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## **Discourse in Polish society in response to the political communications of the Ministry of Health on COVID-19 disseminated via public service announcements**

### **Dyskurs w polskim społeczeństwie jako odpowiedź na komunikowanie polityczne Ministerstwa Zdrowia na temat COVID-19 za pomocą rządowych komunikatów**

Social campaigns, which can be used in the context of political communications, are an interesting phenomenon; however, they do not create social reality through established models, standards of behavior and norms. Being politically neutral, they inspire trust, which is one of the most important values that fosters societal cohesion. Although by definition they do not garner political support for their creators, they are used by governments and nearly all ministries.

Information campaigns are a reliable source of information for citizens – ordinary people, observers of reality and the issue at hand, and a viable communication tool for the Prime Minister, ministries and the government. They are used by governments in an attempt to publicize social issues and to communicate the nature of the problem, the ways to fight it and the things that make it worthwhile to pursue the common goal.

The social campaigns run by the individual ministries and the government as a whole, which are in part a consequence of the policy pursued by them, also serve as a source of knowledge, which enables navigating the world and facilitates making important decisions. As a specific tool for communicating specific knowledge, they are thus part of a strictly defined space of power. Knowledge is a source of power. Power, thanks to knowledge, allows to subjugate – to subdue, coerce, prohibit or oblige<sup>1</sup>, as well as to transform and improve. Knowledge of social problems and threats enables power within interpersonal interactions on their multiple levels<sup>2</sup>.

Using campaigns for communication often serves a higher purpose – they are aimed at highlighting proper and pro-social behaviors, while trying to discourage

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<sup>1</sup> M. Foucault, *Nadzorować i karać. Narodziny więzienia*, Warszawa 1993.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. Barker, *The Social Work Dictionary*, Washington 2003.

socially destructive ones. Thanks to them, the society – which is not aware of problems and issues due to being ill-informed or only partially informed and not reacting to the evil at hand – transforms into a conscious group thanks to information, becoming active and willing to take part in both individual and collective action, which may take the form of – for example – social discourse.

Taking up the research problem presented in this paper was caused by the highly visible – in particular in social media – debate undertaken by the Polish society, which concerned the rather inefficient political communications offered by Ministry of Health as part of its public service announcements published in connection with the global COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This area was poorly explored to date, especially in relation to government campaigns at the ministerial level, as none of the social issues addressed to date have required such a rapid response from the authorities, in particular in terms of educating the society at large, given such a scant level of knowledge.

Campaigns on COVID-19 proved to be a challenge for the Polish Ministry of Health, as it sparked a fierce debate in social media, that the authorities were ill-prepared for, which culminated in disabling comments under clips published on the official YouTube channel of the Ministry.

The aim of the paper is not only to showcase the possibilities afforded by using social campaigns in the field of political communications, but above all to illustrate the discourse of the Polish society in social media as an impulsive and emotional response to the government's inability to communicate using such campaigns. Particular attention was paid to the government's mistakes noted and highlighted by the public in numerous comments, which slipped through cracks in government's control.

Due to the exploratory and interdisciplinary nature of the topic at hand, focusing on media analysis and political science – as the combination of these point of views reveals socially significant relationships defining the relations between public communication and the communication instruments used for this purpose – quantitative and qualitative methods were used as research methods with an emphasis on source studies, media content analysis, desk research and case studies.

The paper assumes, that with selected videos broadcast within the framework of the public health campaign conducted by the Ministry of Health, during the first year of the pandemic in Poland (from 4 March 2020 to 4 March 2021), the Ministry tried to inform and educate the public about public health and safety in connection with the spread of COVID-19 and the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

## **Ministry of Health in Poland in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic Historical aspect of the Ministry of Health until 2020**

The Ministry of Health came to be when the Public Health Office was established within the Department of Internal Affairs by the Provisional Council of State in 1917. With time, the Office was transformed into a Department, then a Section,

and later a Directorate of Public Health. The Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Labor Protection was established on 15 May 1918 by decree of the Regency Council of 4 April 1918. The first Minister of Health was Witold Chodźko. As the state came to be and existed as a legal entity, on 13 December 1918, the Chief of State Józef Piłsudski appointed Witold Chodźko as undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Public Health in the cabinet of Jędrzej Moraczewski<sup>3</sup>.

After numerous changes, the name “Ministry of Health” remained in use until 13 June 1960, when the ministry was renamed to the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The old name was reinstated on 19 September 1999.

In 2020-2021, the Ministry of Health comprised the minister’s Policy Cabinet and a number of organizational bodies, which included departments established in order to carry out substantive tasks of the Minister of Health and offices, which were set up to carry out tasks related to the operations of the Ministry of Health and its head; among them were also bodies subordinate to the Minister or supervised by the Minister, as well as agencies, research, diagnostic and rehabilitation centers, medical centers, universities and medical institutes<sup>4</sup>.

The Ministry of Health carried out tasks concerning supervision over the National Health Fund, reimbursement of medicines, medical devices and foodstuffs for special nutritional purposes, supervision over medical professions, the development and coordination of health programs, organization and supervision over the National Medical Rescue System, as well as tasks related to health resort treatment<sup>5</sup>.

One needs to point out that a health policy concerns planned, justified, broad, safe and effective health care measures. It includes, but is not limited to, detecting and addressing specific health needs, as well as improving the health status of a specific target group of patients. It addresses outbreaks, health issues – including non-epidemiological ones – concerning society as a whole or specific target groups of patients, with existing possibilities of eliminating or alleviating these issues, as well as implementing new medical and preventive procedures<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Lusińska, *Kampanie społeczne w służbie publicznej. Komunikowanie rządowe w Polsce w latach 1994-2015 z wykorzystaniem informacyjnych kampanii społecznych*, Warszawa 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/login.php?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FMZGOVPL%2Fphotos%2F2731689023567184%252012.03.2020> (dostęp:13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>5</sup> Tamże.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/MZGOVPL> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

## COVID-19 situation in Poland

The pandemic respiratory infectious disease<sup>7</sup> known as COVID-19 was caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. The first case of the disease was detected on 17 November 2019, in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province of central China. Until January 2020, the infections appeared mainly in the city of Wuhan, but by mid-January the virus spread across all of China. In late February, further outbreaks occurred in South Korea, Italy and Iran<sup>8</sup>. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic<sup>9</sup>. On 13 March 2020, WHO reported that Europe was the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, and new infections were reported on all continents – the last one being Antarctica in December 2020.

On 4 March 2020, the first case of SARS-CoV-2 virus infection was confirmed in Poland. From 14 March to 20 March, a state of epidemic emergency was in force in Poland<sup>10</sup>, and on 15 March a sanitary cordon was set up on the Polish borders, significantly limiting cross-border traffic. As of 20 March, a state of epidemic was introduced by the regulation of the Minister of Health. Within a year, the virus led to a significant death toll around the world. By 4 March 2021, there were 1,750,659 cases of infection recorded in Poland, with 44,649 deaths and 1,448,619 patients making recovery<sup>11</sup>.

With the launch of more laboratories in Poland testing samples for COVID-19 infection, the Chief Sanitary Inspector recommended the cancellation of all mass events with more than 1000 people organised indoors. At the same time, the Polish authorities started adding on further measures concerning socio-economic life to limit the spread during this international crisis.

After banning mass events primary and secondary schools and universities began to shut down. Borders were closed, and border traffic controls were reinstated. Travel, and thus free movement of the population, was restricted, with two-week quarantines imposed on people arriving in Poland.

The majority of service outlets and retail establishments were closed, as only pharmacies, post offices, grocery stores, drug stores and take-out restaurants were

<sup>7</sup> M. Tibayrenc (ed.), *Genetic and evolution of infectious diseases*, Elsevier Inc. eBook, 2017. P. M. Martin, E. Martin-Grel, *2500-year evolution of the term epidemic*. *Emerg Infect Dis.*, 2006, 12 (6), pp. 976–980.

<sup>8</sup> B. Chappell, *Coronavirus: COVID-19 Is Now Officially A Pandemic*, WHO Says, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> WHO, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>10</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Health, *Regulation of the Minister of Health of 13 March 2020 on the declaration of the state of epidemic emergency on the territory of the Republic of Poland*, [in:] Dz. U. [Journal of Laws] of 2020, item 433, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20200000433> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>11</sup> *Ministry of Health, Pierwszy przypadek koronawirusa w Polsce*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/pierwszy-przypadek-koronawirusa-w-polsce> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

allowed to operate. These decisions and the lack of reliable information caused a public panic, which could be seen in unusual consumer behavior, such as mass purchases of necessities and withdrawals from bank accounts. Negative public sentiment has also translated into a number of incidents of xenophobia and racism against the Chinese and other East and South East Asian people.

The pandemic brought about social and economic disruption, including the worst global recession since the Great Depression. Due to the lack of comprehensive information concerning the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected nearly all countries around the world and disrupted lives on an unprecedented scale, conspiracy theories and misinformation about the virus began to circulate online and in other media<sup>12</sup>. Some speculated that the pandemic was caused by the 5G technology, which was slated to be enabled soon, that the coronavirus was a biological weapon engineered to take over the world by medical and bureaucratic means, that it was used against the masses by powerful elites – the media and authorities – to spread panic and to militarize the everyday life, as well as that it was a “Trojan horse” used to break democratic processes and take control over societies. Some theories even stipulated that there was no virus and no crisis<sup>13</sup>.

In the face of false information spreading among the public, the Polish government – in an attempt to warn the society about those who tried to use the crisis situation for illicit purposes – tried to react on the spot by publishing statements and communiqués, as well as by organizing expert talks and conferences with doctors and virologists<sup>14</sup>. However, by doing so they failed to reduce the scale of media coverage containing unconfirmed and unfounded information about the coronavirus. In response to that, the government decided to use the minimally intrusive and socially acceptable tool in the form of public information campaigns.

### **The political communication on COVID-19 in Poland based on social campaigns run by the Ministry of Health**

In an attempt to provide the most comprehensive information concerning the virus itself, its spread, social behavior in public spaces, increased hygiene and the rules for infected persons, as well as people at an increased risk of infection, the Polish government has launched a long-term, multi-stage public information campaign.

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<sup>12</sup> Radio Szczecin, *Dezinformacja w sieci w czasach pandemii koronawirusa*, <https://radioszczecin.pl/6,403445,dezinformacja-w-sieci-w-czasach-pandemii-koronaw> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>13</sup> K. Grzelak, *Tych rad nie słuchaj. Obalamy fake newsy o koronawirusie*, <https://www.focus.pl/artykul/tych-rad-nie-sluchaj-obalamy-fake-newsy-o-koronawirusie> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>14</sup> *Ministry of Digital Affairs, Koronawirus – oszuści do blokady*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/cyfryzacja/koronawirus--oszusci-do-blokady> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

### *Phase 1*

During Phase 1 of the campaign, on 27 February 2020 during a press conference with representatives of the Ministry of Health and the Council of Ministers on the epidemiological situation<sup>15</sup>, the first nationwide informational advertising video entitled “What do you need to know about coronavirus?” was aired for the first time<sup>16</sup>. Officially, the campaign launched on 28 February 2020. By 22 March, the Ministry managed to reach nearly 22.8 million users, or 81% of the population<sup>17</sup>.

The ad contained information about the coronavirus, presenting its symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, muscle aches, fatigue), spread modes (coughing, sneezing, talking), ways to prevent the infection (frequent hand washing and disinfection, covering the mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, keeping a social distance of at least 1 meter) and actions to take in the case of a suspected infection (calling a sanitary-epidemiological station or reporting to the observation and infectious diseases unit of a local hospital).

The “What do you need to know about coronavirus?” ad was initially published only in digital channels (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) and on the radio. Only after the television was included in the media mix on 14 March 2020, the day after the Prime Minister announced restrictions on the operations of schools, stores and institutions, the reach of the campaign grew larger. The TV ad significantly boosted the reach of information activities, allowing the government to reach many real users<sup>18</sup>.

In the third week of the campaign, a significant increase in user activity was noted at [www.gov.pl](http://www.gov.pl), which includes the page dedicated to the coronavirus – [www.gov.pl/koronawirus](http://www.gov.pl/koronawirus). This website was also advertised during the campaign as a source of up-to-date information on the coronavirus, which generated a record 35.2 million page views on the government website<sup>19</sup>.

Other activities of the government also included recommendation for the general public to cover their mouths and noses by wearing masks in public places – not a mask mandate at the time. These information and educational activities were complemented by posters and leaflets dedicated to various social groups and public utility institutions. Some of them illustrated ministerial recommendations on coronavirus prevention for schools, kindergartens and educational institutions. According to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and Science, they were to be

<sup>15</sup> *Polityka Zdrowotna*, Ł. Szumowski: *pojawienie się wirusa może być kwestią kilku dni*, <https://www.politykazdrowotna.com/54241,rzad-co-musisz-wiedziec-o-koronawirusie> (dostęp: 13.005.2022 r.).

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Health, *Koronawirus – co musisz wiedzieć?*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/co-musisz-wiedziec-o-koronawirusie> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>17</sup> Gemius Poland, *Kampania Ministerstwa Zdrowia przyciąga na strony rządowe*, <https://www.gemius.pl/wszystkie-artykuly-aktualnosci/kampania-ministerstwa-zdrowia-przyciaga-na-strony-rzadowe.html> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>18</sup> Tamże.

<sup>19</sup> Tamże.

posted in institutions in visible spots and distributed to students and parents<sup>20</sup>. The other five types of posters appearing on both ministry and social media sites further clarified the information contained in the ad. These included: “Coronavirus - information for seniors”<sup>21</sup>, “Recommendations for managers of public places”<sup>22</sup>, “Recommendations for employers in relation to coronavirus”<sup>23</sup>, “Information for people who suspect they may be infected with coronavirus”<sup>24</sup>, and “Coronavirus quarantine rules”<sup>25</sup>. The mandatory quarantine introduced at the time was intended to isolate people, who were in contact with the virus to minimize the risk of more people being infected, with the aim of preventing a potential outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus<sup>26</sup>.

On 13 March 2020, an information video “What do you need to know about coronavirus?” in sign language was also posted by the Ministry of Health, published by the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities (PFRON). The video was created in response to claims by the d/Deaf community, represented by the Polish Association of the Deaf, that they felt largely excluded from the fast flow of information, calling for changes that would enable them to have the same access to knowledge as the rest of society. A much longer video – more than 4 minutes long – answered the most important questions about the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and offered clear advice on protecting oneself from infection, as well as things to do in the case of infection.

On 13 March 2020, as the coronavirus video in sign language was made public, a government conference was held to inform citizens about the introduction of an epidemiological emergency in Poland. In connection with the emerging situation, the country’s borders were closed to foreigners from 15 March. The government also announced that all the people returning to Poland have to undergo a

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<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Education and Science, *Materiały informacyjne dla szkół, przedszkoli i placówek oświatowych dotyczące profilaktyki zdrowotnej*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja-i-nauka/materiały-informacyjne-dla-szkół-przedszkoli-i-placówek-oswiatowych-dotyczące-profilaktyki-zdrowotnej> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Family and Social Policy, *#Koronawirus: ważne dla seniorów*, <https://senior.gov.pl/aktualnosci/pokaz/468> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/login.php?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FMZGOVPL%2Fphotos%2F2731689023567184%252012.03.2020> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>23</sup> Gov.PL, *Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Do pobrania*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/dopobrania?fbclid=IwAR0cgEdvfJYNDfwNQhMvUFHTpUOoPwTxd8u9UT2QqNxDV7fyVB2qUoCc> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>24</sup> Tamże.

<sup>25</sup> Tamże.

<sup>26</sup> money.pl, *Koronawirus. Zasady kwarantanny, wszystko co powinieneś wiedzieć*, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/koronawirus-zasady-kwarantanny-wszystko-co-powinienes-wiedziec-6484902787442305a.html> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

mandatory two-week quarantine<sup>27</sup>. These activities marked the second phase of an informative advertising campaign concerning the coronavirus, which started with an ad entitled: “What should you know about quarantine?” made public on the official website of the Ministry of Health and its YouTube channel on 18 March 2020<sup>28</sup>.

On 20 March 2020, a state of epidemic was introduced in Poland until further notice, giving state authorities new powers. Accordingly, the first national quarantine was also declared<sup>29</sup>. The concept of quarantine has accompanied Polish society on a daily basis since the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic, defined as the isolation of a healthy person because of the possibility of being exposed to infection with the particularly dangerous SARS-CoV-2 virus, for example as a result of contact with an infected person. According to the adopted rules, the quarantine lasted for a minimum of 10 days; However, in some cases, this period was prolonged, for example in the case of people quarantined due to a person they lived with coming down with coronavirus<sup>30</sup>.

Advertising materials in key colors – white, red and blue – were designed to spread awareness of quarantine to the general public to the greatest possible extent, informing about key information, as well as allowed and banned activities during isolation. Particular emphasis was placed on recommendations, bans and orders to stay home, follow the rules of hygiene and avoid contact with healthy people.

## *Phase 2*

The second phase of the advertising campaign also featured online banners (“What should you know about quarantine?”, “What not to do during quarantine?” and “What to do during quarantine?”<sup>31</sup>, as well as about ten posters, which complemented the video – similar to Phase 1. These included, among others: “Mandatory 14-day quarantine – what does it mean?”, “Quarantined”, “Hospitalized”, “Under epidemiological surveillance” and “Sanitary inspection”<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Gov.PL, *Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Zamykamy granice przed koronawirusem*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/zamykamy-granice-przed-koronawirusem> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Health, *Koronawirus – co musisz wiedzieć?*; <https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/co-musisz-wiedziec-o-koronawirusie> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>29</sup> Gov.PL, *Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Wprowadzamy stan epidemii w Polsce*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/wprowadzamy-stan-epidemii-w-polsce> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>30</sup> W. Matela-Marszałek, *Kwarantanna – definicja, zasady*, <https://www.infor.pl/prawo/prawa-konsumenta/prawa-pacjenta/3625697,Kwarantanna-definicja-zasady.html> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/MZGOVPL/photos/2755810734488346> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/MZGOVPL/photos/2749256805143739> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).



Large-scale education of the Polish public about the national quarantine turned into a massive campaign entitled “#stayathome” presented in the form of online posts on Facebook and Twitter, as well as banners and posters on government websites<sup>33</sup>. It was initiated by a new regulation of the Minister of Health announced during a joint conference with the Prime Minister banning the movement of people within the territory of the Republic of Poland in the period from 25 March to 11 April 2020, aimed at slowing down the spread of the coronavirus in Poland and thus gaining time to better prepare health services to fight the pandemic. The existing restrictions and prohibitions related to public life were also upheld<sup>34</sup>.

Coronavirus poses a threat not only to physical, but also mental health. According to psychiatrists, people who have survived COVID-19 are more likely to develop various mental disorders. The SARS-CoV-2 virus affects the central nervous system, which can exacerbate subsequent disorders<sup>35</sup>.

The prolonged national isolation combined with the imposition of further restrictions by the Polish government proved difficult for most Poles and began to take its toll on their psychological well-being. As social distancing measures were upheld in the country, calling for remote work and education, the citizens were faced with a new reality characterized by isolation, uncertainty and many unknowns, as something like this was never implemented on such a large scale before. Adapting to a chronic sense of danger and anxiety, having to reorganize life rather rapidly, as well as introducing changes, forced adaptation to new conditions – something that usually takes 2 to 3 weeks. As a result, the needs of being close to another person, as well as touch resulting from people being social beings, had to be reduced to a minimum, resulting in disrupted psychosocial behaviors<sup>36</sup>.

As part of the Polish state's response to the deteriorating well-being of Poles, from 27 March to 30 March 2020, social media dedicated to the Ministry of Health and the government featured information<sup>37</sup>, as well as posters and banners, including: “Excessive information about coronavirus can make you feel worse”, “Physical activity improves well-being and boosts your immune system”, “Isolation does not mean loneliness”, “Planning your day will make it easier for you to stay in shape in isolation or quarantine”, “Avoid coping with stress with alcohol and other

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<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account,

<https://www.facebook.com/MZGOVPL/photos/2749256805143739> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>34</sup> A. Banasik, *Jest rozporządzenie wprowadzające ograniczenia w przemieszczaniu się osób*, <https://samorząd.pap.pl/kategoria/aktualnosci/jest-rozporzadzenie-wprowadzajace-ograniczenia-w-przemieszczaniu-sie-osob> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>35</sup> WHO, *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*, <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331808/WHO-2019-nCoV-MentalHealth-2020.1-pol.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>36</sup> Wprost, *Zdrowie i medycyna. Zdrowie psychiczne w czasie pandemii COVID-19 – jak o nie dbać?*, <https://zdrowie.wprost.pl/koronawirus/fakty-o-koronawirusie/10307606/zdrowie-psychiczne-w-czasiepandemii-covid-19-jak-o-nie-dbac.html> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>37</sup> Gov.PL, *Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Ochrona zdrowia psychicznego*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/ochrona-zdrowia-psychicznego> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

substances”, “If you feel stressed or anxious...”, “How to support your child during an epidemic?”, “Take care of your mental health during quarantine”, promoting behaviors related to coping with the stress of the pandemic. Then, from 31 March to 9 April 2020 on the YouTube channel of the Academy of the National Health Fund, ten free podcasts on anxiety and fear, isolation and loss of control, the need for support and intrusive thoughts were published as part of the government's psychological support campaign, entitled: "Fear - what to do to do not take over you?", "Isolate staying in touch with others", "Control - how to lose it?", "Conflicts in the family - how to not allow them?", "Lowering the mood - make a new plan", "Fear of loss of work - how to deal with him?", "Relaxation techniques - how to regenerate?", "Social responsibility - thought about others", "A team of post-traumatic stress - how to take care of your future?", "Movement is health, but remember about security". Their aim was to support people dealing with anxiety and emotional problems resulting from social and health crisis during the epidemic<sup>38</sup>.

On 31 March 2020, further restrictions were imposed, including a reduction in the number of customers in stores, which were still allowed to operate, restrictions on the movement of minors, closing hairdressing salons, beauty salons and tattoo parlors, closing hotels, parks, beaches, promenades and boulevards, leading to the so-called hard lockdown in Poland. New fines of 5,000 - 30,000 PLN were imposed for violating these bans<sup>39</sup>.

The introduction of numerous government restrictions, bans and orders in connection with preventing the spread, published with the “#stayathome” hashtag started stirring controversy among some citizens. The idea was quickly adopted by the society and spontaneously turned into a nationwide social media campaign urging the citizens to give up all outings and meetings with loved ones and friends for some time. Internet users, as well as famous artists, athletes and journalists encouraged compliance with the recommendations of sanitary services by showing how they spend their free time at home<sup>40</sup>.

The government saw the worsening public sentiment, which resulted in launching the “Behavioral prevention in combating viral diseases. Father and son” campaign on 3 April 2020 in TVP, Polsat, Trwam and Republika TV stations, commissioned by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Health

<sup>38</sup> Akademia NFZ, *Wsparcie psychologiczne w czasie epidemii*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHIPgNNpFcU&list=PLZ2X-9LnwIVGKMYST9rzCs5KqLiPy1q17> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>39</sup> Gov.PL, *Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Kolejne kroki w walce z koronawirusem – w sklepie mniej osób, ograniczenia w poruszaniu nieletnich, a parki, plaże i bulwary zamknięte*, [https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/kolejne kroki?fbclid=IwAR0vJFwJuKhiSAXk6Y7Xy\\_ctak8qP685U46z-m94ttM8UCsLMA1PeYvbSHw](https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/kolejne kroki?fbclid=IwAR0vJFwJuKhiSAXk6Y7Xy_ctak8qP685U46z-m94ttM8UCsLMA1PeYvbSHw) (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>40</sup> J. Kostkowski, *Artyści i sportowcy apelują: #zostańdomu. Ta akcja „nie ma nas przestraszyć”*, <https://fakty.tvn24.pl/ogladaj-online,60/koronawirus-trwa-akcja-zostan-w-domu,1008966.html> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

and the National Sanitary Inspectorate, aimed at promoting proper habits and behaviors during the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak. The advertising spot was meant to be a universal guide to closeness, showing how to live in a single household during isolation spanning multiple days. The key message it was meant to spread was that no matter who you are and what you do, the health recommendations apply to everyone<sup>41</sup>. The video was available in three variants – with a runtime of 60, 45 and 30 seconds. A 45-second version was intended for television broadcast and the rest for online publication<sup>42</sup>. The video, directed by Marek Dawid, was created and produced by the advertising agency Fabryka Komunikacji Społecznej and Propeller Film. The campaign was also tagged with hashtags: #stayathome #helptheelderly #staytogether #family.

16 April 2020 saw another regulation of the Minister of Health, concerning a mask mandate. Every person out and about in public was required to wear a mask, scarf or shawl covering both the mouth and nose. The mandate applied to every person in the public spaces – on the streets, in offices, shops, service outlets and workplaces<sup>43</sup>. As part of the campaign, the Ministry of Health posted seven leaflets on its website and in social media, including Facebook. These included information on the recommended mask types, places where the mandate is in force, cleaning the mask and making a mask out of a T-shirt, a bandana or even a coffee filter<sup>44</sup>.

In the period following Easter, on 20 April 2020, the Polish government made the first decision concerning removing some of the restrictions, divided into several stages to keep the citizens as safe as possible. Stage 1 saw increased limits for people in stores and places of religious worship. The ban on travelling for “leisure purposes” and the restrictions concerning staying in public spaces were also lifted<sup>45</sup>. During Stage 2, which was launched on 4 May 2020, shopping malls, libraries, museums, art galleries, hotels and medical rehabilitation facilities were reopened under a sanitary regime. 18 May 2020 saw other restrictions lifted, with hair and beauty salons reopened, while restaurants, bars and cafés were allowed to reopen, but only if they were in line with the sanitary guidelines in force. The final stage – Stage 4 – started on 30 May 2020, with restrictions on retail, catering, and

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<sup>41</sup> *Kampanie Społeczne.pl, Bądźmy razem – ruszyła kampania Kancelarii Premiera i Ministerstwa Zdrowia o bliskości w czasie koronawirusa*, <https://kampaniespoleczne.pl/badzmy-razem-ruszyla-kampania-kancelarii-premiera-i-ministerstwa-zdrowia-o-bliskosci-w-czasie-koronawirusa/> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>42</sup> *Fabryka Komunikacji Społecznej, Ojciec i syn*, [www.fks.com.pl/artukul.php?id\\_artukul=575&selectedTags%5B%5D=1](http://www.fks.com.pl/artukul.php?id_artukul=575&selectedTags%5B%5D=1) (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>43</sup> *Gov.PL, Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Obowiązek zasłaniania ust i nosa już wkrótce, a zasady bezpieczeństwa na dłużej*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/zasady-na-dluzej> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>44</sup> *Gov.PL, Chief Sanitary Inspectorate. Jak prawidłowo nałożyć i zdjąć maseczkę*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/gis/jak-prawidlowo-nalozyc-i-zdjac-maseczke> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>45</sup> *Government Security Centre, Otwarte parki i lasy, więcej osób w sklepach*, <https://rcb.gov.pl/otwarte-parki-i-lasy-wiecej-osob-w-sklepach/> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

wedding industries being lifted. Cinemas, theatres, operas, swimming pools, fitness clubs, amusement and play parks, saunas and solariums have resumed operations. The mask mandates, however, remained in force<sup>46</sup>. During the process of lifting the lockdown, the Ministry of Health used previous promotional materials published in the media on sanitary safety in public spaces – washing and disinfecting hands, covering mouths and noses and maintaining a social distance.

Throughout the summer, the country returned to a semblance of normalcy, although on 8 August 2020, in accordance with the new regulation issued by the Council of Ministers, regional restrictions have been introduced in selected districts, which were color-coded – districts marked with red had the greatest restrictions, yellow districts had milder restrictions, and the remaining districts, marked with green color, had no restrictions)<sup>47</sup>.

### ***Phase 3***

On 26 August 2020 Adam Niedzielski was appointed the new Minister of Health, marking the launch of the third phase of the ministerial advertising campaign, the course of which coincided with the second coronavirus outbreak in Poland. At that time, the decision was made that children are to return to in-person education; however, due to the dynamic spread, just a couple of weeks later, the government introduced further safety rules to counter the epidemic. As of 24 October 2020, the restrictions previously applicable to red districts became nationwide, and new safety principles were introduced, concerning all areas – education, economy and social life. In addition to that, the Polish government has launched a program aimed at coordinating support for the elderly, active at the central and local government levels – the program was called the Solidarity Senior Support Corps<sup>48</sup>.

The start of autumn, coupled with the second lockdown imposed in Poland, which resulted in isolation, has exacerbated symptoms of mental health problems in both children and adults. In connection with these issues, the Ministry of Health has issued two posters “Take care of children's well-being during the epidemic” and “Take care of physical and mental health during the epidemic”, which were

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<sup>46</sup> Business Information Website, *Cztery etapy odmrażania gospodarki*, <https://www.biznes.gov.pl/pl/firma/sprawy-urzedowe/chce-przestrzegac-przepisow-szczegolnych/cztery-etapy-odmrazania-gospodarki/cztery-etapy-odmrazania-gospodarki> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>47</sup> Gov.PL, *Dodatkowe obostrzenia w powiatach z największym przyrostem zakażeń*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/dodatkowe-obostrzenia-w-powiatach-z-najwiekszym-przyrostem-zakazen> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>48</sup> Gov.PL, *Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Cała Polska w czerwonej strefie, kolejne zasady bezpieczeństwa oraz Solidarnościowy Korpus Wsparcia Seniorów*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/cala-polska-w-czerwonej-strefie-kolejne-zasady-bezpieczenstwa-oraz-solidarnosciowy-korpus-wsparcia-seniorow> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

posted in social media<sup>49</sup>. In addition to the posters, the Ministry also advertised where to find help with mental health during the pandemic<sup>50</sup>.

On 6 November 2020, the Ministry of Health launched a campaign aimed at young people, encouraging them to wear masks and adopt healthy attitudes, including a commercial (15 and 30 seconds long) entitled: “Wear a mask - common sense is free”/“Which mask do you choose?” The clip shows a group of young people, wearing masks on their chins or not wearing them at all, hanging out with friends and ignoring social distancing rules. When one of the characters is ends up in a hospitals and doctors put an oxygen mask on his face, we can hear the voiceover asking the question: “Which mask do you prefer?” The video was broadcast in the media (on TV, YouTube channel, Facebook and Twitter) until 31 December 2020, and the total amount paid for broadcasting the campaign on TVP, Polsat and TVN24 was 2 million PLN<sup>51</sup>.

#### *Phase 4*

The development and distribution of an effective and safe vaccine against COVID-19 was considered a sustainable solution to the global pandemic, which led it to become the main focus of the European Commission's response to the coronavirus. On 17 June 2020, the European Commission presented a European strategy on vaccination. On 21 December 2020, it granted conditional marketing authorization for the first vaccine developed by BioNTech and Pfizer. The positive results of the analysis by the European Medicines Agency have been endorsed by the EU member states, which launched their vaccination campaigns<sup>52</sup>. The launch of the National Vaccination Program – which was the largest logistical operation concerning public health in Poland – coincided with the third coronavirus outbreak. With the first deliveries of vaccines, the Polish government launched the fourth phase of its information campaign on 22 December 2020 – citizens were encouraged to vaccinate, even though vaccines were limited to people most exposed to coronavirus and then senior citizens.

The “#LetsVaccinate” awareness campaign was meant to raise awareness, inform and dispel any doubts about the vaccine. Published and broadcast in various

<sup>49</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account,

<https://www.facebook.com/MZGOVPL/photos/3311678942234853> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>50</sup> Gov.PL, *Koronawirus: informacje i zalecenia. Gdzie znajdziesz pomoc w przypadku pogorszenia stanu psychicznego*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/gdzie-znajdziesz-pomoc-w-przypadku-pogorszenia-stanu-psychicznego> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>51</sup> [polsatnews.pl](https://www.polsatnews.pl), *Nowy spot ministerstwa zdrowia. „Którą maseczkę wolisz?”*, <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-11-07/ktora-maseczke-wolisz-nowy-spot-ministerstwa-zdrowia/?fbclid=IwAR2wHKaDfi6plHqotGBcDNwFg7cbjXWSNc7TUc-kGrKipr3EluzDYMvZp0> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>52</sup> European Commission, *Coronavirus vaccine strategy*, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/public-health/coronavirus-vaccines-strategy\\_pl](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/public-health/coronavirus-vaccines-strategy_pl) (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

mass media (TV, radio, Internet and on the streets of cities across the country), it encouraged people to get vaccinated and made them aware of the benefits.

In addition to television and radio ads, which were also published online, as well as campaigns in social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), an outdoor campaign was also carried out, with hundreds of billboards, LED screens, as well as banners, posters and murals<sup>53</sup>. The Chancellery of the Prime Minister, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, launched the *gov.pl/SzczepimySie* website, which contained comprehensive and verified information on the vaccine, including expert opinions. Citizens were also provided with a 24-hour toll-free hotline at 989<sup>54</sup>. Polish artists and athletes became the campaign's ambassadors. In order to encourage the elderly to get vaccinated, a 98-year-old veteran, a former Home Army soldier with codename "Eagle" was also involved in the drive.

The first of the ads promoting vaccination was aimed at the group, which was at the greatest risk of being infected – medical professionals. Its headline was: "Are you a healthcare professional? Get vaccinated!" The video included information on how and where to go to sign up to get the vaccine. Subsequent videos, which were published in late December 2020 and early January 2021, encouraged mass vaccination (including, "Who are you going to get vaccinated for?" and "Vaccination is not only your business!" of particular groups at highest risk, including seniors and teachers, who were divided into a number of age categories<sup>55</sup>.

The final analyzed ad "#DDM Coronavirus. Protect yourself and your loved ones so you don't lose what's most precious"/"#MaskYourself" aired from 1 March to 11 April 2021, as part of a public awareness campaign on the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and fighting COVID-19. The clip was broadcast by major Polish TV stations (TVP, TVN and Polsat) as well as by the National Health Fund channel on YouTube and the Ministry of Health's Facebook page. It seems to be a compilation of information included in all previous videos and other posts by the Ministry of Health, reminding the general public in an emotional way that in order to protect ourselves and our loved ones, we should continue to observe the basic rules of sanitation – social distance, hand disinfection and wearing masks that cover the mouth and nose<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> T. Dereszyński, *Koronawirus w Polsce: Plk. Witalis Skorupka ps. Orzeł - pojawiły się murale z jedną z twarzy akcji Szczepimy Sie przeciw COVID-19*, <https://polskatimes.pl/koronawirus-w-polsce-plk-witalis-skorupka-ps-orzel-pojawily-sie-murale-z-jedna-z-twarzy-akcji-szczepimy-sie-przeciw-covid19-spot/ar/c1-15407952> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>54</sup> Dereszyński T., *Koronawirus w Polsce. Znany aktor i komik Cezary Pazura będzie twarzą rządowej kampanii „Szczepimy się”. Kiedy zobaczymy spoty?*, <https://polskatimes.pl/koronawirus-w-polsce-znany-aktor-i-komik-cezary-pazura-bedzie-twarza-rzadowej-kampanii-szczepimy-sie-kiedy-zobaczymy-spoty/ar/c1-15369380> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>55</sup> Tamże.

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Health Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/MZGOVPL> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

Up until 4 March 2021, after one year of the pandemic in Poland, which saw three outbreaks – in winter-spring 2019/2020, in autumn-winter 2020/2021 and in winter-spring 2020/2021 – the Ministry of Health together with the Polish government implemented an informative public campaign on the spread of COVID-19 and fighting the virus in four phases, carried out in parallel to the pandemic as it unveiled.

### **Discourse of Polish society in social media as a reaction to communication on COVID-19 by the Ministry of Health**

The ongoing pandemic and the government's response, including communication and information through public campaigns, stirred up public expectations, which resulted in numerous comments from the general public. It was particularly prevalent in social media, which is related to their unquestionable popularity not only in the world, but also in Poland.

The latest figures show that social networking sites are now actively used by 3.80 billion users, or 49% of the world's population. In Poland, internet users account for 30.63 million people or 81% of the total population; however, there are only 19 million active social media users – almost half of the total Polish population<sup>57</sup>.

These data also illustrate user behavior. In Poland as many as 99% of 16–64-year-olds use social media or instant messaging, with 85% of users actively using social media. The most popular website is YouTube, which does not require the user to have an account with the website to watch the videos, while offering the opportunity to freely comment on the content while staying anonymous. The second most popular platform in Poland is Facebook. A typical Facebook user in Poland during a month likes at least 1 page and 11 posts, leaving about 3 comments on average. In terms of usage, Twitter is the least popular, which only 1.25 million social media users<sup>58</sup>. It is also the platform of choice for the Polish government and its agencies for social communication, which was particularly noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All information published by the Ministry of Health on the virus and stopping the spread through staying at home, isolation, taking care of mental health, wearing masks, and getting vaccinated first appeared on the official Twitter accounts, followed by Facebook, and YouTube accounts. Every information was met with different reactions of social media users on a large scale.

Due to the sheer scale, the study of the comments left by the recipients of the ministerial campaign was limited only to the analysis of comments under the ads – 6,565 in total. The vast majority of the comments were left under the ads posted on

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<sup>57</sup> M. Kuchta-Nykiel, *Social media w Polsce i na świecie – najnowsze dane*, <https://socialpress.pl/2020/02/social-media-w-polsce-i-na-swiecie-najnowsze-dane> (dostęp: 13.05.2022 r.).

<sup>58</sup> Tamże.

Facebook, with 5,881 comments left with approximately 2,968,000 impressions, comprising text, emoticons, images (including videos, parodies, gifs, giphy posts, photos and memes), as well as links to other content. The comments on Twitter were similar. Here, the number of comments recorded was 684 despite some 2,269,600 impressions. It is worth noting that in addition to the main threads of the discussion, there were extremely extensive side threads on other topics. In the case of the official channel of the Ministry of Health on YouTube, where the total amount of views amounted to 9,624,238, comments were blocked, and the viewers could only like and dislike the videos in question – YouTube users left 2,457 likes under the videos, with 2,023 dislikes.

The first video “What do you need to know about coronavirus?” was viewed by social media users a total of 3,487,474 times, with 577,000 views on Facebook, 769,600 on Twitter and 2,140,874 on the YouTube channel. The ad had 813 total comments, with 586 on Facebook and 227 on Twitter. A total of 3,772 likes or other reactions were left on Facebook and Twitter, with 1,100 likes and 200 other reactions recorded on Facebook, as well as 2,472 on Twitter, including 1,645 likes and 827 other reactions. There were a total of 1,580 likes/dislikes left on the YouTube channel, with 1,300 likes and 280 dislikes.

The second video “What do you need to know about quarantine?” was viewed by social media users a total of 9,991,243 times, with 1,100,000 views on Facebook, 1,500,000 on Twitter and 7,391,243 on the YouTube channel. The ad had 1,135 total comments, with 797 on Facebook and 338 on Twitter. A total of 2,239 likes or other reactions were left on Facebook and Twitter, with 1,050 likes and 50 other reactions recorded on Facebook, as well as 1,139 on Twitter, including 837 likes and 302 other reactions. There were a total of 273 likes/dislikes left on the YouTube channel, with 230 likes and 43 dislikes.

The subsequent ad “Wear a mask - common sense is free”/“Which mask do you choose?” was viewed by social media users a total of 1,034,121 times, with 942,000 views on Facebook and 92,121 views on YouTube. There is no data for Twitter, due to the fact that the users were redirected to YouTube. The ad had 2,819 total comments, with about 2,700 on Facebook and 119 on Twitter. A total of 5,685 likes or other reactions were left on Facebook and Twitter, with 1,900 likes and 3,400 other reactions recorded on Facebook (including 2,900 “Haha” reactions), as well as 385 on Twitter, including 307 likes and 78 other reactions. There were a total of 2,627 likes/dislikes left on the YouTube channel, with 927 likes and 1,700 dislikes.

The final analyzed ad – “#DDM Coronavirus. Protect yourself and your loved ones so you don't lose what's most precious”/“#MaskYourself” Protect yourself and your loved ones so you don't lose what's most precious”/“#MaskYourself” was viewed by social media users a total of 369,000 times, with 369,000 views on Facebook. There are no data for other platforms, due to users being redirected to the Academy of the National Health Fund YouTube channel. There were 1,800 comments on Facebook, with about 1,500 likes and other reactions, including 372 likes



and 1,128 other reactions (including about 949 “Haha” reactions). There were a total of 273 likes/dislikes left on the YouTube channel, with 230 likes and 43 dislikes.

Among the comments left under all four analyzed spots by social media users selected for the analysis, seven characteristic categories could be distinguished. In the table number 1 below, they are categorized according to the stages of respondents' emotional response to the Ministry of Health's public communication.

**Table 1. Social media comment categories**

No.	Category name	Category content/characteristics
1.	Need for detailed information concerning the pandemic	comments with questions about the symptoms of coronavirus, the rules of quarantine, mask types, using masks, vaccine safety – for example: <i>Which muscles hurt when it comes to muscle pain? Back, arms, legs? I would like the symptoms to be described in more detail.</i>
2.	Doubts concerning the content, manner and forms of information on coronavirus	comments undermining public trust in the quality of public information published by the Ministry of Health concerning the pandemic, usually in the form of accusations, questions and allusions; casting doubt on the existence of coronavirus (including conspiracy theories) – for example: <i>Only people who can't think independently have COVID in their brains, this is also the case for mainstream television – there is no logic in ANYTHING concerning this famous COVID. The Ministry of Health has taken the lives of thousands of patients who have just passed away and are passing away every day, because they can't get help from their doctors!</i>
3.	Suggestions/advice/solutions	comments on how to deal with coronavirus. The information contained in these comments concerned regulations, treatment options, coping with the stress of the pandemic and forced social isolation. There are also references to strategies implemented by other countries fighting COVID-19 – for example: <i>Good morning, the French Ministry of Health has announced not to use Ibuprofen during the outbreak.</i>
4.	Anger/frustration/fear expressed with vulgar words	comments addressed both to the authorities, as well as other participants of the debate, making positive and negative statements about the content of spots and the solutions suggested in them

		<p>– for example:  <i>F*ck off with this pandemic thing... The Minister of Health is crazy, is there any normal person who would order treatments and surgeries to be postponed for people who really need them?! It's sick, and so is this whole government... People have been so fooled it's hard to believe!</i></p>
5.	Supporting the Ministry of Health's response to the pandemic	<p>comments containing both words of appreciation and gratitude addressed to the Ministry of Health for the COVID-19 response, support for the information and recommendations contained in the ads, as well as declarations of compliance with the guidelines – for example:  <i>Minister, as an ordinary citizen, thank you very much for your work and dedication in the face of the danger posed by the Coronavirus. I hope that all the people working to save Poles will stay protected by the Polish Saints, may they guard you.</i></p>
6.	Denunciations	<p>comments describing non-compliance with bans and restrictions presented in the ads – for example:  <i>Instead of complaining that not enough tests are being done and other things, perhaps start with criticizing yourselves! Instead of sitting at home you want to renovate, shops are overcrowded and there are lots of people walking around in clusters! We are making ourselves a bed that we are going to have to sleep in, but before you realize that instead of running for the next toilet paper roll you were supposed to stay at home, it may be too late.</i></p>
7.	Humour concerning the ads	<p>comments containing a humorous or ironic take on the coronavirus, including the information contained in the ads, often in the form of memes – for example:  <i>I am an environmentalist, I don't use soap in plastic containers. Can you please tell me how on Earth am I supposed to use a bar of soap with my elbows?</i></p>

Source: own compilation

## Conclusion

The process of communication through social campaigns is a form of governance, in particular in the area of holding power over knowledge. It manifests itself in the broadcaster's control over the public by influencing it in a number of ways, including through effective control of information to simultaneously attract social attention, direct it through selected rapid messages and persuasion, driving opinions, beliefs and attitudes, shaping awareness, influencing behavioral change and evaluating the effects of social change<sup>59</sup>.

The power over knowledge resulting from the communications in social campaigns also results from the direction of information flow – from the authorities in this case, the Ministry of Health) to the receivers – citizens. Their broadcasting (via the media) usually takes place vertically, in a top-down approach, although in a democratic system – for example in Poland – as many as three directions of the flow of information can be used, depending on situation: from the authorities to citizens, from the citizens to the authorities, and international communications<sup>60</sup>.

These social control activities presented above serve to filter out and eliminate undesirable and socially harmful opinions and behaviors; and in the case of the topic at hand, social control should be understood as the supervision of society in terms of the knowledge disseminated and its impact – including social change, which enforces behaviors believed by the government to be socially acceptable, consistent with the laws of the given state<sup>61</sup>. However, the studies carried out to date showed the lack of full control over the behavior of citizens, who expressed their opinions through social media, which allowed them freedom of expression concerning the information communicated by the Ministry of Health in Poland.

This begs the question about the nature of the discourse within the Polish society, which took the form of reactions towards political communication on COVID-19 using social campaigns by the Ministry of Health, which escaped from the clutches of the government, as well as its degree and purpose. By simplifying the issue, one may assume that it was about responding to the decisions about the content communicated to the recipients by the authorities by means of social campaigns to foster understanding and decisions in line with the intentions of the authorities, as well as in accordance with the rules of a given society, making them socially proper<sup>62</sup>.

Throughout the first year of the pandemic in Poland – from 4 March 2020 to 4 March 2021, a total of six government ads were aired as part of the ongoing public awareness campaign on COVID-19, five of which were published by the Ministry of Health; however, only four were posted on the Ministry's official social media pages and therefore only these were analyzed in detail.

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<sup>59</sup> A. Lusińska, *Kampanie społeczne...*, Warszawa 2019.

<sup>60</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Komunikowanie polityczne i publiczne*, Warszawa 2007.

<sup>61</sup> D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego*, Warszawa 2008.

<sup>62</sup> A. Lusińska, *Kampanie społeczne...*, Warszawa 2019.

A total of 6,567 comments were posted under all of the analyzed advertising videos, which were divided into seven categories outlined in the paper. The most reactions were posted under the video entitled “Wear a mask - common sense is free”/“Which mask do you choose?” – exactly 2,819 of them. Second place went to “#DDM Coronavirus. Protect yourself and your loved ones so you don't lose what's most precious”/“#MaskYourself” with more than 1,800 comments. “What should you know about quarantine?” had 1,135 comments, and the first video – “What do you need to know about coronavirus?” had only 813 comments.

The “Wear a mask - common sense is free”/“Which mask do you choose?” video had the largest number of comments, and the metaphors included in a video struck a chord with young people, the primary users of social media. Some of them interpreted it as an accusation, claimed that it suggested that they were the main culprits in spreading the virus due to them ignoring the mask mandates, a behavior considered a threat to seniors in particular. The “What do you need to know about coronavirus?” video had the least number of comments, mostly questions. The main reason for that is that it was published by the Ministry at the beginning of the pandemic, when there was a lack of detailed information on the spread of the coronavirus, and the society was mostly concerned.

In the debate that emerged in the comments posted under the videos, one can notice the changes in type and intensity of emotions of their participants. Initial uncertainty resulting from the lack of knowledge manifested itself in comments in the form of fear or ignoring the issue at hand. Out of their need to know more, users mainly posted comments in the form of questions to the Ministry. Among them were also others, who gave advice based on information they had obtained from other sources or provided links to international data on coronavirus. The prolonged lockdown, significantly limiting the freedom of citizens, caused irritation and fatigue in the society, also visible in the comments under the subsequent videos. Social media users expressed a growing distrust towards the subsequent decisions and recommendations communicated by the government, rebelling against the introduction of further restrictions without visible impact on the spread. The backlash, which could be seen in the comments, has also intensified due to the inconsistency of the authorities, and thus the participants in the comments started perceiving the ministerial communication as an attempt to manipulate the life of Polish society. The Ministry and the government were thus accused of late and chaotic communication, as well as presenting contradictory data. The emotional comments were often laced with vulgar words, as well as hate towards the authorities – authors of videos – as well as other people commenting.

Political communication through social campaigns seems significant, but it does not always have the intended effect. The public is learning about a problem they knew little or nothing about. thus, becoming informed to an extent. This means that the members of the public can talk about the topic at hand, express their opinions, compare them with others and draw conclusions, which are not always expected by the organizer of the campaign – this has led to blocking comments on

the Ministry's videos on COVID-19 posted on its official YouTube channel. Other social media gave the users unlimited access to free debate and international sources of information. After the public became accustomed to the pandemic, comments on the information contained in subsequent ministerial even before they were made public on the official website of the Ministry of Health. Delayed and unreliable information was brutally verified by web users.

The discourse in Polish society, which can be analyzed on the basis of comments published in selected social media, concerning the information presented in advertising videos about the COVID-19 pandemic was drumming up action, thus resulting in the anxiety of the publisher due to the disruption of the default information regime; this leads us to the topic of the potential to generate change. It should be seen as a stimulus for change, and in particular for the careful preparation of public information campaigns.

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## Summary

Public service campaigns and communications disseminated by the government is aimed at highlighting proper and pro-social behaviors, while trying to discourage socially destructive ones. As a result of their dissemination, an informed social collective is transformed into a collective that is aware, active and willing to act on an individual and collective level within the framework of social discourse. Taking up the research problem presented in this paper was caused by the highly visible – in particular in social media – debate undertaken by the Polish society, which concerned the political communications offered by the Polish Ministry of Health as part of its public service announcements published in connection with the global COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The aim of the paper is not only to showcase the possibilities afforded by using social campaigns in the field of political communications, but above all to illustrate the discourse of the Polish society in social media as an impulsive and emotional response to the government's inability to communicate using such campaigns. Particular attention was paid to the government's mistakes noted and highlighted by the public in numerous comments, which slipped through cracks in government's control.



## **Streszczenie**

Rządowe komunikowanie kampaniami wskazuje adresatom ścieżkę zachowań prospołecznych, starając się jednocześnie zniechęcić ich do zachowań społecznie destrukcyjnych. Dzięki nim poinformowana zbiorowość społeczna przeobraża się w zbiorowość świadomą, aktywną i chętną do zarówno indywidualnego, jak i zbiorowego działania w formie społecznego dyskursu. Podjęcie problemu badawczego artykułu spowodowane zostało widocznie zarysowaną, zwłaszcza w mediach społecznościowych, wysoką reaktywnością dyskusyjną polskiego społeczeństwa na komunikowanie polityczne Ministerstwa Zdrowia w Polsce za pośrednictwem informacyjnych kampanii społecznych w związku z sytuacją ogólnoświatowej pandemii COVID-19 wywołanej wirusem SARS-CoV-2. Celem artykułu uczyniono nie tylko ukazanie możliwości wykorzystywania kampanii społecznych w obszarze komunikowania politycznego, ale przede wszystkim zobrazowanie dyskursu polskiego społeczeństwa w mediach społecznościowych jako impulsywnej i emocjonalnej odpowiedzi na rządową nieumiejętność komunikowania kampaniami. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na błędy rządzących zauważone i podkreślone przez społeczeństwo w licznych komentarzach, wyłamujący się spod kontroli władzy.

**Key words:** social campaigns, political communications, social discourse, COVID-19, pandemic

**Słowa kluczowe:** kampanie społeczne, komunikacja polityczna, dyskurs społeczny, COVID-19, pandemia