coverage. It takes a considerable time to develop an outstanding reputation; yet reputations can be damaged in an instant’ (Burke, 2011, p. 6).

Trust must be added to these ideas, emotions, expectations, actions and experiences with an organisation (Helm, 2006; Blöbaum, 2016). Reputation can be analysed by taking into account three types: 1) functional – consisting of the evaluation of the action; 2) social – referring, for example, to the integrity of the organisation; and 3) expressive –

referring to the perception of an organisation or institution (Blöbaum, 2016: pp. 10–12). This approach is used in the case of political reputation because emotions, perception and the evaluation of the actions of political parties, governments and individual politicians are of great importance for politics and political communication (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022, pp. 141–178; see Migalski, 2020). Public relations, i.e., where reputation is discussed most often, is a concept often discussed in a political context (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Strömback & Kioussis, 2020). However, studies that directly refer to political reputation are still rare. Reputation is often treated as a synonym for political image (Scammell, 2015). Key differences need to be highlighted. The source of the concept of image is marketing. Reputation is a concept from the field of public relations. The image is the result of promotional activities. Reputation is based not only on the communication aspects of an organization, but also on its activities. Finally, the image may be subject to change. Reputation requires stability (Brodzińska-Mirowska, Jacuński 2022: 153).

Researchers analyse how media influence the perception of political parties and as a result how they affect their reputation (Browning & Sweetser, 2020). A broader discussion of political public relations and political reputation can be found in reputation building for individual politicians. Such an approach has been presented, for example, by Christian Schnee (2015). Finally, political reputation also shows the internal dynamics of political parties' functioning and thus organisations' political communication. Due to several challenges in studying political parties and their members, such an approach is also rare (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022). Reputation is also analysed in the context of the internal selection of candidates (Marland & DeCilla, 2020) or the impact it has on the possibility of using various competitive strategies at a time of political change (Hamann & Sgouraki, 1999). Taking this into account, it will be understood as 'how the target groups of key importance for political parties [...] perceive and evaluate their functioning and the effects of their activities' (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022, p. 154). It must be emphasised that in the case of voters – the group taken into account in these analyses – political reputation does not equal support for political parties. Therefore, it will be treated as one of its elements. Political reputation also comes with higher risk. This is mainly due to politicians' dependence on the media.

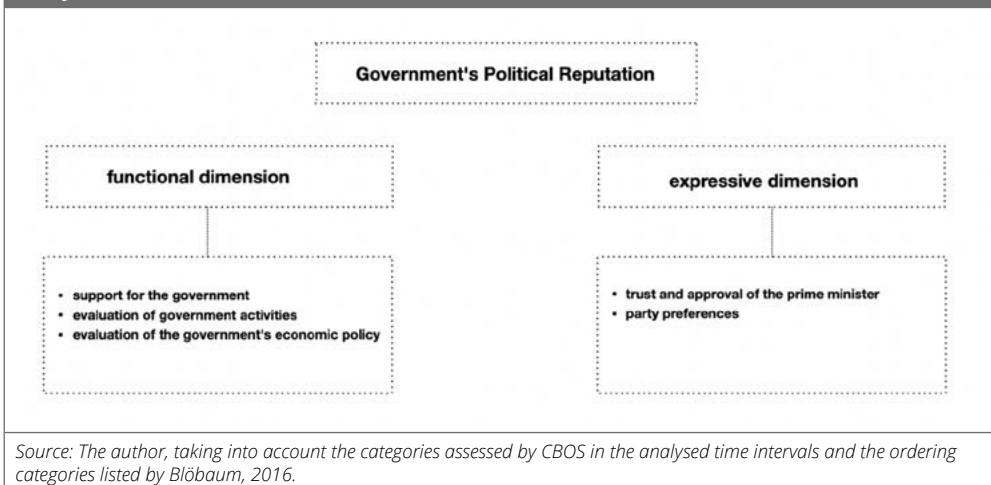
However, several factors play a role in reputation in politics, as is the case with commercial organisations. These are categorised as external, often independent of the party, and internal, related to the party's organization, management and communication (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022). The external factors determining reputation, apart from the media and the specificity of the narrative about politics, include the impact of the quality of communication on the actions taken by politicians, the political experience of leaders and the political culture of voters. Internal factors include the approach taken by parties to communication (not least during the inter-election period) and the extent to which parties cooperate with specialists in the field of communication (in Poland, this differs significantly from the models adopted by parties, for example, in the USA). As in other organisations, internal reputation matters – in the case of political organisations, reputation among its members (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022, p. 156). That is why it is so important in the analyses undertaken here to consider a broad context, which is essential for assessing the level of political reputation.

Based on the theoretical assumptions, the analysis was conducted taking into account two dimensions: functional and expressive.¹ As researchers rightly point out, reputation analysis requires the inclusion of possible indicators to evaluate specific groups (Fiedler, 2011; Dowling, 2016). It is worth considering the most critical components from the point of political communication view. Detailed indicators of both dimensions were selected from the database of research reports published several times a year by the CBOS public opinion research centre from 2007–2023. In the functional aspect, it was necessary to consider the results of research on voters' assessments and perceptions of government actions and the level of support for governments. One of the important aspects of the voters' assessment of politicians is economic issues. Therefore, in the functional dimension, voters' opinions on this were taken into account (Skarżyńska, 2019, p. 239).

In the expressive dimension, the existing research lists such data as measurements of trust in and acceptance of the prime minister. This is important due to the role of personalisation in politics and the importance of perceiving leaders in the context of their political parties (Mazur, 2014; Peszyński, 2023). I took into account preferences for all the parties which in 2007–2023 make up the government.

The research process consisted of three steps. Firstly, I collected data published by CBOS² in 2007–2015 and 2015–2023 (to August) on selected indicators, i.e., support for the party, acceptance of and trust in the prime minister, support for the government, the evaluation of the government's actions and opinions on economic policy. In the second step, I calculated the average of these indicators to estimate the level of reputation each year. I got my final reputation score by calculating the average of the annual reputation levels. In this way, I obtained the level of political reputation in both periods. In the case of the CP-PPP government, it was two full terms; in the case of the United Right, it was the entire first term, and the second term until August 2023. The analytical scheme according to which the reputation of both governments was analysed is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The political reputations of the CP-PPP and UR governments – analytical framework

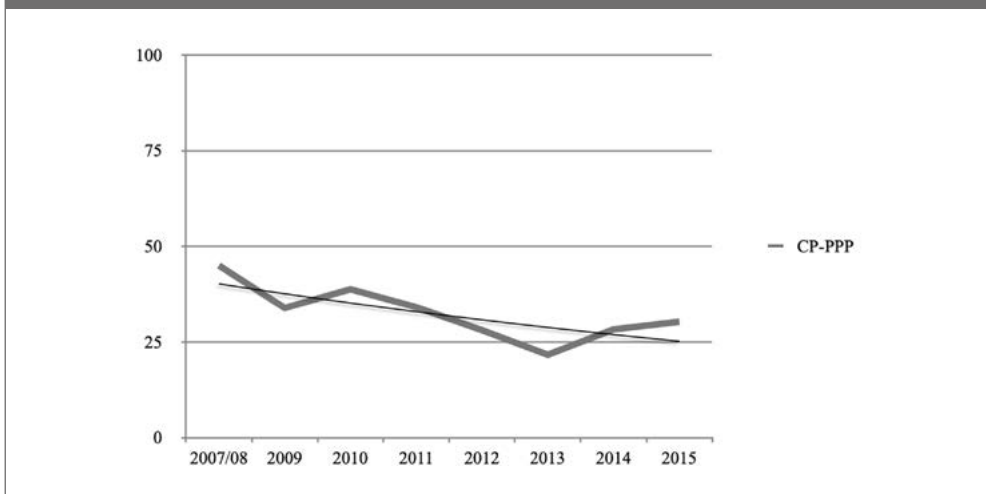


Analysis of the existing data allows the first research question to be answered. I will refer to the second research question on the basis of the literature on the subject, including the analysis of political parties' communication. In the course of the analysis, the results of my own research on the expectations voters had of the main political parties in the two governments, carried out as part of nationwide research, are also cited.³

4. The results of the analysis

The political reputation of the CP-PPP government among voters, taking into account the functional and expressive dimensions, remained at a stable, relatively high level at the beginning of the first term of office. From the middle of this term a downward trend was visible in all analysed areas. The government suffered a fall in its reputation in the second year of office and another in the sixth year. This translated into an overall average reputation score of 32.5% in 2007–2015.⁴ Distribution, along with the trend of the reputation level, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The level of political reputation of the CP-PPP government in its two terms, 2007–2015



Source: The author, based on the existing data concerning the analysed categories published by CBOS in 2007–2015.

The CP-PPP government started with a reputation of 45.15%, slightly higher than the United Right government (see Table 3). The average level of reputation of the party in the analysed period was 32.5%. The first dip in political reputation occurred very soon after the start of the first government – in the second year of office. It is worth noting that, the reputation trend declined from the middle of the first term. The factor that caused the first decline in reputation was the economic crisis in 2008. Its effects were already visible in the second year in office when the average satisfaction with the financial situation was 26%. The

critical independent from the CP-PPP government, which shook this government's reputation, were the economic crisis and the 2010 presidential plane crash in Smolensk. Their political consequences were visible primarily in the solid and clear polarisation of Polish society. The first re-election of a government in the history of Poland after 1989 (in 2011) did not translate into an improvement in reputation. Another critical moment (2012) came with pension reform – the government raised the retirement age to 65 for women and 67 for men. This vital reform, however, needed to be constructively communicated and became a critical message point for the opposition (see also Markowski, 2016). The downward trend in reputation continued. The second drop in reputation level occurred in the second half of the second term of office due to the image crisis caused by the publication of tapes clandestinely made of ruling party politicians' talking. Even though the tapes turned out to be a recording of politicians' private conversations, representatives of the ruling party did not manage to overcome this image crisis in terms of communication.

The change of the prime minister in the CP-PPP government was inevitable at the end of the second term. Ewa Kopacz replaced Donald Tusk, who became president of the European Council. This change did not negatively affect the general level of the government's political reputation. The analyses showed the increase in its level in 2014, which can be explained by the refreshment of the party's image; the increase in the level of reputation didn't stop the downward trend of this government.

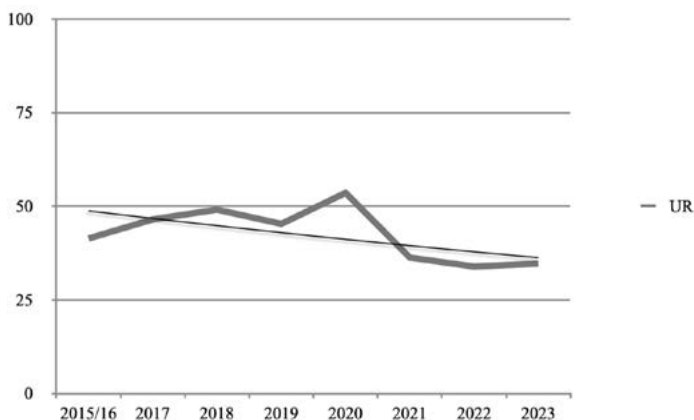
The main exogenous factors in maintaining a high reputation level are shortcomings in communication. This mainly concerns the issue of permanent communication, which was primarily focused on the media dimension (see Brodzińska-Mirowska, 2013). Despite a large expenditure of effort in this area of communication, the CP-PPP clearly had problems with creating a coherent and effective communication policy, especially covering large projects introducing changes, for example, increasing the retirement age. This government's communication policy was reactive – i.e., messages responded to communication stimuli – rather than proactive, thus actively framing the thematic agenda and interpretations.

The second internal factor that can be taken into account to determine the level of reputation is how political parties operate on the ground, at lower organisational levels, how party structures operate and how their members engage. This dimension proves that, the Civic Platform had fallen into the 'trap of mediatisation', neglecting those dimensions of communication that bring profits in the long run and are much easier to control. The research carried out shows that despite its extensive structures, the CP did not use its potential even during its rule. In turn, its coalition partner PPP was significantly more active in the structures, but in turn its ability to increase media visibility was therefore not great (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Winclawska, 2019; Winclawska & Brodzińska-Mirowska, 2016; Jacuński et al., 2021). Research on the party's reputation in the intra-organisational dimension after the CP lost the elections in 2015 showed that its reputation was the lowest of all the parties surveyed at that time (38.7%). The other coalition member, PPP, performed better in this field. The PPP enjoyed one of the best internal reputations of all Polish parties surveyed, 66% (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022, p. 167). Thus, a significant contributing factor was communication short-sightedness, and the fact that the communication activities were carried out in an ad hoc way, rather than coherently and strategically.

Initially, the United Right government enjoyed a reputation of 41.4%, which is only slightly lower than that of the CP-PPP government at the beginning of its rule. During its

time in office, the average level of reputation over the period considered was 42.6%. This is higher than the CP-PPP government. The reputation trend of the United Right government was very stable from the beginning of its first term in office. The good economic condition of the country, especially in the first term of office, made it possible to implement one of the critical election promises concerning social policy. These actions were transformed into an improvement in reputation and this trend continued throughout the first and much of the second term.

Table 3: Political reputation of the government of the United Right in 2015–2023



Source: The author, based on the existing data concerning the analysed categories published by CBOS in 2015–2023.

The communication of the Family 500+ programme to voters was widespread and sustained.⁵ In this respect, the government of the United Right showed remarkable coherence and consistency and thus responded to one of the expectations of its electorate. Surveys of voter opinions, especially among Law and Justice voters, showed clearly that they expected election promises to be kept. Such an expectation was articulated by as many as 65.5% of respondents participating in the survey and declaring their support for Law and Justice.⁶ The United Right government was very effective in managing communication crises, setting them apart from their opponents. During the analysed period, an apparent reputation crash occurred only once in 2020. The decline in reputation was very noticeable at the time, from the average reputation level in the fifth year of the rule of 53.63% to 37.42%. This resulted from political decisions to restrict abortion rights in Poland in the first year of the second term of office. Media information on several doubts about the actions of United Right government representatives (e.g., violations of the constitution, spending public money, conflicts over the rule of law with the EU) did not have much impact on declared party preferences (susceptible to greater fluctuations and being the result of the moment) and reputation (i.e. the result of both the affective assessment and the party's activities in various areas) among their electorate. It was of great importance to the Law and Justice electorate that the party was not 'involved in scandals' – this

expectation was indicated by 39% of respondents expressing their support for Law and Justice (Jacuński et al., 2021).

However, the period of power of the United Right also presented external challenges, independent of the party, which posed a potential threat to its reputation. For example the Covid-19 pandemic occurred during the UR's rule. However, the fact that Poland did not do as well in the crisis as the rest of Europe did not affect the reputation of the United Right government. Contrary to the CP and PPP, Law and Justice, the largest party forming the coalition government, tried to build foundations in the regions and even during its period of opposition. During the first term of office, its intra-organisational reputation was also relatively high at 65.7% (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022, p. 167). During both governments, the prime minister was changed. In the case of the United Right government, this occurred during the first term of office. Due to the advanced process of policy personalisation, not only during the election period (King, 2002; Mazur, 2014, 2017a, 2017b) but also during permanent communication, such a change carries a risk of refusal. The change of prime minister from Beata Szydło to Mateusz Morawiecki was not discussed in detail. This change did not have a noticeable effect on the party's reputation.

From the perspective adopted here, both government coalitions had a significant number of challenges and experienced events that were potentially significant for their reputation. The UR government suffered many more such incidents, but its reputation turned out to be less sensitive to crises than that of the CP-PPP government, whose reputation level suffered clearer dips. Both cases confirm the theoretical assumptions in the field of crisis communication, which emphasise that the way an organisation reacts to an image crisis is crucial. It is communication rather than the nature of the problem that determines potential reputation loss (Tworzydło, 2019, 2022). The two governments differed significantly in terms of communication strategies and tactics. A summary is provided in Table 4.

Table 4: The communication tactics of the two government coalitions

Communication tactics	CP-PPP	UR
The nature of communication activities	reactive communication	proactive communication
Communication culture of relations with the media	symbiotic, subjective	assertive, politicised, objectifying
Internal communication	low level of satisfaction of party members with internal communication	high level of satisfaction of party members with internal communication
Crisis communication	low level of effectiveness in crisis communication management, dominant 'apology' strategy (see Tworzydło, 2019, 2022)	high level of effectiveness in managing crisis communication, using the strategy of defence by attack and downplaying
Communication tools	media relations, limited strategic public relations	propaganda

Source: The author.

Effectiveness in communication management was a key factor in maintaining a stable political reputation. The researchers of reputation also point to this effect (Da Camara, 2011).

5. Discussion and limitation

An important objective of the analysis of the existing data was to answer the question about the strength of the reputation of both government coalitions. The main conclusion is that the United Right government maintained a better and much more stable reputation of 42.6% throughout its term in power. The political reputation of the CP-PPP government decreased quickly in its first term. There were also more moments of reputational collapse than during the United Right's term of office. The average reputation for the entire period of the CP-PPP government was 32.5%. Comparing these averages with the results of research conducted by Polish political parties allows factors that could have a significant impact on political reputation to be identified. This was the subject of the second research question. The parties forming the two coalitions differ fundamentally in many aspects of communication, which, especially when it involves the perspective indicated in this article – i.e., excellent public relations (Grünig, 2009) – is important for the levels of reputation obtained. The strong relationship between reputation and communication strategy is confirmed by analyses undertaken by other researchers (Klewes & Wreschniok, 2009). The decline in UR's reputation appeared much later than for CP-PPP. The first severe decline in the level of political reputation also appeared relatively late. A stable and good reputation was maintained despite many potentially harmful activities. Three such factors could have been influential in maintaining a sound reputation. First of all, the victory of the United Right in Poland in 2015 was primarily the result of the in-depth understanding of voters and the preparation of a precise offer for them, with social reforms becoming its flagship slogan (Wojtasik, 2016; Sadura & Sierakowski, 2023). They were only a complement to the whole picture because the politicians of the United Right turned to those who for years might have felt alienated from politics and also felt that they had no representation (Wigura, 2020, p. 17). The fulfilment of the flagship promises and a consistent message focused on building an identity and the safe community reality all contributed to the loyalty of the electorate. The statements of the United Right were also made at the right moment politically, i.e., they appeared in a period of significant crisis of democracy and a substantial increase in the importance of populism (Jansen, 2011). Law and Justice, basing its messages on issues of identity and dignity (ensured by a social programme), very well reflected the character of post-communist populism, which was characterised by Arkadiusz Lewandowski and Marcin Polakowski in the following way: 'it has established that it is marked by three out of the four D-features of populism: i.e., the distrust of politicians and institutions of liberal democracy; the criticism of the primacy of transnational structures, of migration and of the destruction of historical national identity; and the utilisation of deprivation resulting from social inequality to criticise elites' (Lewandowski & Polakowski, 2023, p.19). At the same time, UR pursued a communication strategy characteristic of populist parties (Stępińska et al., 2016).

Secondly, the politicisation of public media is not without significance for the reputation of UR. The popularity of populist parties is, in many cases, associated with reducing the quality of communication by trying to influence the media (see also Stępińska et al., 2016, 2020). The propaganda involved in political communication objectifies the audience, but it is very effective. Public television in Poland carries propaganda for the ruling party,

creating an imbalance in access to general information. The propaganda of the pro-government traditional and online media is essential in maintaining the continuously good reputation of the ruling party among its voters. They watch TVP not only because they do not have access to other communication channels but also because they identify with its message (see Gdula, 2020, pp. 139–183; also Sadura & Sierakowski, 2023). The example of Poland (and similarly of Hungary) shows that television is still significant in building political support (see Hejj, 2022; Stanley, 2019; Pająk-Patkowska & Rachwał, 2016).

Politicising the media guarantees politicians control over the message. Any difficulties in creating a narrative that fulfills political communication goals in the era of a complex and demanding communication environment are overcome by populists by the politicisation of the media. This is how they gain influence over the nature of any communication content. The changes that took place in the Polish public media after 2015 were fundamental. Although public media are often the target of political influence, the scale of changes under the CP-PPP and UR governments is difficult to compare. Thus, the possibility of influencing media messages during CP-PPP rule was different from the opportunities the UR gained from politicisation (see Węglińska, 2021; Jędrzejewski, 2016, 2017).

The UR broke some of the rules of political communication to improve its reputation, supporting this by generating propaganda; this was effective, although it objectified the audience. The party also subverted the culture of political communication in its relations with journalists. The UR government perceived the media instrumentally and claimed that changes in the public media were necessary to 'equalise' the messages. The representatives of CP-PPP, which formed the government before 2015, had a different view of the role of the media. Despite many remarks to the media, they presented opinions indicating their acceptance of the role of the media in a democracy (Jacuński, Brodzińska-Mirowska, Pacześniak, Winclawska, 2019, pp. 4–32). This break is the basis of – as van Dalen points out – 'the common interpretation of the appropriate way for journalists and politicians to interact' (Van Dalen, 2019, p. 2714). Meanwhile, the negativism of media messages and the tendency to criticise politics in a structural dimension, i.e., 'structural critical bias' (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019, p. 212), means that building a good reputation for political organisations, governments and individual politicians is a big challenge. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the homeostasis of media relations and politics is violated by politicising them (see Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The two governments differed fundamentally in the effectiveness of their communication strategies. CP-PPP communication was definitely more reactive. The tone of the public debate was set more effectively by UR while in both government and opposition. Despite its economic successes, CP-PPP was not able to use this to communicate with important success groups. In addition, an important factor was the crisis of leadership, which was important for the position of the party (Wojtasik, 2016; Winclawska et al., 2021; see Kasińska & Gajewski, 2021).

The analysis I performed, like any research process, had certain limitations. Political reputation as an analytical category can be helpful, especially in studying the real effects of actions under a permanent campaign, going much further than daily short-term communication goals related to media visibility. Further research on political reputation should be expanded with in-depth theoretical and methodological analyses. It may also

be a perspective worthy of attention in terms of social practice, especially in the era of the second wave of the crisis of political communication (Brodzińska-Mirowska, 2022) and the deficit of quality in both politics and the media. The quality of political communication and relations with voters are of great importance in the case of the level of reputation (see Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Ledingham, 2011). Low-quality political communication is a problem not only in Poland. On the other hand, the Polish case may be a useful point of reference for attempts to analyse the political reputation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe due to a shared historical experience. In-depth analyses of the role of media in building political reputation may also be noteworthy (Brodzińska-Mirowska, 2019). Such research is essential primarily because the intermediaries affect reputation. This relationship is also confirmed by studies (Lange & Lee, 2011, p. 171).

The academic challenges are related primarily to the ordering of terminology, as political reputation does not equal party support or image. However, both of these elements are significant for reputation. The methodological challenge is, among other things, to analyse reputation when propaganda tools and public media are used to shape it, as in the cases of Poland and Hungary. Here, political reputation is shaped by meaningful organic access to reliable information. These are research challenges, because in the still competitive political market there are entities that use communication tools that, to some extent, take away the audience's subjectivity. The next point is the indicators in the research of reputation in politics. The reputation measurement process is a topic that raises several doubts and discussions (Goberbes & Stork, 2011; Helm & Klode, 2011). These mainly result from the fact that it is an intangible asset, so it is challenging to develop indicators that can be used in such a measurement. The elements of political reputation must differ in scope and detail depending on the target audience included in the study.⁷ These comments also apply to political reputation. Therefore, the challenges in the empirical area concern, as in the case of the reputation of other organisations, issues, possible additional indicators of reputation and their well-being. The analysis I carried out was limited due to the resources available from CBOS. However, it is worth considering whether any dimensions can still be considered in the case of the political reputation of governments. The analyses based on the background data showed the empirical potential of this category. Therefore, the methodological work on the development of the political reputation survey scale, together with the determination of the importance of individual variables, are worth attention.

However, it should be born in mind that researching political reputation seems to have more limitations than researching the reputation of other types of organisation. First, it is about the specificity of politics and political communication, access to information, trust in the source of political statements and people's knowledge of politics. Therefore, the scales of political reputation research will be and must be limited.

Finally, the studies of the political reputation of other groups essential for the party, governments and politicians, such as journalists, non-governmental organisations and businesses, are worthy of in-depth attention. It is worth going in the direction Schneer (2015) shows, i.e., the reputation of individual politicians. Due to the results of research suggesting a relationship between reputation and loyalty in the case of commercial organisations (Helm, 2006, p. 63), it may be interesting for researchers in the field of communication and media, as well as political science. In addition to the solid political polarisation, the transfer

of communication bubbles from the online world and back sheds light on the importance of party loyalty. Today, reputation itself as well as the process of shaping and protecting it, are among the most crucial challenges for various types of organisation, both in the private and public sectors (see Gaultier-Gaillard, Louisot & Rayner, 2009). The challenges in shaping and maintaining reputation are also reinforced by the dynamic development of artificial intelligence and its importance for politics (see Duberry, 2022). Questions about reputation in politics become more important in today's complex communication conditions, about which Barbara Pfetsch writes: 'the coincidence of disrupted democracy and dissonant public spheres is related to profound structural changes in the party organisation, campaigning and political leadership' (Pfetsch, 2023, p. 346; see also Freelon & Wells, 2020). This is why it is worth observing reputation in politics and political communication.

Endnotes:

1. The concept of different dimensions of reputation described by Blöbaum was also useful in analysing internal repetition (see also Brodzińska-Mirowska, Jacuński, 2022).
2. CBOS – Public Opinion Research Centre www.cbos.pl. Reports from December were most frequently used as they contained the results for each month of the year in one report. All reports I used are included in references.
3. The conclusions from research that I refer to are the result of a team project entitled Political parties in relations with the environment. Communication and organisational strategies – Sonata BIS programme conducted in 2016-2020 and financed by the National Science Centre (grant no. 2015/18 / E / HS6 / 00763). The research team was composed of: Barbara Brodzińska-Mirowska, Anna Paczeński, Michał Jacuński and Maria Winclawska.
4. If, for the purposes of interpreting this value, we assume three working reputation categories: low, moderate and high with a maximum scale of 100%, the CP-PPP government obtained a low level of reputation. I used percentage data so I also present the results as percentages. However, as part of further work on methodological assumptions, when designing a tool dedicated to reputation, it is worth considering its indexing.
5. The programme's assumptions include an allowance of PLN 500.00 for each child in the family. The programme was communicated as actions to improve the demographic situation in Poland. The programme is part of social policy. There was no significant impact of these measures on the change in the fertility rate in Poland.
6. Research (CATT) on a nationwide group of adult Poles N-1006 was carried out in January 2018 as part of a team research project entitled Political parties in relations with the environment. Organisational and communication strategies of Polish political parties. The project was carried out by the scientific consortium of Nicolaus Copernicus University and the University of Wrocław, conducted in 2016-2020 and financed by the National Science Centre (grant no. 2015/18 / E / HS6 / 00763). The members of the research team were Anna Paczeński, Barbara Brodzińska-Mirowska, Winclawska and Michał Jacuński.
7. The following elements were taken into account in the reputation analyses carried out among members of Polish political parties (i.e., the internal dimension of reputation): 1) the assessment of party management, 2) the assessment of the party's performance, party management when asked, among other things, about the issues of assessing whether the party represented its voters, acted as an intermediary in contacts with state institutions, or implemented the programme and whether it efficiently communicated decisions to party elections. More detailed questions in this area resulted primarily from the assumption that party members were familiar with various areas of its operation (Brodzińska-Mirowska & Jacuński, 2022, pp.158–168).

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