

The Image of Germany in Social Media: Political and Social Aspects of Public Service Media in Poland



Agnieszka Węglińska

ORCID: 0000-0002-2573-5981

UNIVERSITY OF LOWER SILESIA, POLAND

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ABSTRACT: The goal of this paper is to analyze the image of Germany and Germans in social media platforms of Polish Television (Telewizja Polska — TVP). Through a web content analysis the study aims at presenting main societal and political aspects in the daily functioning of public service media. The outcome is therefore presented in a broad social and historical context, including relations between Germany and Poland. The main factors shaping bilateral relations such as stereotypes, trans-border cooperation and the presence of the German minority in Poland are presented. The empirical part of the paper comprises content and discourse analysis of TVP's social media related to the image of Germans and Germany over a period of three months in 2018.

KEYWORDS: TVP, Germany, social media, an image, content analysis, discourse analysis.



INTRODUCTION

Creating an image of a foreign person is always complicated, particularly when a neighbouring nation is being considered. Poland and Germany have a common history of wars, cooperation, alliances, diplomacy, and economic collaboration. Polish-German history has been determined by contentious bilateral issues as well as problems that stem from the Partitions and German aggression in 1939. It is worth mentioning that most of the time Polish-German relationships were characterised by profitable coexistence and economic cooperation. Moreover, the Polish-German border was the safest in the region between the 16th and 18th centuries (Matelski, 2017). The Partition of Poland by Prussia, Austria, and Russia at the end of the 18th century and the loss of independence indicates a turning point in the Polish-German relationship. It seems that the last two centuries cast a shadow over Polish-German relations (Matelski & Sakson, 2013). The situation has improved since 1989, when Poland returned to a democratic system.

Relations between Poland and Germany are complex. Germany is a powerful state, while Poland is an aspiring country with the aim of improving its relative standard of living and increasing its economic potential in the region. These complex relations were reinforced during the period of The Polish People’s Republic, through Polish waves of economic migration in the 1970s and 1980s. The disparity between Poland’s economic crisis and German prosperity was indisputable and provoked bitter reflection towards the real result of the Second World War (Wóycicki & Czachór, 2009). Therefore, strong stereotypes, such as alien or an enemy — aggressor (Dąbrowski, 2009) have widely developed. The colonizer stereotype can be explained by the centre — periphery approach (Díez-Nicolás, 2009). From this perspective, Germany is perceived as a centre — dominant player in Europe contrary to Poland — a periphery country. In the context of the centre — periphery theory, the main role in upholding negative stereotypes can be the paternalistic attitude on the German side and inferiority complex on the Polish side (Wóycicki & Czachór, 2009).

A new chapter in Polish-German relationships began in 1989 with the Solidarity movement’s victory in Poland and the collapse of the communist system. Germany supported Poland’s efforts to obtain NATO and EU membership during that time and economic and cultural cooperation between the two neighbours grew. In post-war relationships between Poland and Germany the following periods can be identified: (1) the decline of a Cold War ideology; (2) a period of improving bilateral relations; (3) collaboration in the European Union; (4) stable relationships between Poland and Germany despite complications; (5) a deterioration in Polish-German relations since 2015.

The political and economic issues affect public opinion. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the opinion of Poles on relations with Germany.

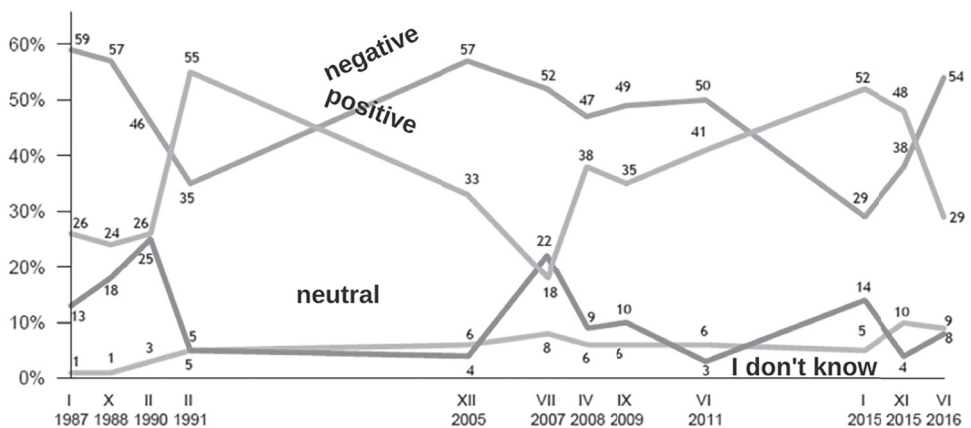


Figure 1. Poles’ opinions of Germany, findings from public opinion research

Source: CBOS (2016).

The significant increase in negative opinions about Polish-German relations was noticed in 2005. The main reason was the agreement between Gerhard Schröder, Chancellor of Germany and Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, regarding the construction of Nord Stream — a North European Gas Pipeline (CBOS, 2016). The second reason was the anti-German rhetoric by the Law and Justice Government (2005–2007) which returned to power in 2015. The second Law and Justice Government raised the rhetoric of Second World War reparations. The discussion concerns reparations made after the war by the vanquished to the victors. However, communist Poland resigned from war reparations from Germany in 1953. The research of Centre of Public Opinion Analysis (TNS Poland, 2014) evidenced that reconciliation between the two nations is regarded impossible for 40% of Poles. However, the possibility of mutual forgiveness noted by 53% of Poles is an optimistic fact (TNS Poland, 2014).

In the contexts of post-war rhetoric and centre-periphery theory, the image of Germany has often been negative. On the other hand, in the trans-border regions, such as Opole and Silesia, Germany is seen a partner (Olechowska, 2015). Data about stereotypical image of Germans and Germany identify both positive and negative attitudes. In the foreground, the list of positive features includes being organized, disciplined, and punctual. The list of negative stereotypes includes features like arrogance or pride (CBOS, 2015).

THE IMAGE OF GERMANY IN THE POLISH MEDIA

Media play an important role in shaping stereotypes and prejudices in Polish-German relations. Various reports from different public opinion centres indicate that Poles receive their information about other cultures and nations from television. Research by Piontek (2011) provides an overview of journalism and media in contemporary Poland. In 2009 and 2010 Piontek compared the content of two news programmes: “Wiadomości” TVP (public service media) and “Fakty” TVN (private broadcasting). The research concluded that the level of tabloidization in both private and public service media can be defined as high (Piontek, 2011). In addition to this, there have been significant studies of journalists’ roles in society (Hess & Szymańska, 2014) and journalistic activities *via* social media (Łokić, 2014). Researchers have also evidenced the tabloid nature of social media (RISJ, 2016). The tendency of media tabloidization is manifested in trends to present contrasting content, negativism, pictogram messages, dominance of soft news, and so on (Sparks, 2000).

On the other hand, public media in Poland have recently evolved towards state media, with close ties between journalism and politics. The communist past has been seen as one of the reasons why journalists at TVP respond to political pressure. In fact, both decision-makers and public service media authorities lack a basic understanding of the public interest, public service, the remit of the public broadcaster and the public objectives (Węglińska, 2018). Due to the high level of polit-

ical parallelism, public service media in Poland reflect the goals of the ruling government. Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the Law and Justice party, has made several contributions on Germany and German citizens. In his opinion, Germans are rich, strong, and they cooperate with Russia. According to populist ruling party rhetoric, Poles should not trust Germans, even though they are Polish allies.

In the last couple of years, transformation of Polish-German rhetoric was followed by the increasing dependency of TVP on the government (Wąsicka-Soroczyńska, 2019). TVP has also recently developed its online services, and extended its activities via social media (Węglińska, 2018). In 2018 in the context of the 100th anniversary of Polish Independence, the discussion concerning the German role in creating a Polish national identity was back on the agenda. Additionally, the topic of Nord Stream 2 has returned to political public debate, however in a new dimension.

Media studies in Poland have already identified the image of Germans and Germany from a printed press content perspective (Ociepka et al., 2009). Researchers looked at the tabloid “Fakt” (Röger, 2009), the daily newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza” or weekly magazines, such as “Polityka” (Nowicka, 2010). However, there is a lack of research regarding audio-visual media and their content published online.

TVP AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Methodology and hypotheses

Research on the image of Germany on social media of TVP was conducted by web content analysis with two research techniques: content analysis and the coding frame. This study draws on the code book and an analytic tool for social media monitoring developed by Brand24 (brand24.pl).

The following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Polish Television (TVP) upholds in social media negative stereotypes of Germany.

H2: The negative image of Germany is related to the policy of the ruling Law and Justice party.

H3: The image of Germany can be related to the region of a particular local TVP station.

The following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: Are the negative stereotypes of Germany being maintained on TVP social media?

RQ2: Which elements of the image of Germans and Germany are dominant in TVP social media?

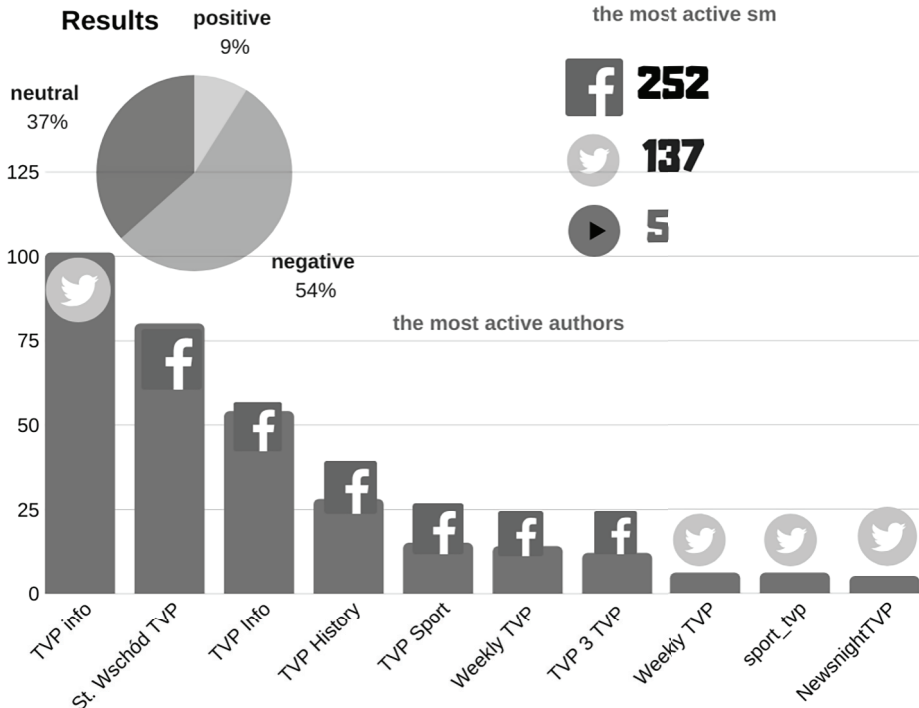


Figure 2. Results from quantitative research

Source: Author, Brand24.

historical, and social context of news. Moreover, context interpretation is always marked by subjectivity (Van Dijk, 2006; 2009; Trimitiotis, 2017). Overall, 54% of mentions were classified as negative, while only 9% had positive connections. In addition to this, 37% of mentions were classified as neutral (Figure 2).

Qualitative research

In the course of qualitative analysis six categories of mentions were distinguished (Figure 3):

1) the aggressor — The Second World War, German invader, Nazi, the enemy, SS soldier, the admirer of Hitler, a murder, the peak;

2) the colonizer — the alliance with Russia, does not observe the law itself, but at the same time accuses Poland — a hypocrite, despises Poland, a country one cannot trust, the ‘old invader’, a country interested in cooperation with Russia against Poland (Nord Stream) the intensity of mentions appearing in this category increased during the Helsinki summit and meeting of Merkel and Putin;

3) a rich country — an important player in the world of politics and economics, a leading country in the EU, an economic partner for Poland, a big investor in

Poland, an employer, the main European player in the world, Angela Merkel — ‘the Queen of Europe’; the peak days for this category was during the NATO Summit.

4) a neighbouring country — a neighbouring country mentioned with regard to cooperation, organization of events, students’ and employees’ exchanges; the intensity of mentions in this category was rather divided;

5) the German minority — ‘the next-door neighbours’ in the regions of Opole and Silesia, friendships, regional politicians, the intensity of mentions in this category was rather divided with a peak on August 22 — the announcement of German minority candidates to regional/municipality councils.

6) A country of refugees — mentions that comprised topics such as immigrant problems in Germany, aggressive Muslims in Germany, acts of terrorism in Germany. The distribution of mentions in this category was rather divided, the peak day was July 2, 2018, which marked the resignation of Horst Seehofer.

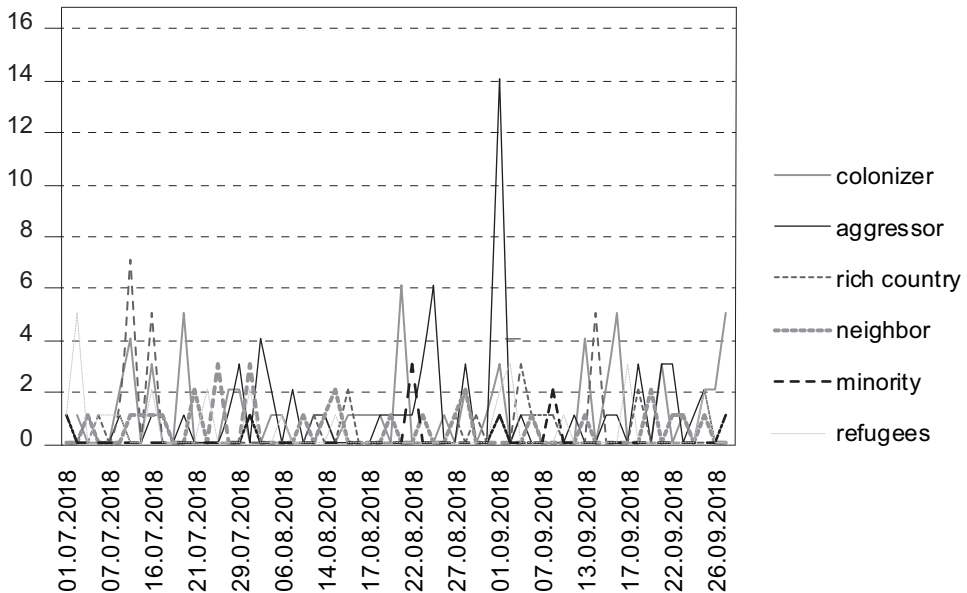


Figure 3. The intensity of mentions in six key categories

Source: Author, Brand24.

Figure 4 further illustrates the distribution of positive, negative, and neutral mentions in three categories related to the main stereotypes. The category of the neighbouring country had the largest number of positive and neutral mentions. The most influential authors in this category were TVP info on Twitter and Facebook, TVP Sport on Facebook, as well as regional TVP stations from transborder regions — TVP Gorzów Wielkopolski, TVP Szczecin, TVP Opole on Facebook. One of the examples of mentions from this category is presented below:

25 years have passed. The Spree-Neisse-Bober Euroregion celebrates its jubilee. Polish and German communities cooperating with each other in the field of environmental protection, education, and tourism (TVP Szczecin).

The mentions concerning cooperation with the neighbouring country contain joint sporting events or educational initiatives. What is more, Polish-German cross-border business cooperation, social phenomena, or cultural events in Germany were also mentioned in this category. The other category where the distribution of positive, negative, and neutral mentions was almost equal was the connotation of the 'rich player'. In this category, TVP info and TVP Sport were the most active and influential authors on TVP's social media. This category included mentions about German international activities, such as diplomatic visits of Angela Merkel, but also comments and analyses after the 2018 European Athletics Championships in Berlin. In this category, Germany was seen as a country which Poland is supposed to follow. Germany should be considered an ally of Poland. Furthermore, Germany is a positive role model, as illustrated below:

Poland is in the top 25 most-developed economies in the world. We are in the same group as the USA, Japan and Germany (TVP info).

However, during the time of the NATO summit in Brussels, the topic of Germany appeared mostly in negative meanings (see Figure 4). Polish public media journalists accused Germany of avoiding an increase to 4% of their spending to the NATO budget. The largest number of negative mentions was attributed to a code 'colonizer'. This data evidenced an image of Germany as an aggressive country, which 'has been colonizing Poland' in political and economic terms. This kind of image has its roots in times dating back to Poland's partitions. The category of the colonizer is related to the official rhetoric of the ruling Law and Justice party. The characteristic feature for Law and Justice leaders' narrative is that of a general anti-German attitude. According to the party's programme, the ambition of Poland shall be to create a counterbalance to Germany in Europe. Law and Justice has been trying to give the impression of an equal and strong partner for Germany in Europe (Batory Foundation Report, 2017). However, the crucial element of this strategy has been to constantly recall the German colonizer past:

The new German order of the world — the Minister of International Affairs — Heiko Maas' diplomacy outlined the new European Union. A united and sovereign union. A union without nation states — a German Union. Heiko Maas met minister Jacek Czaputowicz several days ago (Studio Wschód TVP).

The construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which will connect Russia and Germany, was one of the topics discussed by Andrzej Duda and Donald Trump in the White House. President Donald Trump strongly opposes construction of Nord Stream 2 (TVP Info).

As illustrated above, some mentions can be interpreted as a German attempt to restore a traditional alliance with Russia against Poland. In addition to this, in some mentions references to the Yalta Treaty were used in the context of the Helsinki Summit. The most active author in this category was TVP’s Info news programme Studio Wschód (Studio East) on Facebook, with a significant role of Twitter in the case of TVP Info.

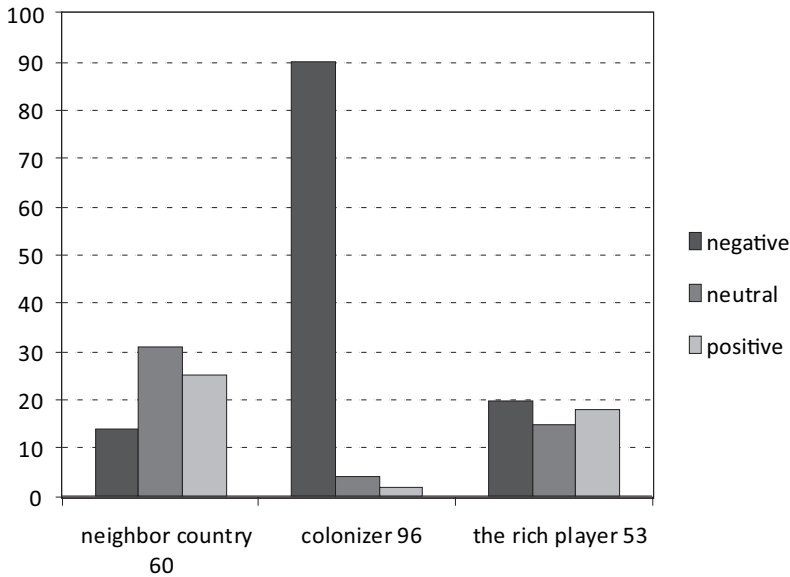


Figure 4. Findings from qualitative research (1)

Source: Author, Brand24.

The category of aggression was indicated as stronger than colonizer. The foreground of this frame was the Second World War and the German invasion of Poland. In this category the historical context was the most important and was further associated with the image of aggressor, Nazi and murder. Figure 5 indicates the number of mentions on TVP’s social media. One of the most active authors in this frame was TVP History — a thematic channel on history. Moreover, this category was represented by mostly negative mentions which mostly reflected Polish fears of Germans and upholds negative stereotypes of the Nazi period. Similarly to this, TVP’s social media on September 1st were full of cruel stories from the war:

The Golgotha of Polish villages — we are talking about Michnikowo, Świętokrzyskie, where 75 years ago, Germans murdered the residents because they fought for a free Poland and helped Polish soldiers. It was there — for the first time — that a new public holiday was established — the Day of the Fight and Martyrdom of the Polish Village (Panorama TVP/ Facebook).

The category of ‘country of refugees’ appeared mostly as negative mentions. From May 2015 there has been an increase in the percentage of Poles who oppose accepting refugees from the areas affected by armed conflict. However, the majority of the Polish population (54%) supported the provision of assistance to people from war regions, though usually only until the end of the conflict in the country of origin of refugees (46%) (CBOS, 2016). TVP made many mentions which blamed Angela Merkel for the refugee crisis. The peak day for this category was July 2nd, 2018 with a story about the government crisis in Germany. Its goal was to mark the responsibility of Angela Merkel for the situation and forecast consequences in the future — the breakdown of the coalition between the CDU/CSU:

The government crisis in Germany. This is the biggest political crisis in Germany in recent years. Chancellor Angela Merkel loses not only support, but also credibility. Bavarian CSU sets the condition: tightening migration policy or the breakdown of the government, but the German Chancellor does not intend to admit to her mistakes (TVP Info).

TVP social media presented Germany as a country which gives support to Muslim immigrants seen as extremists, terrorists, and rapists etc.

The German police is looking for 126,000 illegal immigrant criminals. The German police is looking for hundreds of thousands of people — the Federal Criminal Office indicates a large number of migrants avoiding deportation (TVP Info).

The most influential and active social sites in this category were the social media of TVP Info. Social networks mostly upheld the negative image of Germany as a country with a refugee crisis. The problem of migration was simplified, tabloidised and therefore maintained several stereotypes.

The category of the German minority in Poland was measured with a case study of a regional television station, TVP Opole. In this case only 10 mentions which comprised information about the German minority were included in the final dataset. The most active and most influential TVP channel was TV Opole on Facebook. The peak day for this category was on August 22nd, 2018 when the German minority introduced their candidates to regional/municipal governments. Mentions in this category were mostly neutral or positive:

The German minority today officially announced the start of the election to regional government. At the press conference their activists presented the electoral slogan and the leading candidates in 4 out of 5 districts elections to the regional council (TVP Opole).

The negative mentions in this category concerned the speech of Jarosław Kaczyński, who warned of cooperation of the German minority with Germany against Poland.

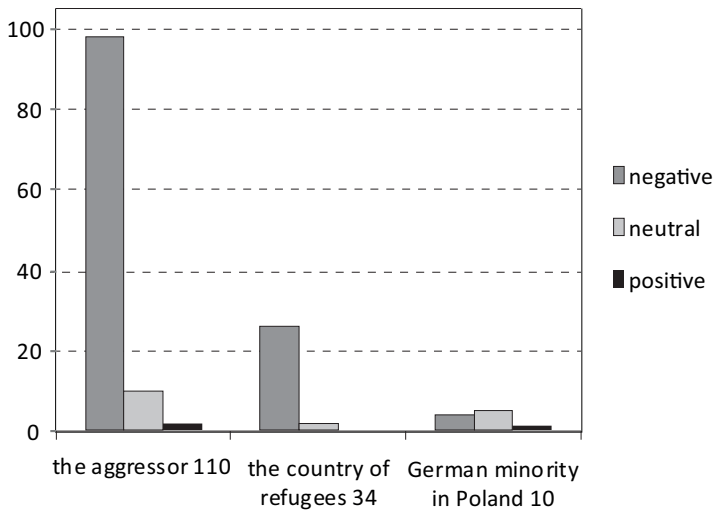


Figure 5. Findings from qualitative research (2)

Source: Author, Brand24.

CONCLUSIONS

The research has shown that the dominant stereotypes of Germany, such as aggressor, colonizer, a neighbouring and rich country are maintained in TVP social media. In the majority of cases public service media in Poland uphold the negative image of Germans and Germany. The majority of the analyzed mentions were negative (H1). Furthermore, the content provided in TVP’s social media was related to the governing party policy (H2). The image of Germans and Germany as the historical enemy was often used by Law and Justice leaders. The members of Law and Justice often recalled the example of Germany to explain anti-immigrant statements. In addition, September 1st activities on social media have proven that the historical background is still a key factor in shaping the image of Germany in TVP. The dominant stereotypes of Germans and Germany — as an aggressor and colonizer built on the position of Germany in the past and in contemporary Europe.

Germany was presented on social media in the context of The Second World War, Nord Stream cooperation, European economy, and collaboration with the EU. The most expansive and negative categories of TVP’s social media were that of aggressor and colonizer. The context of the aggressor comprised several components, including the Nazi attack in 1939, the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact, the Holocaust, and Adolf Hitler’s propaganda. The context of the colonizer was built mostly in the context of economics (RQ2). Positive and neutral stereotypes of Germans and Germany occurred most often in the context of the German football team, German minorities (Opole and Silesia), neighbour, employer, EU partner and a role model

for Poland (RQ1). The negative image of Germany was used by the ruling Law and Justice party to justify its political ideology and activities. Law and Justice's official rhetoric is built on anti-German elements. Government control over TVP contributes to public service media being a tool for propaganda and politics (R3). TVP used social media to reach young audiences (RQ4). Additionally, the tendency of social media to create contrasting and unequivocal messages fostered the negative image of Germany.

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