

## Chapter 4

# Poland

### *Independent vs servile relationships*

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#### Abstract

The Polish political and media systems changed dramatically after the 2015 parliamentary elections. The Law and Justice Party gained power and started to restructure the conditions for political communication – journalists, press secretaries and politicians. However, despite structural and organisational changes within public service media, journalists keep working and reporting about political events. This chapter presents the relationships between Polish journalists and their political sources – both politicians and press secretaries. The interviews show a mutual dependency between politics and the press, where both sides recognise the need for formal as well as informal relationships. The nature of the relationship varies with the political climate: when the political situation becomes complicated, politicians become less accessible and press secretaries block the information flow. As a result, journalists in Poland prefer direct contact with politicians and/or other complementary sources of information. The respondents further emphasised the need for a professional relationship and adhering to professional norms.

Keywords: Poland, media-executive relationships, information access, professional roles, political communication

#### Introduction

After the semi-democratic election in 1989, Poland began to develop relationships between political executives and free independent media that were more similar to those in other democratic countries. Nonetheless, Poland has fallen behind in many international rankings, such as the World Press Freedom Index and the Democracy Index, since the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015. The changes are closely related to the communication policies of the political executive in Poland, the main topic of this study. Providing a point of departure for the chapter, Table 4.1 summarises the political system and the media system in Poland.

**Table 4.1** The political and media systems in Poland

Characteristics	Poland
Political system	Parliamentary system of III Republic (the Constitution 1992)
Electoral system	Proportional representation (multimember constituencies)
Party system	Multi-party (eight parties in Parliament since 2015)
Turnout:	
National parliamentary elections	Low average 1989-2015 46.6 per cent
Presidential election	Low average 1990-2015 57.7 per cent
Government (since 2015)	One-party government (Law and Justice)
Media system	Dual public-private broadcasting system, private newspaper business
Audience share of public service TV, May 2017	Lower position (16 per cent) than the main two commercial competitors (21 and 31 per cent)
Audience share of public service broadcast TV news, May 2017	Lower position (TVP1, TVP2 – 19 and 7 per cent) than the main commercial competitor (TVN – 22.4 per cent)
Newspaper reading, May 2017	Very low – in the case of the print version of five main daily newspapers, which is read by 4.4 per cent of the population; and low – in the case of the online version, which is read by 21.44 per cent

## The Polish political and media landscape

### *Media context*

In Poland, a pluralistic media system began to develop in the 1990s. Private and independent print media emerged and the main state media channels were transformed into public broadcasting services. After a decade that saw the rise and fall of commercial enterprises, the media system stabilised and still today maintains the same structure.

Television is the main source of information for Poles, above all for the older generation, which is also the most active group of voters. TV coverage of politics hence plays a leading role in political communication. The print press, i.e. newspapers (print and online versions) and weekly magazines' websites dedicated to politics, are also important. We will therefore concentrate our analysis of leader-media relationships on these two media platforms.

The main public channels, TVP1 and TVP2, attracted 16.7 per cent of viewers in May 2017.<sup>1</sup> The commercial and relatively low-quality channel POLSAT TV attracted 11.4 per cent of the viewers, and the other commercial channel, TVN, attracted about 10 per cent. More than 60 per cent of Poles prefer other channels. The Polish news channels are well-developed media companies and have a loyal audience. All of them

had more viewers in 2017 than in the previous year. TVN 24, owned by the commercial American group Scripps Networks Interactive, is the most popular one. TVN 24 also had the highest change in viewership between 2016 and 2017 (4.66% of viewers in May 2017, 20% more than in May 2016). The public channel TVP Info came second (3.38% of viewers in May 2017), and the commercial channel POLSAT News TV came third (1.18% in May 2017) (*TVP 1 i TVP2 straciły w maju najwięcej widzów, 2017*) (*Teleexpress i "Wiadomości" straciły najwięcej widzów, 2017*).

In Poland, press readership is low, especially among the younger generation. Data from May 2017 show that only 4.4 per cent of Poles aged 15 to 75 read one of the four main newspapers: the tabloid *Fakt* (8.4%), *Gazeta Wyborcza* (6.7%), the tabloid *Super Express* (3.9%) and *Rzeczpospolita* (1.8%) (*Duży spadek czytelnictwa, 2017*). To a large extent, the internet and social media have replaced the print press. However, online versions of newspapers still manage to attract readers: about 6 million users visited [www.wyborcza.pl](http://www.wyborcza.pl) for an average of 12.23 minutes in March 2017, which constituted 21.44 per cent of the research population (*Serwisy gazet, 2017*).

Having described the characteristics of the Polish media landscape, the next section turns to the political context.

## Political context

The conservative Law and Justice Party won the parliamentary election in 2015, and gained a majority (51%) in the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament. In addition to the one-party government, the parliament hosts seven opposition parties and four unaffiliated members. Table 4.2 provides an overview of the parliamentary situation following the 2015 elections.

**Table 4.2** Structure of the Polish parliament after the parliamentary election in 2015

Political position	Party	No. of seats	Percentage of seats
RULING PARTY	Law and Justice	234	51
	Civil Platform	136	30
OPPOSITION	Kukiz`15	33	7
	.Modern	27	6
	Agriculture Party (PSL)	16	3
		14	3
	Other:		
	Union of European Democrats	4	
	Free and Solidary	3	
REPUBLICANS		3	
	No member of party	4	
TOTAL		460	100

In a rather short period of time, the politics of Law and Justice provoked strong protest and negative reactions from the opposition, leading to increasing politicisation and political antagonism in the media. The content of the two main public service channels, TVP1 and TVP2, and one of the information channels, TVP Info, has become increasingly pro-government. Many professional journalists who have worked in the public service channels for a long time have lost or decided to leave their jobs. Many of the skilled journalists who worked for the public channels before have been engaged by private media companies, who in turn have become increasingly critical of the government and politicians belonging to the Law and Justice Party. As a result, communication between the government and the mass media is not politically neutral. The situation is best described as one of entrenched journalism, where the media takes sides in political conflicts and participates in the political process (Anaszewicz & Dobek-Ostrowska, 2013; Dobek-Ostrowska & Łódzki, 2008; López-Escobar et al., 2008: 185; Michel, 2016). In conclusion, Polish politics and media are characterised by a high level of political polarization.

Somewhat surprisingly, the criticism of the prime minister and the Law and Justice Party has not been reflected in the public opinion. In 2017, 37 per cent of respondents were positive toward the government, 33 per cent were negative, while 26 per cent of the respondents did not have an opinion (*Sondaż: PiS bierze wszystko*, 2017). The same year, 32 per cent of the respondents declared that they would support Law and Justice in the next election, while 27 per cent intended to vote for Civic Platform, 9 per cent for the Kukiz' Party, 8 per cent for Nowoczesna and 6 per cent for the Democratic Left Alliance Party (*Poparcie partii*, 2017). Having outlined the political and media landscape of present-day Poland, the chapter now goes on to describe the government communication structure by the time of the data collection.

### Mapping the government communication structure

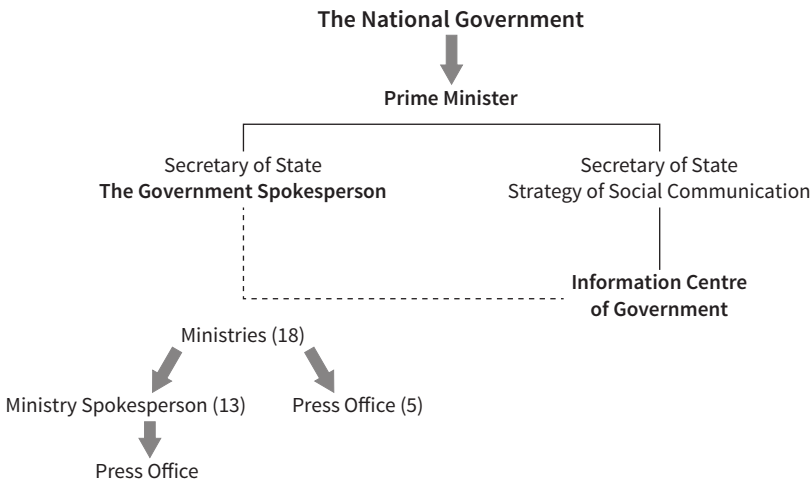
In the government of Beata Szydło, three out of a total of 22 departments in the prime minister's office (PMO)<sup>2</sup> had a key role in the government communication structure. The first one was the government information centre – responsible for providing information and press services to the prime minister (PM) and the government, and publishing the *Public Information Bulletin*. The second one, the media support department, arranged the domestic visits and meetings of the PM. The duties of both departments included building relationships with the media and influencing the public opinion. The third department with a role in government communication was the strategy and communication department, providing website communication via the website ([www.premier.gov.pl](http://www.premier.gov.pl)) and handling the social media profiles of the PM's chancellery.

## The role and position of government spokespersons

Overall, the government of Beata Szydło was composed of 18 ministries (see Figure 4.1). Thirteen had spokespersons and press secretaries, while five departments only had a press secretary. Some of the spokespersons were linked to the ruling party, while others were civil servants. As an indication of the relative size of each group, figures from 2013 establish that 61 per cent of government spokespersons were civil servants while 33 per cent had some kind of connection to the ruling political party. Over 78 per cent reported directly to their minister and 17 per cent reported to the chief of the department at the ministry (Anaszewicz, 2015: 133) (see Figure 4.1).

As for the government information office, figures from 2013 show a total of 330 people working there, with 31 of them (9%) being directly connected with the chancellery of the PM (Anaszewicz, 2015: 169). About 16 per cent of all personnel had a degree in political science, 14 per cent in law, 13 per cent in philology, 6 per cent in management and marketing, and 5 per cent in journalism, military studies or economics (Anaszewicz, 2015: 173). Figure 4.1 shows how the spokespersons fit into the overall structure of the government.

**Figure 4.1** Position of government spokespersons in the prime minister's chancellery.



Source: Authors based on Anaszewicz (2015: 133); see also Anaszewicz & Dobek-Ostrowska (2013: 162).

A point that deserves particular emphasis is that the positions of press advisor and press secretary are very distinct in the Polish context. Press advisors are active in particular when the election campaigns begin, when the help of press advisors and spin doctors is heightened. Press secretaries, on the other hand, are responsible for media-politician relations in general. Consequently, the two groups are analysed separately.

## Results

Within the project, 23 interviews were conducted with journalists, government spokespersons and politicians. The journalist respondents included eight experienced journalists from national radio, television (public and commercial) and newspapers from both left-wing and right-wing media sectors. As for political respondents, five spokespersons were interviewed, including the spokesperson for the government, as well as ten politicians, including deputies and ministers from the ruling party and the opposition.

In general, the material shows that the relations between politics and media in Poland depend on three interconnected factors: (1) the relationships between politicians, press secretaries and journalists; (2) the individual perceptions of the other actors in political communication; and (3) a recognition of the fact that different actors have different power to influence the information flow. These elements equally shape the connections between media and politics and determine the communication strategies of political and media actors. The data also show that mutual relationships between politicians, press secretaries and journalists consist primarily of formal and informal contacts and are ultimately determined by individual choice and experience.

One important issue is the fact that, very often, relationships between politicians and journalists are perceived as a form of communication where actors cooperate and maintain room for discussion. A conclusion is hence that relationships and political communication in Poland have not been institutionalised, but communication between specific actors varies a lot depending on the individuals involved; the frequency of meetings, the intimacy of contact and the information that can be obtained from the sources vary from case to case. In this regard, one of the interviewed journalists remarked:

My reflection is that you shouldn't believe in the institutionalisation of relationships between politicians and journalists. We are only human beings and a lot depends on changes we undergo ourselves. I am sure you can define some trends or tendencies, but I don't think it is appropriate to talk about any patterns or models that determine these relationships. (Polish journalist 1)

This statement emphasises how different the communication between particular actors can be, and how much depends on individual factors and choices. Secondly, the perceptions that the actors have of each other also matter. Interviewed journalists and politicians pointed out the clear distinction between trusted personalities and new names in the profession (usually young journalists or deputies). We also assume that the journalists' and the politicians' perceptions of their own position and role in the communication structure influence their actions. This, in turn, brings us to the third factor – the fact that different actors possess varying power over the information process. This is recognized by all actors, and hence shapes both individual strategies and the general dynamics of political communication.

The following sections cover various aspects of media-politics relationships. The first two sections describe the daily routines of political journalists, including the process of content production. A third paragraph covers the role of social media in political communication and the different strategies pertaining to social media use. The chapter then carefully sketches the relationship between media and politics in Poland.

### Daily routines of political journalists

The first finding is that the daily activities of the journalist respondents did not follow a schedule and differed a lot among individuals. Each of the interviewees had their own tasks and usually performed them in different ways. The journalists themselves pointed out that their daily work is very varied and that there are no set routines, as described below:

I spend most of my time in the office, but my working days are never the same. Apart from my own ideas for news stories, I also work on stories commissioned by the editor and on the issues in the schedule. That's when I cover events at the Sejm, and work according to the parliament's agenda, and I have no time to think of anything else. I just need to give an account of what's going on there – especially when there are some spectacular votes or when important bills are passed. (Polish journalist 2)

Nevertheless, we can assume that as the political agenda and the media agenda are interconnected, the activities of the different professional groups depend on the activities of each other (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2007: 165-168). All journalists are required to seek and maintain appropriate, verified and sufficient sources in order to tell a story (Reich, 2009). In the Polish case, we can distinguish five main sources from which journalists glean information: the parliament (Sejm), informants, social media, official political statements and other media companies. Starting with the parliament, the respondents agreed that this is one of the most important sources of political information in Poland. As described by one of them:

I sometimes spend my whole day in the office, but that's when I write. When I want to gather information, I go where the politicians are. I meet them at the governmental institutions, at the parliament building, or I go to the headquarters of the party I am writing about. (Polish journalist 4)

Another journalist added that:

The parliament is a mine of information. Here, both the opposition and the ruling party speak more freely and say more. (Polish journalist 2)

The parliament building is a special place for journalists as they are able to meet politicians in person there. An interesting fact in this context is that media access to the Sejm has been gradually restricted. Ludwik Dorn, marshal of the Sejm, issued

a decree in 2007 that gradually reduced the number of seats available for reporters. Accreditations to the Sejm were also limited under the following marshal, Bronisław Komorowski, as well as in 2008 when the head of the press office, Jarosław Szczepański, drastically limited the number of accreditations. As a result, the number of accredited journalists fell from 1,500 in 2007 to 900 in 2008. At the same time, journalists were restricted from accessing the Sejm lobby, as described by one journalist below:

Unfortunately, our access to politicians has been limited recently because we are no longer allowed into the lobby. It is not a big problem, but it is a disadvantage. Before that, it was easy to meet politicians who were stepping out from the sessions chamber for a while and talk to them unofficially. (Polish journalist 3)

It should be mentioned that the Law and Justice Party was strongly against these restrictions when the Civic Platform Party was in power, and tried to defend the journalists' right to report. Since 2015, however, the situation has been reversed. For example, marshal Marek Kuchciński attempted to limit the number of journalists allowed in the main parliament building to two under the pretext of a need for order.

In general, the daily routines of journalists revolve around the main task of producing content. Several interviewed journalists emphasised the need for thorough preparation and good research, not least by following other media outlets. Various information-gathering practices allow journalists to capture the wider context of an event and prevent them from being sidetracked. Following other media outlets is also a useful way to find some aspect in a reported story that can be told from another perspective. One journalist describes this process in the following way:

As far as inspiration is concerned, I would mention two things here. First of all, it is research into other media, especially newspapers. Research that is well done and well documented can result in a lot of news stories. While following an event covered in a newspaper, you can often find a lot of links there to what is going to happen to the case in the future. I always try to document it well, write it down and get back to it. (Polish journalist 6)

Many interviewed journalists described the process of content production as following a "story-breeds-story" logic, which further indicates the importance of research and staying informed. The description by the journalist below illustrates how content is produced:

In general, I draw inspiration from my own resources, my own sources. I make a "round of phone calls" or have meetings with politicians to find out what's going on in their parties and what they are going to do. Sometimes we need to "catch up with" the news we simply didn't know about. Once a week we have a meeting when everybody reports what they would like to deal with during the week. (Polish journalist 4)

The above statements highlight the importance of inspiration and ideas in publishing. This was mentioned by several respondents, for example in the quote below:



My inspiration for ideas comes mainly from the reality around us. It just generates ideas. I also conduct a lot of interviews – they are often comments on current affairs made by politicians or analysts. (Polish journalist 4)

The next section investigates a particular component of political communication frequently mentioned in the interviews – the use of social media.

### Social media in the communication process

All respondents confirmed that social media is a very important and useful tool in their daily work. The majority of the journalists primarily used social media to stay up to date, although sometimes also as a way of contacting politicians or other actors, as described here:

It is a method for communicating with politicians and listeners and political commentators, as well as a way of forming your opinions and clashing them against others. (Polish journalist 1)

The journalists also indicated that social media is a space for opinion formation and discussion. In addition, many journalists also noted that social media offers a golden opportunity to obtain information or direct feedback from relevant sources. This was confirmed by the press secretaries, who described how social media allows them to respond and react to discussions about political issues:

Of course, thanks to this platform, we have an opportunity to react to Twitter debates – so we always know what's going on. (Polish press secretary 2)

On the same topic, one interviewed journalist said that:

People who are not journalists often share very interesting stories and discuss very important issues. (Polish journalist 5)

The reporters distinguished two groups of social media users: professionals, like politicians or press secretaries, and other people who possess knowledge, experience and access to information. The second group consists of non-professionals who operate without any formal membership. The latter group disseminates stories or comments of interest to journalists as well as politicians and press secretaries (Nożewski, 2017: 117-119). Despite the many advantages, several respondents emphasised that the openness of social media sometimes results in an uncontrolled information flow. In such cases, primarily press secretaries have to, or at least try to, react and respond. However, according to our respondents, there is no communication strategy concerning the nature of such a reaction. In general, spokespersons do not have any formal guidelines or requirements concerning their tasks, but operate and make decisions based on experience. One spokesperson describes this state of affairs below:

There are, of course, certain rules that spokespersons follow. A big one is the hierarchy of decisions taken that result in a specific statement. Long-term strategic planning is hard to imagine! In the dynamic world of administration, laws, etc., we can only talk about the usual procedures and our experience in effective communication. (Polish press secretary 1)

Spokespersons are in regular contact with the spokesperson for the government, and if anything happens in one of the ministries, they contact the PMO. Then it is decided who will communicate the information and at which level.

The interviewed politicians considered social media to be a platform for communication as well as a reflection of society, as demonstrated in the quote below:

Social media is a well of information that I also use. It reflects the public mood – and shows how different political issues are discussed and understood by the public. (Polish politician 3)

Specifically, politicians paid a lot of attention to Twitter and emphasised that the short and concise messages play an important role in the communication with others:

For me, Twitter is the main source of information. To be honest, I read the news on Twitter first and then I move on to other media. I am a great fan of the 140 characters! Twitter is the main source of information for me. As far as my contacts with journalists are concerned, I sometimes use Twitter for that purpose. I prefer short and precise messages. (Polish politician 5)

The political professionals described how carefully formulated Twitter messages represented the only way to avoid the spread of inaccurate information and unwanted discussions:

I try to express my opinions and share ideas through social media. Of course, a message needs to be short, concise, witty and appeal to my receivers. (Polish politician 4)

The daily routines described above, from the general patterns of information gathering to content production and social media use, shape the relationships between journalists and politicians and their staff. The following section describes these relationships in greater depth.

### **Relationships between journalists, politicians and media staff**

Based on the interviews, we are able to identify three aspects of relationships between journalists and press secretaries in Poland: The choice of communication channels, the choice of information channels and both sides' perception of professional roles in the communication process. First of all, both professions use the same information channels. The most important ones are personal contacts and direct phone calls. Press conferences are also venues for information, but journalists do not particularly like

them because of the limited amount of time and the limited number of questions they can ask. As far as personal relationships are concerned, phone calls are considered the best way to communicate because of their immediateness. Both journalists and press secretaries also use email, but they all agree that this way of communicating is rather problematic since email inboxes are always full, making it hard to find important messages or get them through fast enough. Another finding is that reporters and press secretaries use similar information sources, namely dominant media outlets, to stay informed and be well prepared. This might be sustained by the fact that many press secretaries in Poland are former professional journalists who continue to work in a similar way in their new role. One interviewed press secretary described this part of the daily routine below:

I start my day early in the morning with a press review. I listen to the morning's interviews as well as to summaries of the previous night's interviews. From these I can glean a lot of useful information concerning the ministry. (Polish press secretary 1)

Turning to the relationships between journalists and politicians, the interviews show that both journalists and politicians perceive each other as professional. The following quote is an example of this, where the politician acknowledges the importance of the media:

Journalists and the media aren't enemies. They play a very important role and they are a very important link which connects the world of politics with the rest. (Polish politician 2)

Nonetheless, one journalist complained that most politicians do not understand the importance of having a smooth cooperation with journalists while keeping an appropriate distance. For journalists, the distance is necessary to preserve professional standards (Barczyszyn, 2016: 46).

Several reporters noted that politicians sometimes do not like what journalists write about them and take offence:

There are politicians who feel that the media is more favourable to them, while there are others who think that the media is less favourable to them. And a lot depends on it. (Polish journalist 6)

With regard to who controls or leads the communication process, the interviews identified the political side as the driving force behind journalist-politician relationships in Poland. As described by one journalist:

The governmental sources are definitely more active. The truth is that the main events are created by politicians in the government because they have more tools at their disposal. They have some ideas, bills, legislative proposals – and they simply want to boast about them and inform the public. (Polish journalist 5)

The same journalist added that:

Political sources usually initiate contact when they don't like an article in the newspaper. Then they want to tell me that something is wrong, that I must have misunderstood something or they want to ask why the information is so unfair. (Polish journalist 5)

Nonetheless, several of the interviewed politicians (both ministers and deputies) admitted to keeping their distance from journalists in order to maintain the professional relationship:

It seems that journalists see us as more detached than we really are. They think we put some distance between us, but I think we don't really deserve to be thought of in this way. But that opinion might result from the different forms of contact. Sometimes it might also be caused by the fact that the ruling party needs to create its own buffer zone. I guess we should keep our distance. (Polish politician 3)

Another dimension of the politics-media relationship is the relationships between politicians and their communication staff. Politicians and press secretaries often have a tight cooperation. One politician describes the value of press secretaries in the following way:

To be able to communicate with different social groups, you need to have a team of people who maintain this contact. In other words, they provide a medium for the flow of information between them (the feedback on what the groups expect) and me (the things that I would like to communicate). (Polish politician 1)

With regard to the role of press secretaries, the material does not reveal any centralisation tendencies in the sense of press secretaries being transferred to a central entity. Rather (as described earlier) press secretaries work for one particular minister at a specific ministry. In comparison to press advisors, press secretaries are therefore more exposed to journalists' attacks and function as a buffer for politicians in delicate political situations.

It also became evident that the press secretaries manage communication matters rather freely. One interviewed politician emphasised the importance of this separation of tasks:

Personally, I have never practised any media politics behind the backs of those responsible for that at the ministry – i.e. a spokesperson and a director of media relations. They prepare particular strategies, I accept them and we are obliged to abide by them. I can't answer for them, I don't know if it is good enough for journalists, I simply don't know. (Polish politician 3)

Despite this fact, many journalists said that they avoid contact with press secretaries and prefer contacting politicians directly. Nor did they have much contact with spokespersons, as described by one journalist below:

I think that a spokesperson is the last person a journalist turns to. I always try to contact a politician directly and only if I don't succeed do I approach a spokesperson to get an official statement. (Polish journalist 2)

Journalists also pointed out that departments and ministries vary a lot with regard to organisation and how they manage relationships with the media. Sometimes the cooperation works well, but sometimes journalists find it difficult to get in touch with the politician or minister. One journalist describes the variation in the following way:

There are politicians equipped with a very good PR and media apparatus, for example the ruling party "is equipped" with a reactive, image-creating apparatus. There are also politicians who pay no attention to such things. (Polish journalist 5)

According to the respondents, the individual variation is significant – some politicians do not pay much attention to media relations and think that social media is unnecessary. In those cases, media staff manage all communication.

Having described the general relationships between central communication actors, the next sections investigate the relationships between the political side and the media side of political communication in greater depth. More specifically, it discusses the relationship in terms of formal and informal relations.

### Formal and informal relationships

The interview data show that relationships between journalists, politicians and press secretaries take many different forms. Most prominently, all respondents clearly distinguished between formal and informal relationships. It is worth noting here that all respondents agreed that "the more I know someone, the more I can trust them". The journalists in particular emphasised that informal relations are an indispensable part of their work, as in the quote below:

To be honest, I live off such contacts! If I had relied only on the official channel, I would never have written anything and my bosses would have fired me a long time ago. (Polish journalist 5)

According to the interviews, Polish reporters use informal contacts to a large extent and both groups confirmed that the world of politics and the world of media are close to each other. However, although journalists are aware of the value of informal relationships, they also pointed out that they do not let familiarity with politicians influence their work:

Their roles are definitely separate. A journalist is there to inform as soon as he/she finds something out. (Polish journalist 7)

Overall, journalists were very aware of this distinction, emphasising that the main aim of their work is to tell people the truth. As one of the interviewed reporters said:

Of course, informal relationships are very important! However, you need to be very careful – it is a very nice and tempting path but a very dangerous one at the same time. Too much fraternisation with politicians or with their surroundings can bring ruin to journalists. (Polish journalist 1)

The same reporter added that many of his colleagues actively avoid relationships with politicians, despite the fact that such relationships might be a way to access information. One of the press secretaries reasoned in a similar way, saying that:

It is good to be aware of that [the separation]! If we don't want to cause problems for ourselves and don't want to spoil our relationships with journalists, we should be careful what we say even when we meet outside of work. (Polish press secretary 3)

Some of the interviewed press secretaries even pointed out that they always avoid close contact with journalists. According to them, this could cause misinformation or, in the worst case, conflict.

At the same time, while recognising the need for distance, both journalists and politicians were aware of the many advantages of informal contacts. Below, a press secretary describes the mutual benefits of informality in politics-media relations:

Of course, such [informal] contacts are useful for both sides. First of all, for a politician if they want to spread information but also for a journalist because they can get a scoop, exclusive material or information before others. It definitely happens very often. (Polish politician 4)

The data also indicate that the informal relationships between journalists and other actors in political communication are somewhat hidden. As one of the journalists pointed out:

I know that the general mood within the party is not what it is officially claimed to be. I value these sources the most. They can tell me what kind of person Chairman Kaczyński is – because I know people who are close to him and when I talk to them I can create an image of him in my head. Of course, I can't use all the information I get. (Polish journalist 5)

Both journalists and politicians firmly distinguish between private and public in their mutual relationships. One of the press secretaries confirm this by saying that:

I was a journalist in regional radio. I left many of my colleagues there. Now, when we are talking about something associated with the ministry, I treat these kinds of contacts formally and officially. It does not matter if it is your friend or not – private is private and public is public. You can't talk to everyone about everything – you just can't! (Polish press secretary 1)

The majority of the interviewed journalists had alternative ways of getting information, namely by getting in touch with other people involved in politics. One of the journalists describes this in the following way:

I already have contacts but also form new social relationships with people from the world of politics or those who are close to it. (Polish journalist 2)

As the journalists pointed out, not all information becomes news. As one of the journalists noted, journalists follow professional rules when deciding what to report about:

There are taboo subjects in Poland connected to people's private sphere. And, therefore, in Poland you don't talk to politicians about their divorces, marital problems. You don't talk to politicians about their sex life, religion, etc. It is all based on common sense. (Polish journalist 6)

Another journalist added that he prefers to keep his distance so that politicians do not think that they can get preferential treatment. One politician expressed the same line of thought, saying that:

Even if a politician drinks beer with a journalist, it doesn't mean that they should be lenient with each other – nobody should get preferential treatment. (Polish politician 6)

Formal or informal relationships with politicians appear to be an almost integral part of daily journalistic activity. In addition to formal contacts, journalists use informal relationships with politicians, press secretaries and political advisors to complement a story. Informal relationships hence play a significant role in the production of news. However, both sides recognise that both formal and informal relations need to comply with professional standards, and avoid private or too personal subjects and relationships.

Against this background, the next section discusses the degree of professionalisation of political communication in the Polish context.

### Professionalisation of political communication

The actors in the communication process act according to the norms of their particular professional role. Starting with the journalists, Hallin and Mancini (2004) summarise the norms inherent in journalistic professionalism as the norms of autonomy and service to the public. And, as exemplified by the quote below, the interviewed journalists adhered to those professional norms when asked to describe their daily routines:

There is one principle that you always stick to – you always ask the other side to confirm or deny the information. When you get information which might discredit somebody, or which is not favourable to somebody, you should comply with the journalistic ethics and commandments and call the person and ask them to comment. (Polish journalist 7)

Similarly, another reporter says that:

The role of a journalist is to get to as many readers as possible but also to the sources to make sure that the news story is unbiased. And it doesn't matter what the journalist-source relations are. (Polish journalist 4)

Another way to comply with the professional norm was to use many sources when covering a story, in order to represent as many perspectives as possible and report objectively (see also Nygren, 2015: 132). One journalist describes this in the following way:

A journalist who complies with the standards knows that a politician is only one of the sources. A journalist knows that he/she must broaden his/her knowledge by talking to experts, and is supposed to use his/her own experience and not to form his/her opinions only on the basis of what a politician says. (Polish journalist 5)

On the political side, professional norms concern following the established roles and routines. First of all, government communication in Poland is decentralised. Many decisions are made in accordance with the guidelines of the official party or government and in agreement with particular departments. Starting with the role of spokespersons, each ministry has a spokesperson that coordinates the media staff of the ministry, supported by the government information centre and under the coordination of the PM's spokesperson. One respondent describes the role of spokespersons below:

I participate in daily meetings with a minister and deputy ministers during which we try to set out a schedule of activities. During the meeting, we determine which questions from journalists we will answer and in what order. We must cooperate. Of course, we meet with a spokesperson for the government who presents us with their expectations but they don't impose anything on us. (Polish press secretary 4)

Each spokesperson organises their own workplace according to the principles of their departments. One spokesperson said:

There are some sets of regulatory competences, but a spokesperson tries to organise their own workplace. The tasks of a government spokesperson are divided into two categories: internal and external. Operating internally means that a spokesperson has to organise cooperation with the staff of media-related matters of particular ministries and be in touch with the government information centre. Operating externally simply means that a government spokesperson is obligated to maintain contact with journalists. (Polish press secretary 5)

In contrast, the role of a ministry press secretary entails a relatively high level of independence. Press secretaries present and communicate information (in consultation with the appropriate minister) from each ministry quite freely, and make their own decisions when it comes to communication and maintaining contacts with journalists. One of the respondents describes the role in the following way:

When I want to communicate something, I do it in accordance with the rules of the ministry. If I have some information, I just upload it onto social media. Thus I reach



the audience directly without journalistic interference. It must be said that sometimes journalists distort the proper meaning of a message. (Polish press secretary 3)

None of the journalist respondents had experienced any political pressure on, for example, editors to stop or change journalistic content, although political staff may get in touch to correct a particular story or add information. Below, two journalists discuss this theme:

There are no phone calls to the editor-in-chief from a minister who says “please restrain it” or “I demand this or that” – it doesn’t work this way. More often it is spokespersons who send us some material, data from ministries which stand in stark contrast to our material. (Polish journalist 5)

Politicians always want to present the issue from their own point of view – but journalists have their own brains. (Polish journalist 2)

Nonetheless, respondents representing the media raised some concerns about the nature of politics-press relations due to insufficient professionalism on the political side. One example was how the interviewed journalists complained about spokespersons often lacking experience:

Very often spokespersons seem to have been chosen by accident. They are not specialists in communication, but quite often they are somebody’s acquaintance, or party members, or a given politician’s acquaintance. (Polish journalist 3)

According to the journalists, this is due to the fact that ministries often employ young people as spokespersons. In addition, spokespersons sometimes play ugly, as described in this quote:

Unfortunately, spokespersons often have to lie. Sometimes they say: “No, there is no such issue”, or “There is no such document” or “It is not at this stage yet” even if they know the opposite to be true. There are also public relations specialists who work for politicians too, and who can show an issue in a different light. In this way they divert our attention from it. (Polish journalist 1)

But overall, journalists perceive politicians as professional in their communication activities, and consider the majority of political actors to be well prepared when it comes to talking about politics and related activities. They were also aware of the need for politicians to present themselves in the best light. According to journalists, politicians rely on their press secretaries to do that job, rather than using social media. One journalist found this somewhat surprising, saying that:

In my opinion, politicians generally pay too little attention to social media – they don’t seem to notice it. And if you don’t comment on an issue, your comment simply doesn’t exist in the public sphere. (Polish journalist 7)

And indeed, the staff for media-related matters are responsible for presenting the PMO and ministries' offices in the best way. It is therefore natural that the interviewed journalists often perceived press secretaries to act as "shields" for politicians.

In conclusion, given the well-defined roles of various units and functions, government communication in Poland can be categorised as professionalised. The next section discusses whether this and other aspects of the relationship have remained stable or changed over time.

### Change over time

Our data show that both individual and structural factors influence relationships among journalists, press secretaries and politicians. For example, individual characteristics of a particular actor, e.g., a press secretary, influence the nature of press relations. Structural factors, such as technological development and new ways of expressing political opinions, also matter.

For a long time, the relationship between politicians and the media in Poland was characterised by the fact that most had a joint background in Solidarity in the 1990s. Many journalists and politicians were friends or at least acquaintances from that time. For example, one of the reporters commented on how the relationship had changed over time:

I remember the time when politicians and journalists were on friendlier terms than they are now, when different political-journalistic events were a daily routine and when the two worlds were younger and less separated from each other. Today, they are not very separated either but there is definitely less "feasting" with politicians than there used to be in the early 1990s when everything was new. (Polish journalist 1)

All journalists identified a change in the relationships between politics and the media since then. Before that, journalists literally needed to chase politicians to get any information. This is no longer the case, as described by one respondent below:

[When] politicians realised that current affairs stations lived off them, that they passed on information provided by politicians, it turned a tide. Politicians started contacting journalists more and more often. Then there was another metamorphosis, leading to journalists broadcasting everything politicians wanted to say. (Polish journalist 6)

In addition, government has better control over what information reaches the press – partly by using professional press secretaries, as described earlier.

Another change affecting the relationships between media and politics mentioned was the technological development. As a result of new technologies, communication has become much faster and multidirectional:

New channels of communication are sure to have some influence because they make online communication between a journalist and a politician more intense than it used

to be. I can leave the room now and go and write a controversial opinion on Twitter, politicians will start replying to it and we will engage in a discussion. It happens mostly via Twitter. It definitely changes the relationships and makes the world of politics and of journalism operate more online than in the past when there were no such tools. (Polish politician 3)

All respondents agreed that social media drastically changes the way particular actors communicate with each other (see the paragraph about daily routines above). Most prominently, social media makes communication with elites more accessible. One of the journalists explains how:

That's a kind of media revolution. When it comes to face-to-face contact, they don't change. If you have good relations with politicians, it doesn't matter if it was 20 years ago or if it is now – it works in the same way and is based on the same principle: it is based on trust. (Polish journalist 9)

The interviewed politicians, journalists and press secretaries agreed that while technological development has changed the way in which the media and the political side communicate, it hasn't changed the relationship in any fundamental way – politicians still want to present themselves in the best light and the press secretaries help them to achieve it. Journalists, on the other hand, perceive themselves as gatekeepers of the information flow and watchdogs of the exercise of political power.

The general political climate also matters – in particular, the journalists emphasised that politician-journalist relationships are better and more frequent when the political situation is less tense. As the political situation gets more complicated, there are fewer contacts with the press and those that exist are more formal. In addition to the current political situation, several journalists mentioned that the age of politicians and journalists also influences the relationships. Today, fewer journalists possess enough experience, which is sometimes used by politicians that want to get their message out.

## Conclusions

This chapter uses in-depth interviews with journalists, politicians and government communication professionals to assess politics-media relationships in Poland (see Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015). The results show that relationships between politicians, journalists and press secretaries are professional, in the sense that each group has a recognised and defined role in the communication process. Relationships range from formal to informal, but both sides are determined not to jeopardise professional norms by getting too close. A comparison of relationships shows that spokespersons play a minor, or at least omitted, role in the press-politics relationships. Journalists prefer to contact politicians directly or, as a second choice, their press secretaries. It is evident that ministers and press secretaries have a very close relationship. In the decentralised structure, press secretaries are attached to a particular minister, and are

an indispensable element of political communication according to the interviewed politicians.

All the interviewed groups point to technological development as a factor that had changed the forms of political communication in Poland. Politicians and the media communicate via social media platforms (especially Facebook and Twitter) and use them to get in touch with each other. In addition, both politicians and the media use social media in their daily routines in order to stay informed. Social media is also recognised as an arena for self-presentation and a source of information. Despite the many advantages, the respondents also acknowledged that there are situations when other communication channels are better suited to establish contact with “the other side”. Journalists in particular said they sometimes preferred other, more traditional ways to establish contact or organise meetings.

Turning to the government side in the relationship, the data show a politicisation of civil servants in government communication. As an example, a significant number of spokespersons are members of political parties. However, the significance of spokespersons should not be exaggerated. Our analysis shows that the PM plays the leading role in government communication, followed by the political advisors, while civil servants have the least free and influential one.

Interestingly enough, none of the respondents (except for two journalists from a left-wing newspaper) mentioned the recent, rather dramatic political changes in Poland or the associated changes in the media landscape. To some extent, this is surprising as the changes have affected the daily routines of journalists, e.g., by limiting access to the parliament building. There are several potential explanations for the absence of this topic in the interviews. One possible explanation is that the changes did not cause any significant changes in the relationships between the media and politicians and were hence not relevant to the interviews. More specifically, the changes had not caused any noticeable change in the access to political sources, including sources linked to the president or the PM. Another possible explanation is that journalists use additional sources of information, which might reduce the effect of restricted access.

## Notes

1. TVP1 (9%) and TVP2 (7.7%).
2. Prime minister from November 2015 until December 2017.

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