



CASE STUDY: COVID-19 AND ANTI-SILESIA SPEECH IN POLAND 2020-2021

Paweł Trzaskowski

January 2022



About the authors:

Paweł Trzaskowski is a Polish scholar based at the University of Warsaw and Polish Radio, and a 2020/21 DSP Global Research Initiative Fellow. He holds a doctor's degree in applied linguistics. His academic work focuses on language pragmatics, especially the phenomenon of unethical speech. His latest work concerns the manipulative and toxic language of online comments and dangerous speech that targeted Silesians infected with COVID-19.

About this report

This case study was commissioned by the Dangerous Speech Project as part of its Global Research Initiative. The content and analysis within are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Dangerous Speech Project.

Suggested citation

Trzaskowski, Paweł. 2022. *Case Study: COVID-19 and Anti-Silesian Speech in Poland 2020-2021*. Dangerous Speech Project. <https://dangerousspeech.org/publications>

Global Research Initiative Case Study: COVID-19 and Anti-Silesian Speech in Poland 2020-2021

Paweł Trzaskowski, PhD

trzaskowskip@gmail.com

Summary

This case study discusses dangerous speech in May and June 2020 that targeted the inhabitants of Silesia, a region of Poland that was the country's COVID-19 epicenter in the first months of the pandemic. Silesia is the most densely populated region in Poland, and many of its residents work in industries like coal mining that continued to operate during the pandemic, putting them at greater risk of infection. Because Silesia was the first epicenter of the disease in Poland, Silesians, the inhabitants of this region, were victims of various forms of discrimination, both online and in real-life situations.

In this paper, I describe four different speech acts.

Speech Act 1 is an interview given by Łukasz Szumowski, Poland's Minister of Health at the time. In this interview Szumowski stated, "If we separated Silesia and mines from the state of epidemic in Poland, we would already have a downward trend". Even though this message was factual, it was still dangerous as the region of Silesia was singled out from the rest of the country, which was much less affected by COVID-19.

Speech Act 2 is a fragment of June 2020 Parliamentary Health Commission meeting. During the session, one of the MPs put on a mask after she learned that a person sitting opposite and giving a speech was from Silesia. This MP also quietly, but audibly uttered, "I'm going to put on a mask because she is from Silesia". This speech had the potential to be dangerous, as it ostracized a Silesian person because of the region's experience with COVID-19 and suggested that people may pose a threat to others only because they come from a certain place, but widespread condemnation in the ensuing media coverage limited the dangerousness of the speech.

Speech Act 3 is an internet meme that likened one Silesian city's logo to the shape of coronavirus. This speech could have inspired fear and violence by reinforcing the narrative

that the region of Silesia had greater problems with COVID than the rest of Poland. However, the meme wasn't noticed enough to become dangerous.

The final speech act is a collection of toxic online comments that targeted Silesians because of the region's high rate of infections. Such messages appeared mainly on Twitter and in the comment sections of mainstream news portals, and were dangerous because they incited fear and contempt towards Silesians.

General Context

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out at the beginning of 2020, caused by a novel coronavirus that originated in Wuhan, China. The virus mainly attacks the respiratory system and is often lethal for elderly people or those who suffer from other diseases¹. Initially, the most affected countries were China, South Korea, Iran and Italy² but the virus quickly spread worldwide, and most governments implemented severe preventive measures to slow its spread. Whole countries went into lockdown – businesses were closed, sports and cultural events were cancelled, and travel was restricted, within and between countries. People were advised or obliged to keep social distance, disinfect their hands and personal belongings and wear some sort of mouth-and-nose protection³. However, as little was known about the virus at that time, official recommendations kept changing, which added to widespread feelings of fear, uncertainty, and distrust towards policymakers. In Poland, a vivid example of a regulation that infuriated the public was the April 2020 decision to temporarily close national forests and parks⁴. Protests against this were so strong that it was reversed after just two weeks⁵.

In the early days of the pandemic, in many countries, people who refused to comply with mitigation efforts were strongly criticized for it. This angry response took various forms, such as posting photos of crowded public spaces online, or verbally attacking individuals for their misconduct⁶, and it got its own nickname: 'pandemic shaming'⁷.

Like other mass shaming or 'dogpiles' as they have come to be known when they happen online, pandemic shaming sometimes had grave consequences. For example, in March 2020 a

¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/one-year-on-what-have-we-learned-since-news-of-covid-19-first-broke/a-54078531>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-52066956>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-timeline-idUSL1N2GN04J>

⁴ <https://www.money.pl/gielda/ms-zakaz-wstepu-do-lasow-i-parkow-narodowych-obowiazuje-od-dzis-do-11-kwietnia-6495953650566785a.html>

⁵ <https://gazetawroclawska.pl/zakaz-wstepu-do-lasu-ma-byc-zniesiony-juz-w-poniedzialek/ar/c1-14920770>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/11/arts/social-distance-shaming.html>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/apr/04/pandemic-shaming-is-it-helping-us-keep-our-distance>

doctor in Poland diagnosed with COVID-19 was targeted with vicious online harassment after a newspaper reported that he had visited a car dealership while under quarantine. A few days later, he died by suicide, which was attributed to the online harassment⁸.

East Asians (and those perceived to be East Asian) were often attacked by people who blamed them for the virus since it originated in China. The link between China and the virus was often emphasized (or even exploited) by certain public figures. For example, former U.S. President Donald Trump repeatedly called COVID-19 the ‘Chinese virus’⁹ or the ‘Kung Flu’¹⁰, and one study found that this was followed by a surge in anti-Asian rhetoric on Twitter¹¹. Other public figures also attacked Chinese people. For example, Patrick Makau, a member of the Kenyan Parliament, tweeted in February 2020 that 239 Chinese people had just arrived in his constituency to quarantine, and that if someone saw any of them violating the quarantine, they should ‘stone them and chase them away to stay in their houses’¹².

People who contracted the virus, and those considered to be at risk of contracting it, were also attacked. This was especially common in the early days of the pandemic, when not much was known about the new virus, or how it spread. Health care workers were spat at, insulted, forbidden entry to hospitals and chased away from homes (in India¹³, Mexico¹⁴ and Japan, among others¹⁵).

Local context

In Poland the first case of COVID-19 was reported on March 4th 2020¹⁶. The Polish government reacted with strict preventive measures: schools, universities and many businesses were closed, social contact was restricted, those who did not observe the new rules were fined, and 19 hospitals were reserved for patients with COVID-19¹⁷. On March 23rd a

⁸ <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-03-18/nie-zyje-lekarz-zakazony-koronawirusem-mial-mierzyc-sie-z-nieprawdopodobnym-hejtem/>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-51953315>

¹⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2020/06/24/trump-once-again-calls-covid-19-coronavirus-the-kung-flu/?sh=464fed241f59>

¹¹ <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306154>

¹² https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/research/heroimages/The_COVID-19_Pandemic_and_Racialised_Risk_Narratives_in_Kenya.pdf

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52151141>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-paranoia-ins-idUSKBN21G076>

¹⁴ <https://www.devex.com/news/health-workers-in-india-mexico-saw-most-covid-19-related-violence-in-2020-99211>

¹⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-in-japan-arson-ostracism-online-attacks-against-medics-victims/a-53434373>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/pierwszy-przypadek-koronawirusa-w-polsce>

¹⁷ <https://forsal.pl/artykuly/1465461,koronawirus-lista-nowych-obozren-w-polsce-31-marca-2020.html>; <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/wprowadzamy-stan-epidemii-w-polsce>

‘state of epidemic’ (*stan epidemii* in Polish) was introduced, which gave the government additional prerogatives, such as restricting people’s mobility and rationing goods¹⁸. Initially, there were relatively few infections, spread quite evenly across the country. But by April, the majority of infections detected were in Silesia, the most densely populated region of Poland. Many people there work in heavy industry, especially coal mining, which was exempt from the lockdown¹⁹. Consequently, many early cases of COVID-19 in Poland were among miners and their families²⁰. This led to a popular belief that Silesians, and especially miners, were to blame for the high rate of infections as they continued to work and allegedly did not observe the new regulations. Eventually, miners and their families were thoroughly tested and work in certain mines was stopped²¹.

As this was the first real epicenter of COVID-19 in Poland, the inhabitants of Silesia were victimized and ostracized by people from other regions, both online and in real-life situations²². This victimization was particularly dangerous as Silesia is a unique region of Poland. There are three main factors that make the region stand out: ethno-national identity, multicultural history and economic status.

Originally, Silesia was a Polish province. By the 9th century it was inhabited exclusively by Slavic people. It has had a tumultuous history; different parts of the region were incorporated into several political entities, including the Bohemian Land, Prussia, interwar Poland and Nazi Germany. The Silesian lands that are currently within the borders of Poland (Upper Silesia and Lower Silesia) were annexed to the country after the end of World War II (the remaining Silesian lands are now within the Czech Republic). This was the Soviet Union’s means of compensation for the eastern lands of Poland being incorporated into the USSR. Silesia was then officially called a part of *recovered territories*²³ – historically Polish lands that were regained after the 1945 Potsdam Conference, in which the Allied powers planned for postwar Europe. However, as the main growth of Silesia happened while the lands were a part of other, German-speaking political entities, and many Germans lived in Silesia until they were forcibly removed to make room for Polish inhabitants, Silesia still seems somewhat foreign to

¹⁸ <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/1462448,stan-epidemii-w-polsce-co-to-oznacza.html>

¹⁹ <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/koronawirus-epicentrum-wirusa-na-slasku-szczyt-zachorowan-sie-oddala/2zh4zr7>

²⁰ <https://www.tvp.info/48006192/koronawirus-polska-jacek-sasin-zakazonych-799-gornikow-wieszwiecej>

²¹ <https://www.tvp.info/47999482/koronawirus-slask-wyniki-badan-przesiewowych-gornikow-kopalnie-wstrzymaly-wydobycie-raport-1205-maja-zakazenia-zgony-statystyki-mapa-wieszwiecej>

²² <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Gornicy-skarza-sie-na-hejt-z-powodu-koronawirusa-7907656.html>;
<https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polska/slask/koronawirus-przez-hejt-gornicy-boja-sie-o-rodziny/nzkkxfc>

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recovered_Territories

people from the rest of Poland. Silesians speak their own German-influenced language, for instance, viewed by the majority of linguists as a dialect of Polish²⁴.

Moreover, some Silesians have bolstered that notion by calling for political autonomy from Poland. The most vocal separatist organization is the Silesian Autonomy Movement (*Ruch Autonomii Śląska*)²⁵. The ethno-national identity of Silesia plays a major role here as well. In Silesia, many inhabitants of the region identify as members of an ethno-national minority. In the 2011 census about 850.000 respondents identified 'Silesian' as one of their ethno-nationalities (and about 380.000 of those chose 'Silesian' as their only response). That makes Silesians by far the biggest ethno-national minority in Poland, though that's unofficial since the Polish state recognizes Silesians as neither a nationality nor an ethnicity²⁶.

Silesia is also a distinctive region of Poland because of its economy. It is the industrial center of the country, with numerous coal mines and heavy industry facilities²⁷. However, the amount of coal mined every year is decreasing due to higher mining costs and diminishing demand on the market. The climate crisis will eventually shut the mines down²⁸, causing distress and unemployment in Silesia, since Poland is a member of the European Union and must follow European climate policy.

The three abovementioned factors contribute to the dangerousness of speech aimed at Silesians because they differentiate the region from the rest of Poland, which is largely monocultural. The multicultural history of Silesia and unique ethno-national identity of its inhabitants make them vulnerable to attacks as strangers or even quasi foreigners. Considerable affluence of the region can also be a reason for attacks, especially for those from less developed parts of the country.

²⁴ <https://polskatimes.pl/jezyk-slaski-rada-jezyka-polskiego-jest-na-nie/ar/408326>

²⁵ <https://autonomia.pl/> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silesian_Autonomy_Movement

²⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Konrad-Pedziwiatr/publication/266387268_Polish_Silesians_in_Search_for_Greater_Autonomy_SILESIAAN_AUTONOMY_MOVEMENT_IN_POLAND_AND_ONE_OF_ITS_ACTIVISTS/links/542f21780cf277d58e91ee80/Polish-Silesians-in-Search-for-Greater-Autonomy-SILESIAAN-AUTONOMY-MOVEMENT-IN-POLAND-AND-ONE-OF-ITS-ACTIVISTS.pdf

²⁷ https://www.paih.gov.pl/files/?id_plik=26003

²⁸ <https://polandin.com/50328054/group-of-scientists-calls-for-a-quick-withdrawal-from-coal-mining-in-silesia>

Message

Speech Act 1

On May 10 2020, Łukasz Szumowski, the then-Minister of Health, gave a long, 40-minute interview for Polsat News, one of the main news television channels in Poland, during which he answered numerous questions concerning the COVID-19 epidemic²⁹. At the beginning of the interview Szumowski discussed the situation in Silesia and said the following:

"Were it not for the COVID clusters in the mines, in Silesia we would only have a dozen or so new infections from the horizontal transmission. Well, this shows how important, how tragic those big clusters are"³⁰.

At the very end of the interview Szumowski also stated:

"If we separated Silesia and mines from the state of epidemic in Poland, we would already have a downward trend. Of course, these are very large, very serious clusters that we are dealing with, but fortunately this is not the horizontal transmission, the one we are most concerned about. Therefore, it can be said that there is light in the end of the tunnel, but we must act very quickly and efficiently in Silesia so that these outbreaks do not become a source of horizontal transmission. Then we can expect that R will drop below one and we can say that the epidemic is slowly subsiding"³¹.

Szumowski's intention was, to all intents and purposes, informative; however, his speech likely had an impact on how members of the audience discussed, and thought about, Silesians. In May 2020, relatively little was known about the new virus and until then there had been no real coronavirus clusters in Poland. In this light he singled out Silesia from other, much less affected regions of the country. In doing so, this speech was an early step toward making dangerous speech against Silesians more acceptable.

²⁹ <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-05-10/minister-zdrowia-odpowiada-na-pytania-wszystko-o-koronawirusie/?ref=wyszukiwarka>

³⁰ (Pol.) "Gdyby nie ogniska kopalniane, to na Śląsku mielibyśmy tak naprawdę kilkanaście tylko osób chorych nowych z tej transmisji poziomej. No to pokazuje, jak ważne są niestety, jak dramatyczne są te duże ogniska".

³¹ (Pol.) "Jeżelibyśmy oddzielili Śląsk i kopalnie od przebiegu epidemii w Polsce, to byśmy już zaczęli mieć tendencję spadkową. Oczywiście to są bardzo duże ogniska, bardzo poważne, którymi się zajmujemy, ale na szczęście nie jest to taka transmisja pozioma, jakiej się obawiamy. W związku z tym można powiedzieć, że gdzieś jest światełko w tunelu, ale musimy bardzo szybko i sprawnie działać na Śląsku, żeby te ogniska nie stały się źródłem zakażeń poziomych. Wtedy możemy spodziewać się, że ten wskaźnik R spadnie poniżej jedności i będziemy mogli powiedzieć, że epidemia powoli słabnie".

Speaker

Szumowski was appointed as Minister of Health in 2018³² and mostly avoided the spotlight until March 2020³³. When the epidemic broke out in Poland he became the face of the government's fight against the virus, and because the early decisions to enforce strict preventive measures were popular and effective, he enjoyed public recognition for his actions. According to one opinion poll conducted in April 2020, he even became the politician with the highest social trust in Poland (almost 44% of respondents trusted him, whereas 31% did not). In the same poll Andrzej Duda, the President of Poland, placed second and Mateusz Morawiecki, the Prime Minister, was third³⁴. Szumowski got so much praise for his dedication to the office that there were even sympathetic articles about how he used to work with Mother Teresa of Calcutta³⁵ or how his face changed over the first weeks of the pandemic (special attention was given to the dark circles under his eyes, which even became a symbol of the government's dedication in the early days of pandemic)³⁶. These factors made him a very influential and authoritative speaker on issues relating to the pandemic.

Audience

At the time of Szumowski's interview in May 2020, many people in Poland feared that they would get COVID-19, and the Polish public mostly obeyed the new regulations. A poll³⁷ conducted between March 24 and 26 found that the majority of Poles accepted the new restrictions and supported severe fines for those who did not observe the epidemic regulations, but opinions about the COVID-related actions of the ruling Law and Justice party (Pol. *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, hereafter PiS) were more mixed: about 41% supported its response and 32% opposed it, and about 64% did not believe that the government was telling the truth about the scale of epidemic.

³²<https://www.wnp.pl/parlamentarny/osoba/lukasz-szumowski,194360.html>)

³³ This can be illustrated by a Google Trends search: <https://trends.google.pl/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=PL&q=%C5%82lukasz%20szumowski>

³⁴ <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/7690442,sondaz-duda-polityka-ranking-zaufania-szumowski.html>

³⁵ <https://polskatimes.pl/kim-jest-minister-zdrowia-prof-lukasz-szumowski-pracowal-ze-sw-matka-teresa-w-kalkucie-dzisiaj-walczy-z-koronawirusem/ar/c14-14859671>

³⁶ <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/koronawirus-jak-zmieniala-sie-twarz-ministra-szumowskiego-walczacego-z-epidemia/tkc6vzs>; <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/491130-polacy-chwala-ciezka-prace-ministra-zdrowia-chapeaubas>

³⁷ <https://www.swps.pl/strefa-psyche/blog/relacje/21653-jakie-sa-postawy-polakow-wobec-epidemii-koronawirusa?dt=1612801445675>

Polish people's acute fear of the virus was reflected in some incidents that made news. In one case, a tram was stopped when a woman told other passengers that she might be infected. According to the regulations, the tram driver was not supposed to let anyone out and was to wait for the police. Instead people crawled out the windows³⁸. In another example, a truck driver was denied CPR as he was having a heart attack –witnesses feared he was infected. Refused help, the truck driver died³⁹.

Polish people's fear of the virus was soon aimed at people from the first epicenter of COVID-19 in Poland. Hostility toward Silesians was probably worse because of the region's unique ethnic and socio-economic status. Silesians' cultural bonds with Germany and their attempts at gaining autonomy from the rest of the country could be provoking to some. Moreover, the fact that the economy of Silesia is based on mining also had the potential to spark conflicts. On one hand, some people feel resentment by remembering the miners' relatively prosperous times during the communist period. On the other hand, some believe that the coal-mining industry represents the country's backwardness and unwillingness to modernize.

Medium

Polsat News, where the interview was broadcast, is one of the main news television channels in Poland, is considered a credible source of information, and is neither openly pro-, nor anti-government⁴⁰. The sentence "If we separated Silesia and mines from the state of epidemic in Poland, we would already have a downward trend" was repeated by most Polish mainstream media outlets⁴¹ so they were all secondary mediums for that key remark which therefore reached a large proportion of the Polish people.

³⁸ <https://www.rp.pl/Koronawirus-2019-nCoV/200319222-Powiedziala-w-tramwaju-ze-moze-byc-chora-Uciekali-oknami.html>

³⁹ <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-04-09/kierowca-tira-dostal-ataku-serca-i-zmarl-swiadkowie-nie-pomogli-bo-bali-sie-koronawirusa/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.polsatnews.pl/>

⁴¹ <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/1475662,szumowski-gdyby-nie-zakazenia-koronawirusem-na-slasku-mielibysmy-tendencje-spadkowa.html>; <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/Koronawirus/Koronawirus-na-Slasku.-Szumowski-komentuje-doniesienia-o-wyizolowaniu-wojewodztwa>; <https://www.rmf24.pl/raporty/raport-koronawirus-z-chin/polska/news-lukasz-szumowski-gdyby-nie-zakazenia-koronawirusem-na-slasku,nId,4487698>; <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,173952,25937667,gdyby-nie-to-mielibysmy-tendencje-spadkowa-epidemia-na-slasku.html>; <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/Artykul/2507797,Lukasz-Szumowski-gdyby-nie-ogniska-pandemii-na-Slasku-mielibysmy-tendencje-spadkowa>

Reception

Szumowski's speech not only got nationwide attention, it was also reinforced by two more statements. One was by Szumowski himself, given earlier on the same day during a press conference⁴². Three notable excerpts from that speech are:

"We are far from being overoptimistic, but in other areas of the country the epidemic situation is much better than in Silesia"⁴³.

"Among this serious news there is one positive piece of information. It can be said that fortunately more than 95 percent of those who test positive go through the infection absolutely without any symptoms and therefore their lives and health are not in danger as of today. But of course we are aware that Silesia is a densely populated area with a lot of workplaces, so we want to continue this action (of testing miners – PT) until we have complete control over those clusters, because these are simply very large clusters"⁴⁴.

"This is also our huge call to the miners and to the miners' families. We have sent them about 30.000 text messages asking them to stay home for now and try not to go out, because most of them do not have any symptoms of the disease. Therefore, we intensify our actions to test this group as quickly as possible and to isolate the infected from the healthy ones"⁴⁵.

Another statement that reinforced Szumowski's message was uttered by the deputy Minister of Health, Waldemar Kraska, who during a press conference held in Silesia the following day (May 11th 2020)⁴⁶ said:

⁴² https://www.polsatnews.pl/wideo/szumowski-wzmacniamy-kontrolę-sanitarną-na-słasku_6769961/?ref=wyszukiwarka

⁴³ (Pol.) "Dalecy jesteśmy od huraoptymizmu, ale jednak w pozostałych częściach kraju ta sytuacja epidemiczna jest znacznie lepsza niż na samym Śląsku".

⁴⁴ (Pol.) "W tych poważnych informacjach jest jedna tak naprawdę dobra, to znaczy można powiedzieć, że szczęśliwie ponad 95 procent tych osób, które mają dodatni wynik, przechodzi infekcję całkowicie bezobjawowo, w związku z tym nie zagraża ich życiu i zdrowiu na dzień dzisiejszy jakaś poważna sytuacja. Ale oczywiście mając świadomość, że Śląsk jest gęsto zaludnionym terenem, gdzie jest zlokalizowanych bardzo dużo zakładów pracy, chcemy tę akcję ciągnąć do momentu, dopóki nie będzie opanowana całkowicie sytuacja w tych ogniskach, bo to są po prostu duże ogniska".

⁴⁵ (Pol.) "Tu jest też ogromny apel do górników, do rodzin górników, zostało wysłane do nich około 30 tysięcy SMS-ów, aby na razie pozostawali w domach i starali się nie wychodzić, bo większość z nich po prostu choruje bezobjawowo, więc my tutaj intensyfikujemy maksymalnie nasze działania, żeby jak najszybciej tę grupę przebadać, przetestować, odizolować chorych od zdrowych".

⁴⁶ <https://katowice.wyborcza.pl/katowice/7,35063,25935942,ogniska-koronawirusa-w-kopalniach-wiceszef-resortu-zdrowia.html?disableRedirects=true>

"I don't think we have ignored the threat in the mines. It is there that all the factors facilitating the spread of the virus have accumulated, and moreover, Silesia is such a reference to Italy. Here people meet with each other, they like to be close"⁴⁷.

When this speech was given, comparing Silesia to Italy was inflammatory in its own right – Italy was then one of the countries most affected by COVID-19.

Only a few articles openly opposed such messages, these came from media outlets that are considered to be anti-government⁴⁸. Moreover, after Szumowski's speech, it was rumored that Silesia might be separated from the rest of Poland, for example by surrounding it with a sanitary cordon⁴⁹. It appears that Szumowski's speech had great impact on how Polish people referred to Silesia afterwards and inspired many subsequent acts of discrimination such as refusing to host Silesians in some resort hotels (see: **Acts of violence and discrimination**) or attacking them in social media (see: **Dangerous speech in toxic online comments**).

Other related messages

Apart from Speech Act 1 there were several other messages related to coronavirus in Silesia that deserve discussion. Some of them could have been dangerous but eventually turned out not to be – such examples are illustrated in **Speech Act 2** and **Speech Act 3**. There were also messages that appeared benign and minor but could be dangerous – such a situation was especially visible in the case of toxic online comments (discussed below).

Speech Act 2

On June 2, 2020, during a meeting of the Parliamentary Health Commission, one of the MPs put on a mask after she had learned that a person sitting opposite and giving a speech was

⁴⁷ (Pol.) "Nie uważam, że zignorowaliśmy wcześniej zagrożenie w kopalniach. To tam właśnie skumulowały się wszystkie czynniki ułatwiające rozprzestrzenianie wirusa, a ponadto Śląsk to taki odnośnik do Włoch. Tutaj ludzie spotykają się ze sobą, lubią mieć kontakt".

⁴⁸ i.e. <https://natemat.pl/308517,hejt-na-slask-i-gornikow-czy-odetna-województwo-reakcje-dzialania-pis>; <https://www.newswweek.pl/polska/koronawirus-na-slasku-slask-kozlem-ofiarnym-i-ofiara-propagandowej-nagonki/yz6x8py>

⁴⁹ <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/Koronawirus/Koronawirus-na-Slasku.-Szumowski-komentuje-doniesienia-o-wyzolowaniu-województwa> Eventually, it did not happen but it is not known whether it was ever a real possibility considered by the government. In an attempt to ease public concern Szumowski said in an interview given on May 12th 2020 that "if we isolate the miners, then there is no need to isolate the whole of Silesia": <https://www.rp.pl/Polityka/200519836-Szumowski-o-epidemii-Gdyby-nie-kilka-województw-mielibysmy-sytuacje-opanowana.html>

from Silesia. This MP also said audibly, "I'm going to put on a mask because she is from Silesia"⁵⁰.

This speech was potentially dangerous because it suggested that a person may pose a threat to others simply because they come from a certain place. At the meeting, as the video shows, people sat close to each other without wearing masks, and it was only upon finding out that a Silesian was speaking, that the MP sitting opposite decided to put on a mask. Indeed the MP from Silesia felt singled out, as she commented "Well, I see some preventive ostracism from the MP here, alright"⁵¹.

The public was rather unfamiliar with both MPs. They represented two main opposing political forces in the country. The MP who put on a mask, Elżbieta Płonka, is from the ruling Law and Justice party and the speaker from Silesia, Monika Rosa, is a member of the main opposition party, Civic Coalition (Pol. *Koalicja Obywatelska*, hereafter KO). In the speech Rosa was giving during the commission meeting, she criticized the actions of the government concerning the COVID-19 situation in mines and in Silesia.

The incident made news in mainstream, generally credible media outlets⁵². As this incident happened almost a month after the much discussed Speech Act 1, media coverage was unanimously critical of Płonka's behavior. At that time Silesians were already being seen as a victimized group (see: **Acts of violence and discrimination**) and certain government officials even attempted to protect them from the backlash of the general public (see: **Incidents of counterspeech**). This is probably why Płonka's action was almost universally condemned in the media and, as a result, failed to be dangerous.

Speech Act 3

In the early days of March 2020, the following meme⁵³ was shared on the Internet:

⁵⁰ (Pol.) "Założę maseczkę, bo ze Śląska".

⁵¹ (Pol.) "No, tutaj pani poseł widzę prewencyjnie wobec mnie ostracyzm stosuje, dobrze".

⁵² i.e. <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-06-02/zalozze-maseczke-bo-ze-slaska-poslanka-z-pis-na-komisji-do-przedstawicielki-opozycji/>; <https://www.se.pl/slask/koronawirus-skandal-na-komisji-zdrowia-poslanka-zalozze-maseczke-bo-ze-slaska-aa-KBxM-G426-wRud.html>; <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,25997405,komisja-zdrowia-poslanka-pis-do-przedstawicielki-ko-zalozze.html>; <https://katowice.wyborcza.pl/katowice/7,35063,25997324,poslanka-pis-zaklada-maseczke-bo-zaczyna-mowic-osoba-ze-slaska.html?disableRedirects=true>; <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/koronawirus-zaloz-maseczke-bo-ze-slaska-poslanka-pis-elzbieta-plonka-komentuje/4bhee40>

⁵³ Source: <https://www.eska.pl/slaskie/koronawirus-w-logo-sosnowca-internauci-drwia-ale-niektorym-nie-jest-do-smiechu-aa-hePc-zN8p-wJzn.html>



The image to the left shows a rendering of the COVID-19 virus under a microscope. The image to the right is the official logo of Sosnowiec, a city in the Silesian Province. The caption under the picture is in Silesian and means "Coincidence? Don't think so". The sardonic comparison is obvious, but the caption might be unclear for those who do not speak Silesian.

Although Sosnowiec is now a city in the Silesian Province, historically it was part of the Zagłębie Dąbrowskie region, not Silesia, and there is evident antagonism between the citizens of Sosnowiec and the rest of Silesia. Nonetheless, to most people in Poland Sosnowiec is a typical Silesian city with mining industry. The public opinion believes that Sosnowiec is an ugly, hopeless place⁵⁴, which is a topic of numerous jokes⁵⁵.

It appears that this meme was created in the early days of March 2020, right after the first case of COVID-19 had been reported in Poland. This means that the meme was not a direct response to Speech Act 1, but rather a typical Sosnowiec-related joke. Nonetheless, in light of further epidemic developments, if it had spread on the Internet, it would have reinforced

⁵⁴ <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/slask/sosnowiec-odrebnosci-i-wrogosci/bjg8zj1>

⁵⁵ The classic one is: "What's the best thing that can happen to you in Sosnowiec? A bus to Katowice" – Katowice is a city capital of the Silesian Province.

negative attitudes towards Silesians. However, the meme did not gain much popularity and was not shared by influential speakers. Therefore, it failed to be dangerous.

Dangerous speech in toxic online comments

In May 2020 Silesians started being verbally attacked online due to the rapid rise of COVID-19 infections in their region. For example, such toxic speech could be found in comments under the tweets posted by the official Polish Ministry of Health profile ([@MZ_GOV_PL](#)) between May 8 and May 12, 2020. These tweets showed statistics about the epidemic situation in the country (indicating that there were far more COVID-19 cases in Silesia than anywhere else in the country). Among the responses to those tweets (about 80-120 for each) were such messages:

"Lock Silesia down and give it back to the Germans"⁵⁶.

"Surround Silesia with a sanitary cordon for half a year. It will be beneficial for the epidemic situation and for the rest of the Poles as those loud rednecks won't hang around holiday destinations"⁵⁷.

"Maybe we should make Silesia autonomous so they don't burden us with their problems"⁵⁸?

"Were it not for Silesia, it would be OK "⁵⁹

"So we've got *two speeds*. 213 in Silesia today, in the rest of Poland 117. What are you waiting for? You want to have Bergamo in Poland"⁶⁰?

"Good job Silesia. Keep up the good work xD"⁶¹

"LOCK SILESIA DOWN GOD DAMNIT"⁶²!!!

"What's the problem to open everything except for Silesia"⁶³

⁵⁶ (Pol.) "Zamknąć Śląsk i oddać Niemcom".

⁵⁷ (Pol.) "Otoczyć Śląsk kordonem sanitarnym na pół roku. Skorzysta na tym sytuacją epidemiologiczną i reszta Polaków jak te głośne wieśniaki nie będą przebywać w wakacyjnych miejscach".

⁵⁸ (Pol.) "Może jednak dać Śląskowi autonomię, żeby ich problemy nie szły na konto reszty"?

⁵⁹ (Pol.) "Gdyby nie ten Śląsk byłoby OK"

⁶⁰ (Pol.) "No to mamy dwie prędkości. Na dziś Śląsk 213, reszta Polski 117. Na co jeszcze czekacie? Aż będzie tu Bergamo"?

⁶¹ (Pol.) "Brawo Śląsk. Oby tak dalej xD"

⁶² (Pol.) "ZAMKNAĆ ŚLĄSK DO CHOLERY"!!!

⁶³ (Pol.) "Jaki jest problem otworzyć wszystko wszędzie po za Śląskiem"

"Alright, I have an idea. Lock Silesia down and let the rest of the country live normally. In Kuyavian-Pomeranian Province it's not so bad. But things are getting worse when it comes to money"⁶⁴!

"test more of those miners because none of them wears a mask"⁶⁵

Although such messages may not appear harmful as they were posted mostly by anonymous users and did not constitute the majority of comments, they bear hallmarks of dangerous speech. These messages reinforce fear and disdain towards Silesians. According to those speakers, Silesians were to blame for the epidemic situation in Poland ("miners don't wear masks"). These comments also strengthened the belief that the rapid rise of infections in the region is the Silesians' fault (by suggesting that "it's okay in our region, something must be wrong with them"). Such comments also undermined the community spirit of a struggling society (as seen in the utterances along the lines of "If we get rid of them, we'll be ok"). The notion of not being really Polish also resurfaced, dividing the society even more ("they should go back to the Germans"). The reach of this speech was also dangerous, as such messages could be seen not only on Twitter, but also in the comment sections of mainstream news portals. Such toxic messages were so ubiquitous that they were discussed in some major media outlets⁶⁶.

Acts of violence and discrimination

Along with attacks online that were described in the previous section there were reports of discrimination. In some places miners and their families had difficulty arranging doctor's appointments and were denied work or places in nurseries for their children⁶⁷. Silesians were also barred from some holiday resorts⁶⁸. Stories that were shared on the Silesian Autonomy Movement Facebook page illustrate this problem⁶⁹:

⁶⁴ (Pol.) "Dobra, to ja mam propozycję. Zamknąć Śląsk, a reszcie kraju dajcie normalnie żyć. Bo w Kujawsko pomorskie nie jest tak źle. Za to coraz gorzej z finansami!"

⁶⁵ (Pol.) "testujcie wecej tych górników bo żaden maski nienosi "

⁶⁶ <https://katowice.wyborcza.pl/katowice/7,35063,25940755,hejt-na-slask-i-gornictwo-prezydent-i-rzad-nie-robja-nic.html>; <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/slask/koronawirus-na-slasku-masowa-fala-hejtu-na-gornikow-i-slazakow/e593v83>; <https://niezalezna.pl/334436-slazacy-odczuli-hejt-ale-premier-i-prezydent-nas-wspieraja-mowi-nam-posel-adam-gaweda>

⁶⁷ <https://natemat.pl/308371,koronawirus-na-slasku-hejt-wylewa-sie-na-gornikow-i-ich-rodziny>

⁶⁸ <https://www.olsztyn.com.pl/artykul,nad-morzem-nie-chca-mieszkancow-slaska-a-na-warmii-i-mazurach-witaja-ich-z-otwartymi-ramionami,29586.html>; <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/Polska/Koronawirus.-Turysci-ze-Slaska-dyskryminowani-na-wakacjach-Europosel-komentuje>; https://natemat.pl/amp/310739,slazacy-nie-pojada-na-wakacje-ludzie-nie-chca-wynajmowac-im-kwter?__twitter_impression=true&fbclid=IwAR2Ev49ToXzEOtKM7Xyk3utahEIZ7jwhMUs3swTWcQu4yIUIk02F7zTNucw; <https://www.rybnik.com.pl/wiadomosci,dyskryminacja-slazakow-to-nie-mit-l-kohut-ma>

"I heard about such a situation: after 2 days they asked people from Silesia to leave because apparently people in the village made the guesthouse owner's life very difficult..."⁷⁰

"My aunt was given back the money she paid for her seaside holidays in July. The reason was that she is from Silesia..."⁷¹

"A friend of mine was returned the money she paid in advance after she arrived. Fortunately, she managed to find a new place to stay in just a few hours. Sadly, people report to us very unpleasant and shocking situations. Obviously, we hope such situations are rare but they should be condemned nonetheless"⁷².

Incidents of counterspeech

After the attacks on Silesians, there were several attempts to mitigate the public's negative attitude, most notably by the president, certain politicians of both main political parties, a major, state-owned mining company in Poland, and one regional newspaper.

In Polish, toxic speech such as the comments described in **Acts of violence and discrimination** is commonly called *hejt* (from English *hate*, *hate speech* and *hater*). Jastrzębska Spółka Węglowa (hereafter JSW), one of the biggest mining companies in Poland, launched a social media campaign using a phrase, "Put a stop to *hejt*. Do not slander the miner"⁷³.

[pierwsze-zgloszenia.wia5-3266-44942.html](https://www.pierwsze-zgloszenia.wia5-3266-44942.html); <https://www.rybnik.com.pl/wiadomosci,panstwo-ze-slaska-przepraszam-nie-obslugujemy,wia5-3266-44899.html>

⁶⁹<https://www.facebook.com/ruch.autonomii.slaska>

⁷⁰ (Pol.) "Ja slyszalam o sytuacji ze po 2 dniach wyprosili ludzi ze Slaska bo podobno ludzie we wsi zyc nie dali wlascicielowi pensjonatu..."

⁷¹ (Pol.) "Mojej cioci odeslano kasę za pobyt nad morzem w lipcu - powód jest ze Slaska..."

⁷² (Pol.) "Mojej znajomej po przyjeździe zwrócono zaliczkę, na szczęście w ciągu paru godzin udało się załatwić coś innego gdzie nie było problemu. Niestety ludzie nam zgłaszają bardzo przykre przypadki i to jest oburzające. Oczywiście mamy nadzieję, że są odosobnione jednak trzeba takie zachowanie piętnować".

⁷³ (Pol.) "Stop hejtowi. Nie oczerniaj górnika": <https://www.jsw.pl/media/wydarzenia/artukul/nie-oczerniaj-gornika>; <https://www.nieoczerniaj.pl/> The name of the campaign is a play on words – in Polish the word *oczerniać* associates with the word *czarny*, which means *black*. This is the color of coal, dirt, miners' traditional uniforms etc.



Logo of the JSW campaign. The text means "Stop *hejt*. Do not slander the miner".

The campaign website allowed visitors to add this logo to their social media profile photos. Several well-known people did so and their pictures with the logo were shared on the Internet.



A picture of soccer player Kamil Glik used in the JSW campaign

Another pro-Silesia, pro-miner initiative was started by Dziennik Zachodni, a regional newspaper from the Silesian and Opole Province⁷⁴. The newspaper launched a campaign on Twitter called #GórnicyjesteśmyzWami ("Miners we are with you")⁷⁵. Those who were willing to share the hashtag were also encouraged to post this logo⁷⁶:

⁷⁴ <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/>

⁷⁵ <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/gornicy-jestesmy-z-wami-slask-was-wspiera-bo-to-czas-solidarnosci-spolecznej-akcja-dz/ar/c1-14963384>

⁷⁶ <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/gornicy-jestesmy-z-wami-slask-was-wspiera-bo-to-czas-solidarnosci-spolecznej-akcja-dz/ar/c1-14963384>



**#GÓRNICY,
JESTEŚMY
Z WAMI**

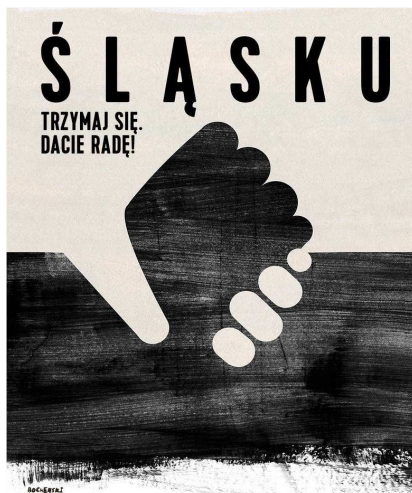
The lump of coal is heart-shaped and accompanied by the pro-miner hashtag created by DziennikZachodni

However, it is not quite clear whether the intention was to support the miners because their infection rate was so high or because they were being harassed and discriminated against. It is quite possible that both reasons were behind this initiative. The same can be said about two subsequent images. Dziennik Zachodni also commissioned two posters by Tomasz Bocheński, a renowned artist⁷⁷. These images were also shared on social media:



The text reads (in Polish and Silesian): "I'm from Silesia! We can make it!"

⁷⁷ <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/slasku-poradzimy-pobierzcie-grafiki-tomasza-bochenskigo-pokazmy-solidarnosc-w-walce-z-koronawirusem-akcja-dz/ga/c1-14968188/zd/43286300>



The text reads in Polish: "Silesia, hold tight! You can make it!"

The #GórnicyjesteśmyzWami hashtag gained some popularity⁷⁸. It was for example used by the President of Poland Andrzej Duda, who posted the following⁷⁹:

Today we are all from Silesia. Together we will fight the pandemic! And to those who "forget" about it I have a simple message – come to your senses and use your energy to do something constructive! We are with Silesia!

President Duda was not the only politician of the ruling party who tried to mitigate the negative attitude towards Silesians. Mateusz Morawiecki, the Prime Minister of Poland and an MP from Katowice, the city capital of the Silesian Province, criticized the toxic speech aimed at Silesians in an interview given a couple of days after Szumowski's controversial speech. Morawiecki said⁸⁰:

"As a person involved in anti-crisis measures and an MP from Katowice I also have to stress that all those emotional messages about coronavirus in Silesia that we have all seen recently come mainly from people who do not really know the situation and are absolutely unjustified and harmful".

⁷⁸ https://twitter.com/hashtag/G%C3%B3rnicyjeste%C5%B4myzWami?src=hashtag_click

⁷⁹ (Pol.) "W tych dniach wszyscy jesteśmy ze Śląska. Razem pokonamy pandemię! A tym, którzy o tym *zapominają*, przekazuję prosty komunikat – opamiętajcie się i swoją energię skierujcie na pozytywnie działania! Trzymamy ze Śląskiem"! Source: <https://twitter.com/AndrzejDuda/status/1260913596378353665>

⁸⁰ (Pol.) "Jako osoba zaangażowana w działania antykryzysowe i poseł z okręgu katowickiego muszę też podkreślić, że emocjonalne wypowiedzi na temat Śląska w związku z koronawirusem, jakich byliśmy świadkami w ostatnich dniach, a pochodzące głównie od osób, które nie znają dokładnie sytuacji, są zupełnie nieuzasadnione i krzywdzące". Source: <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/koronawirus-mateusz-morawiecki-o-hejcie-na-gornikow-i-slask-emocjonalne-wypowiedzi-6511207389186177a>

There was also one notable attempt by a member of the opposition to respond to anti-Silesian discrimination. This initiative, by Łukasz Kohut, a Polish-Silesian member of the European Parliament, was called the "Silesian Anti-defamation Shield"⁸¹. Kohut encouraged Silesians who suffered discrimination to contact him and he issued the following statement:

"Are you from Silesia or the Silesian Province and were denied a hotel booking or service in a restaurant or in a cinema? WE WILL HELP – my office and I decided to launch the "Silesian Anti-defamation Shield" campaign – we want to help!! Write an email to: pomoc@lukaszkohut.pl And we will intervene in said place to stop the ostracism of people living in our province. Only together can we put an end to it!"⁸²

Later in an interview, Kohut stated that he had received several e-mails in response to his call. People reported that they were denied hotel bookings or a place in an intensive therapy retreat. Kohut's reaction was sending "official e-mails with queries" to businesses that refused to serve the Silesians⁸³.

General obstacles and opportunities for countering this speech

Speech Act 1 was difficult to counter. At the time Szumowski gave this speech, he oversaw the healthcare system in Poland and enjoyed very high social trust. Apart from that, he based his statements on accurate facts and figures.

Speech Acts 2 was successfully countered in the media coverage. Speech Act 3 did not become popular enough to be dangerous.

Countering negative opinions among the general public about Silesians – expressed in numerous online comments and discriminative behavior – remained difficult, for at least three reasons. First, most cases of discrimination against Silesians were not reported to officials and therefore no legal action, which would show that the region has the government support,

⁸¹ (Pol.) "Śląska Tarcza Antydyskryminacyjna" – this name is associated with "Anti-crisis Shield", a plan of the Polish government to help businesses that were economically affected by the pandemic:

<https://www.gov.pl/web/tarczaantykryzysowa>

⁸² (Pol.) " Pochodzisz ze Śląska lub województwa śląskiego i odmówiono Ci rezerwacji w hotelu, bądź obsługi w restauracji, czy kinie? POMOŻEMY - ja i moje biuro podjęliśmy decyzję o rozpoczęciu akcji "Śląska Tarcza Antydyskryminacyjna" - wychodzimy z inicjatywą pomocy!! Napisz maila na adres: pomoc@lukaszkohut.pl A my zainterweniuujemy w opisanym miejscu, tak by zaprzestać ostracyzmu wobec mieszkańców naszego województwa. Tylko wspólnie możemy się temu przeciwstawić!". Source:

<https://rybnik.dlawas.info/wiadomosci/slaska-tarcza-antydyskryminacyjna-juz-dziala-sa-pierwsze-zgloszenia/cid,14448,a>

⁸³ <https://www.rybnik.com.pl/wiadomosci,dyskryminacja-slazakow-to-nie-mit-l-kohut-ma-pierwsze-zgloszenia,wia5-3266-44942.html>

could be taken. Second, as described above, many Polish non-Silesians have longstanding resentment of Silesians. Last, in May 2020, apart from the situation in Silesia, the epidemic in Poland did not spread rapidly. Polish people still feared the relatively unknown virus and few people in the country had contracted it. Therefore, it was easy for some to believe that Silesians were to blame for the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the region.

Paradoxically, the main opportunity for countering this speech came from the further development of epidemic in Poland. As more people from different regions of the country got infected with the new coronavirus, it ceased to be associated mainly with the region of Silesia. When the third wave of epidemic struck in March-April 2021, Silesia was still the most affected region, but no major accounts of dangerous speech were reported then.