“This attack is intended to destroy Poland”: bio-power, conspiratorial knowledge, and the 2020 Women’s Strike in Poland

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes how conspiratorial knowledge and bio-power were entangled in the Polish government’s discourse to undermine the 2020 Women’s Strike protests against the curbing of access to legal abortion. Theoretically, it uses Foucault’s “bio-power” to conceptualize both the assault on reproductive rights and the securitization of ensuing protests based on “conspiratorial knowledge,” which uses conspiracy theories as a heuristic device to understand social changes. Empirically, discourse analysis is deployed to interrogate a video-recorded speech by Jarosław Kaczyński, the country’s de facto leader, posted on YouTube in response to the protests. First, the article exposes how the protests are recast as a conspiracy bent on the legal, biological, and moral destruction of the Polish nation. Second, it examines how a small sample of remediations of the video by oppositional media and women’s rights activists refutes the conspiratorial knowledge it promulgated. Throughout, the article also identifies the “(quasi-)cognitive” and “affective” forms of epistemic capital.

Introduction
This article dissects how conspiratorial knowledge and bio-power were entangled in the Polish government’s discourse to undermine the 2020 Women’s Strike against the ban on abortion for embryopathological reasons. To do so, it interrogates a video-recorded speech by Jarosław Kaczyński, Deputy Prime Minister with oversight over the defense, justice and interior ministries, and Chairmain of the governing ultraconservative Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS) party who, because of his absolutist leadership style, can be considered the de facto leader of the country (Pytlas, 2021). The video was posted on YouTube and shared on the party website on 27 October 2020. In addition, the article analyzes a small, purposefully selected sample of remediations of the video by (1) media opposed the to the PiS government, and (2) women’s rights activists, to see how and to what degree, their resistance to bio-power exerted by PiS is accompanied by the refutation of conspiratorial knowledge. To do this, I begin by outlining the different forms of “epistemic capital” on which the different parties – PiS, oppositional media, and women’s rights activists – draw.
Robertson (2021) defines “epistemic capital” broadly as not “what you know, but how you know” (pp. 28–9). In the present case, I view the resources and strategies that go into the production of knowledge about the Women’s Strike and its participants as being primarily “(quasi-)cognitive” or “affective.” While (quasi-)cognitive epistemic capital pieces together disparate and tangential but sensibly observable and, therefore, seemingly “factual” claims (see Robertson, 2018, p. 243), affective epistemic capital openly embraces experiences that are subjective, embodied, and tacit (see Korolczuk, 2020).

Theoretically, this article employs the Foucauldian notion of “bio-power,” which describes “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Foucault, 2007, p. 1). Bio-power includes the management of health and the life of populations, and especially biological reproduction (Inda, 2002), with the (potentially) pregnant body an object of particular control (Kuswa, Achter, & Lauzon, 2008). In this article, bio-power serves to conceptualize both the assault on reproductive rights and the securitization of the ensuing protests as a health hazard carrying the potential to exacerbate the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. Drawing on another Foucauldian concept, power/knowledge, whereby power and knowledge are viewed as mutually constitutive (Foucault, 1978, p. 98), this article proposes that bio-power is intimately entangled with “conspiratorial knowledge,” wherein conspiracy theories are used as a heuristic device to make sense of social changes (Boyer, 2006).

The context: the 2020 Women’s Strike

This article focuses on the government discourse surrounding the 2020 Women’s Strike (Strajk Kobiet) launched in response to the curbing of access to legal abortion, in autumn 2020. While the ban had been some years in the making, ultraconservative forces felt emboldened by the recent reelection of the PiS-associated president Andrzej Duda (Kasia, 2020), and by the restrictions on public gatherings introduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Osiewicz, 2020). Consequently, on 22 October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal – originally a counter-majoritarian device tasked with scrutinizing law for its unconstitutionality, taken over by PiS soon after its ascent to power in 2015 (Sadurski, 2019) – ruled that the already restrictive abortion law did not comply with the Polish Constitution.

In 1993, the Polish government, formed by the former anti-communist opposition, scrapped the communist law that had included “difficult living conditions” as a legitimate reason for seeking pregnancy termination and so had made abortion easily accessible (Król & Pustulka, 2018, p. 370). In its place, the “abortion compromise” decided with the Catholic Church was introduced. In the immediate aftermath of the democratic transition, the Catholic Church – credited by the former anti-communist opposition with assisting in the overthrowing of the communist regime – became “a powerful veto player” and used its position to push for a total ban on abortion (Calkin & Kaminska, 2020, p. 94). The “abortion compromise,” then, was seen as a compromise because it took seriously the Church’s demands, while rendering termination legally permissible in three, strictly defined cases: when 1) it posed danger to the pregnant person’s health or life, 2) there were reasons to suspect that it was a result of an unlawful act, such as rape or incest, or 3) severe and irreversible defect or terminal illness was detected in a fetus (Ostaszewska, 2018, p. 94). It
was the third condition – by far the most common reason for legal abortions in Poland (Nacher, 2021, p. 269; Ostaszewska, 2018, p. 94; Szelegieniec, 2018, p. 49) – that was deemed unconstitutional on 22 October 2020. This ruling set in motion the largest social mobilization in the country since the 1980s, and marked the beginning of a wave of protests and demonstrations led by women that continued for many weeks, despite the restrictions introduced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

The October 2020 ruling was, thus, the climax of the assault on the reproductive rights mounted by conservative political and civil society actors in alliance with the Catholic Church since the 1989 democratic transition (Szelegieniec, 2018). These attacks intensified under the PiS-led government and consisted of the curbing of access to sex education, contraception and assisted reproductive technologies, as well as continuing attempts to introduce a total ban on abortion (Król & Pustułka, 2018). In response to these escalating pressures, a “feminist strike movement” emerged in 2016 (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019, p. 6), sparking cross-sectional resistance and intersectional solidarity that penetrated beyond the rather hermetic circles of urban elites and the middle classes (Majewska, 2016). This was achieved by, inter alia, tapping into the mobilizational and connective potential of social media platforms (Korolczuk, 2016; Nacher, 2021; Ostaszewska, 2018). The 2020 Women’s Strike was the culmination of a series of mobilizations from March 2016 onwards, which have been carefully documented in the academic literature (e.g., Graff, 2020; Korolczuk, 2016; Król & Pustułka, 2018; Majewska, 2016; Nacher, 2021; Ostaszewska, 2018).

Between 2016 and 2020, however, crucial changes occurred in the tone of the protests and in the government’s responses to them. While the 2016 and 2018 “Black Protests” tended to be purposefully depoliticized in their message, which they limited to variously defined reproductive rights (Król & Pustułka, 2018; Szelegieniec, 2018), in 2020 the language became much sharper in calling for the removal of PiS from power and the withdrawal of the Catholic Church’s mandate to meddle in societal affairs (Nacher, 2021, p. 270). Accordingly, the responses of the ruling party also escalated from deprecation of, and embarrassment at, women’s anger (Król & Pustułka, 2018, p. 377) to scaremongering, calls to arms addressed to the right-wing milieu, and the incitement of police violence (Nacher, 2021, p. 269; Osiewicz, 2020).

There are five parts to the remainder of this article. The first part unpacks the bio-power/conspiratorial knowledge as the main analytical device. The second section introduces Foucauldian discourse analysis and the material under study. The third scrutinizes the bio-power/conspiratorial knowledge nexus in the video speech by Jarosław Kaczyński. The fourth part reflects on the remediations of the video by oppositional media and activists through the lens of “epistemic capital.” Finally, the conclusions tease out the main results of the article and suggest avenues for future research.

The bio-power/conspiratorial knowledge nexus

The conceptual couplet of bio-power/conspiratorial knowledge is fashioned after the Foucauldian formulation of power/knowledge: “strategies of relations of forces supporting and supported by types of knowledge” (Foucault, 1980, p. 196). This notion was coined to investigate the modern approach to the body, whose practical social conduct is regulated through, and as, an application of knowledge. Thus, bio-power weaves together power,
knowledge, and body to capture the entanglement between systems of knowledge (on birthrate, longevity, migration, etc.) and mechanisms of power aimed at “the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” to optimize the health and biological continuity of the human species (Foucault, 1978, p. 140).

Scholarship on reproduction and abortion has frequently employed the lens of bio-power, understood specifically as birth-control practices (e.g., Altunok, 2016; Inda, 2002; Kuswa et al., 2008; c.f. Foucault, 2003, p. 243). Such analyses view (potentially) pregnant bodies as subjected to bio-power because of their capacity to safeguard the biological, moral, and cultural reproduction of the nation which political powers seek to ensure through regulating access to pregnancy termination. Accordingly, the prohibitive approach to abortion as an exercise of bio-power both relies on, and further undergirds, a particular “gender knowledge,” that is, “explicit and implicit assumptions or conceptions concerning gender and gender relations, and the norms which support them” (Cavaghan, 2010, p. 18).

This conservative gender knowledge rests on three key assumptions about (potentially) pregnant bodies, mainly cis-gender women. First, as psychologized individuals, they are constructed as irrational, feeble-minded, and, therefore, incapable of making sensible decisions about their bodies and lives (Kuswa et al., 2008, p. 174). Hence, restricted access to pregnancy termination is justified as a means to prevent pregnant individuals from inflicting harm on their own mental and physical well-being (Koralewska & Zieleńska, 2021, p. 7; Korolczuk, 2020). Second, as vessels for biological reproduction, pregnant individuals are regarded as separate from the fetuses that they gestate, and their lives and rights are subjugated to the asserted “fetal citizenship” (Kuswa et al., 2008, pp. 168–9; see also Koralewska & Zieleńska, 2021, p. 6). In light of this knowledge, strict abortion laws serve to ensure the legal and “human” rights of fetuses (Korolczuk, 2020). Finally, in view of (potentially) pregnant bodies being receptacles for moral reproduction, heightened control over pregnancy termination deters women from committing an assault on the conservative moral order, and ensures that conservative values are passed on to their children (Altunok, 2016; Koralewska & Zieleńska, 2021, p. 9).

The operations of bio-power examined in this article are two-pronged: in addition to regulating national reproduction through curbing access to abortion, bio-power also seeks to manage public health in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is done through order enforcement, surveillance, disciplinary measures and, above all, population segmentation and division (see Foucault, 1997, p. 198) not only into sick and healthy, but also right and wrong. Under lockdown policies, bio-power was articulated through the curtailment of dissenting public gatherings (Kowalewski, 2020), and, during the 2020 Women’s Strike, sanitary restrictions were used as a pretext for harassing and even brutalizing the dissenters (Osiewicz, 2020, p. 199).

In the Polish government’s discourse on the 2020 Women’s Strike, I propose, this dual bio-power, itself a power/knowledge system (Foucault, 1978), is further enmeshed with “conspiratorial knowledge.” Where “conspiracy theories” describe the specific beliefs “that a group of evil agents, the conspirators, has assumed or is currently trying to assume control over an institution, a region, a nation, or the world” (Butter, 2014, p. 1), I take “conspiratorial knowledge” to describe a peculiar type, rather than content, of knowledge that uses conspiracy theory as a heuristic device to achieve certain ends. Put simply, conspiratorial knowledge seeks to reveal and explain the “hidden forces” and “estranging dynamics” of the alienating modern experience, while muddying the otherwise self-evident “narratives of
truth” (Boyer, 2006, p. 327). It is typically deployed to grasp an emerging, dynamic, dramatic, and complex situation beyond the limits of individual control (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Conspiratorial knowledge often interprets such conditions as a threat to a way of life predicated upon conventional values and demarcated by the “Christian” moral order (Wilson, 2017, p. 421). In such cases, conspiratorial knowledge is imbued with Christian eschatology which tends to portray the seeming transgressions against conservatism as an evil animated by the singular will to destroy the “good” way of life (Polynczuk-Alenius, 2022). From this vantage point, the demands for overthrowing entrenched inequalities and oppressions may appear to be a harbinger of an impending triumph of nihilism, machinated from backstage by hidden forces. Under the conditions of social change, conspiratorial knowledge may thus serve as a therapeutic device to protect the conservatives’ sense of righteousness and their positive self-picture (see Boyer, 2006), even as they support oppression and inequality.

**Empirical case, material, and method**

Methodologically, this article employs Foucauldian discourse analysis. Explicitly concerned with politics (Foucault, 1972), Foucauldian discourse analysis can be described as a “top-down” approach in that it investigates how broader political, ideological and historical issues play out in discourse (Sam, 2019). Discourse is, in turn, conceptualized as a language used by a particular community at a particular spatiotemporal juncture (Olsson, 2010, p. 65). Foucauldian discourse analysis is, therefore, inherently intertextual and contextual. These insights underpin the study of power/knowledge, which entails the interrogation of how subjects to power are discursively produced as objects of knowledge (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). With this in mind, the forthcoming analysis is framed by the following question: **What knowledge(s) inform the construction of women as subjects to bio-power in the Polish government’s discourse on the 2020 Women’s Strike?**

Empirically, the core component of this article is the Foucauldian discourse analysis of a six-minute video address by Jarosław Kaczyński posted on YouTube in response to the massive Women’s Strike demonstrations, which I transcribed and translated into English. The video, titled simply “A statement by the PiS Chairman, Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński” (Oświadczenie Prezesa PiS, Wicepremiera Jarosława Kaczyńskiego) is riveting in two ways. First, there is a jarring discrepancy between the typical aesthetics of content produced for YouTube and the visual “brutalism” of this video, which frames Kaczyński centrally, visible from the chest up, seated behind a desk against a background of Polish flags. Second, Kaczyński’s monotonous voice and unmoving face are shockingly at odds with the emotionally laden content of his speech.

Most substantially, however, the video is significant because it is a clear example of Kaczyński’s proclivity for conspiratorial thinking. In the aftermath of the democratic transition, his conspiratorial tendencies found an outlet in fantasies about a “scheme”, a supposed informal group of post-communists and liberals from the former anti-communist opposition that secretly rules Poland and champions its own interests at the expense of society (Jasiewicz, 2008). Then, following the 2010 Smoleńsk plane
crash, Kaczyński’s conspiratorial knowledge has been channeled into proving that the disaster was the pre-mediated assassination of his twin brother and the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, orchestrated by Russians in collusion with the then Polish government (Czech, 2015).

To date, the video has been viewed almost one million times on YouTube, by far the most watched content ever posted on PiS’s channel,4 whose number of subscribers in December 2021 amounted to less than 13,000. The social media address also stirred extreme emotions in both women’s rights activist circles and oppositional media, where it was interpreted as tacitly asserting to violence against the protestors and, effectively, a declaration of “martial law.”5 I analyzed a small, purposefully selected sample of ten remediations of the video by oppositional media (seven) and activists (three) to illuminate the different forms of epistemic capital – “(quasi-)cognitive” vs “affective” – that the opponents of PiS relied on to refute the conspiratorial knowledge offered by Kaczyński. Crucially, the sample did not aim to be representative or generalizable, but instead purposefully sought to illustrate the two forms of epistemic capital in action.

“Let us defend Poland!”: an analysis of Jarosław Kaczyński’s address

In what follows, I dissect the entanglements between bio-power (and, in particular, the gender knowledge that underpins it) and conspiratorial knowledge, while also signaling the forms of epistemic capital that are brought into play. In so doing, I adhere – for the most part – to the order in which they are introduced in the address.

Kaczyński begins his speech by framing abortion as a matter of “children’s,” and not women’s, rights in a manner familiar from pro-life discourses (Kuswa et al., 2008). Not only does he talk about pregnancy termination having been previously permissible in the case of “severe damage to the child in the prenatal period” (my emphasis), but he also completely erases women and their rights from the equation. In fact, “woman” or “women” are not mentioned once in the 542 words of the original Polish-language version of Kaczyński’s speech. While such framing may appear “factual” in the light of the post-1993 discourse on abortion in Poland, which dislocated its meaning from a medical procedure to killing humans (Koralewska & Zielinska, 2021, p. 3), at its core it relies on the affective conflation of fetuses with babies and is geared toward eliciting affective responses.

After setting the scene, Kaczyński moves on to presenting the Constitutional Tribunal’s ruling, the details of which he never specifies, as an issue of law and procedure rather than of the exercise of bio-power over (potentially) pregnant bodies that it actually is. He makes use of (quasi-)cognitive epistemic capital in representing the further curbing of access to abortion as the only possible outcome under the current legal/constitutional order in Poland: “This ruling is fully consistent with the Polish Constitution. What is more, in light of the Constitution, no other ruling could be given on this matter.” Having mused at length about the ideology of his opponents in the latter part of the address, Kaczyński rhetorically reiterates this argument toward the end of his speech to drive this legalistic framing home: where they have ideology, we have law.

In what follows, the legalistic opening of the speech slips into an affective homage to the leitmotif of Kaczyński’s political thought: the alleged post-communist–liberal “scheme,” which he sees as secretly orchestrating post-communist Poland (Jasiewicz, 2008). He does this by ceding responsibility for the establishment of the present constitutional order, and
hence for the Constitutional Tribunal’s anti-abortion ruling, to the political left: “I would like to remind you that this Constitution was passed by the 1993–97 parliament . . . in which the left had a majority, a very big majority.”

Plugging back into his legalistic framing, Kaczyński alleges that the legitimate ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal has been exploited as a “pretext” for “violent social demonstrations.” This ominous – and, indeed, affective – description allows him to securitize the Women’s Strike for endangering public health and claim that it will “certainly cost the lives of many people,” given the “grave stage of the COVID epidemic.” In doing so, Kaczyński represents the demonstrations as an assault on biological life in a double sense. On the one hand, they “pose general danger” to public health because they provide an excellent opportunity for the coronavirus to spread. On the other hand, by demanding what the deputy prime minister claims is the right to kill unborn children, the protestors threaten the biological continuity of the Polish nation itself (see Koralewska & Zielińska, 2021). Speaking from the position of bio-power – whose primary task is to protect valued life (Inda, 2002), be it born or unborn – Kaczyński urges that the “[a]uthorities have not only the right but also the duty to oppose such events.”

Subsequently, Kaczyński plunges into the affective realm when he suggests that the Women’s Strike poses a threat not only to biological survival, but due to its attacks on churches, also to the moral constitution of the nation. He thereby relocates the responsibility for the moral reproduction of the nation from (potentially) pregnant bodies to the Catholic Church as an institution that is, moreover, materialized in its buildings (see Altunok, 2016; Koralewska & Zielińska, 2021). Indeed, Kaczyński claims that “with complete certainty, this moral deposit wielded by the [Catholic] Church is the only moral system that is universally known in Poland.” Simultaneously, he equates the attacks on churches with the “nihilism” displayed “in those demonstrations”, and that “in the mode of articulation, the expression of those who are protesting, [their] unprecedented, downright vulgarity.” Kaczyński laments that the “harmfulness of this aspect of the [protests] is particularly great” because children (the second and last time children are mentioned in the address) are frequently called to participate in the protests and are, thereby, exposed to irreparable moral damage.

The reference to “nihilism,” i.e., moral decay associated with conspiracy theories about plots intent on destroying “Western” traditions and values, such as the New World Order and Cultural Marxism (Jamin, 2018), directly transports Kaczyński into the realm of conspiratorial knowledge. It is deployed, on the one hand, to protect a positive sense of self (Boyer, 2006) and, on the other, to discredit dissenting voices (Pelkmans & Machold, 2011). Accordingly, nihilism becomes a dividing line between “us” (the virtuous and the right) and “them” (the nihilists and the wrong). “Us” are the state; the “citizens” whose “responsibility” it is to oppose the Women’s Strike; “all members of Law and Justice,” and “those who support us.” “Them” are merely “a certain part of our society.” Significantly, however, “they” are not acting spontaneously but on somebody else’s premeditated volition: “[W]hat is attacked today is attacked nonrandomly” because “[i]n those attacks some elements of preparation, probably even training are very often visible.”

While this claim may simply be considered a perfect illustration of how conspiratorial knowledge is concocted out of thin air, I wish to argue that it is also informed by, and therefore reproduces, conservative gender knowledge (Cavaghan, 2010). Having erased women’s agency and refocused the issue of abortion on fetal rights, Kaczyński is forced to
explain away the massive scale of social mobilizations spearheaded by women, and does so by devising a makeshift conspiracy of “our opponents.” Such attempts at distorting the reality of women’s rights activism have been in evidence in right-wing discourses since the 2016 “Black Protest,” wherein the division was forged between “ordinary” – that is, docile, feminine, and motherly – women, and the vulgar, insensible, and reckless “feminists” who stage protests instigated by leftist groups or international organizations (Koralewska & Zieleńska, 2021, p. 9).

Hence, the allegations of conspiracy are based not on developments on the ground but on preexisting knowledge about the opponents, their moral nihilism, and their evil intentions. Kaczyński casts these intentions in eschatological terms when he pronounces: “This attack is an attack intended to destroy Poland. It aims to result in the triumph of forces whose power will, in fact, put an end to the history of the Polish nation as we have perceived it thus far.” While those forces are never named, their identity can be inferred both from their intentions to uproot the conservative, Christian moral constitution of the Polish nation, and from their battle cries. After all, as Kaczyński proclaims, “our opponents” have “openly declared” war. Three sentences later he insinuates who those enemies might be: the “radical left” that demands “legislation be passed to allow for abortion on request” and, moreover, voices these appeals “among the exclamations: ‘War, war!’” This is where Kaczyński’s conspiratorial misrepresentation of the Women’s Strike clearly betrays its deeply affective roots: his personal grievances and sense of humiliation at having been politically marginalized in the 1990s still compel him to view the political left, implicated in the “scheme” (Jasiewicz, 2008), as a motor of contemporary developments in Poland.

In sum, in his address Kaczyński blends conservative gender knowledge that disenfranchises women with (quasi-)cognitive and affective capital to profess a convoluted theory in which the protests in defense of reproductive rights are recast as a conspiracy, orchestrated by far-left forces, and bent on a three-pronged destruction of the Polish nation. First, he declares the Women’s Strike to be an assault on the legal essence of the nation, embedded in the Constitution and the Constitutional Tribunal’s ruling which draws upon it. Second, Kaczyński claims that the Women’s Strike attempts to annihilate the Polish nation biologically in two ways: by advocating abortion “on demand,” and by facilitating the spread of coronavirus among the thousands-strong crowds of demonstrators. Third, he alleges that the protestors strive for the moral destruction of the Polish nation by attacking the Catholic Church and the “moral system” it represents. Taken together, the securitization of the Women’s Strike as a grave and manifold danger serves to justify its violent subjection to the bio-power’s prerogative to “defend Poland”.

**Analyzing remediations: rejecting bio-power, refuting conspiratorial knowledge?**

This section explores selected remediations of Kaczyński’s video address by, first, media in opposition to Kaczyński and the PiS, and, second by women’s rights activists. In doing so, it hopes to detect any possible epistemic contestations, whereby the rejection of bio-power, exercised by the government over the reproduction of both the human population and viruses, is accompanied by the refutation of conspiratorial knowledge expounded in Kaczyński’s speech. At the same time, it examines how (quasi-)cognitive and affective
Table 1. An overview of various ways in which (quasi-)cognitive and affective epistemic capital are deployed by Jarosław Kaczyński, oppositional media, and women’s rights activists.

| (Quasi-)cognitive epistemic capital | Jarosław Kaczyński | Oppositional media | Women’s rights activists |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| - visual ascetism and minimalist delivery (emotionless expression, monotonous voice) | - abridging and quoting from the original speech | - challenging conservative gender knowledge |
| - legalistic framing of abortion as an issue of constitutional order | - (overstretched) historical parallels and analogies that usher in alternative conspiracy theories | - asserting ownership of, and agency in, the protests |
| - Women’s Strike as a danger to public health | - focus on Kaczyński, his sanity and cynicism, not on protesters | - unmasking Kaczyński’s affects elicited by the protests (humiliation, sense of threat) |

forms of epistemic capital are dragged into these epistemic contestations. An overview of how the two forms of epistemic capital are employed by different actors – Jarosław Kaczyński, oppositional media, and women’s rights activists – is presented in Table 1.

The oppositional media reporting analyzed here covers Kaczyński’s statement, for the most part, by abridging and quoting the text of the address.⁶ At its most combative, oppositional commentaries tend to interpret Kaczyński’s speech as a call to arms and a harbinger of “civil war.”⁷ In so doing, oppositional media refuse to lean upon affective epistemic capital and choose instead to back their dramatic proclamations with cognitive (scopic and historical) “evidence,” which they piece together in a way that bears the stamp of quasi-cognitive epistemic capital and conspiratorial knowledge. Accordingly, the lapel pin associated with Warsaw Uprising worn by Kaczyński is presented as a sign of a looming insurrection.⁸ Likewise, the uncanny resemblance between Kaczyński’s speech and the televised address by General Wojciech Jaruzelski that announced martial law in 1981 is seen to portend the impending introduction of a state of emergency.⁹ The aesthetic and rhetorical similarities between the two speeches are also detailed and exploited in a much-watched mash-up of the two addresses (uploaded by a famous oppositional journalist) which combines their fragments in such a way as to suggest coherent whole.¹⁰

Crucially for this article, the similarities between Jaruzelski and Kaczyński, signaled by oppositional media commentators, include their shared proclivity for conspiratorial thinking: “[t]he same bullshit about foreign forces behind protesting ‘adolescents,’ criminal elements, enemies of the nation and the fatherland.”¹¹ Indeed, this historical analogy combined with Kaczyński’s words about premeditation, “preparation” and “training” seems to warrant the pundits’ interpretation wherein Kaczyński is seen to imply that protestors act as agents of foreign powers and external enemies.¹² While such commentaries acknowledge that the protestors are actually (Polish) women fighting to defend their rights, they only mention this fact in passing. Instead, they are more invested in debunking the conspiratorial knowledge offered by Kaczyński by questioning his sanity,¹³ and/or in declaring it a cynical device to exploit social divisions and relocate the “problem” from the “political” to the “social and cultural” plane.¹⁴
Meanwhile, remediations of the video by women’s rights activists engage in epistemic contestation at another level. Rather than debating the “factuality” of conspiratorial knowledge presented by Kaczyński by challenging his mental faculties or exposing his political cynicism, activist responses focus on refuting the underlying conservative gender knowledge that posits women’s inability to act and mobilize on their own volition. Accordingly, women’s rights activists assert agency in organizing and leading the demonstrations as well as claiming responsibility for instilling fear in Kaczyński (see Ostaszewska, 2018). The former is clearly demonstrated in a video which opens with a statement in white text on a black background with a red lightning bolt – the symbol of the Women’s Strike. The statement, in English, presumably with an international audience in mind, informs the viewer that:

The fundamentalists in power thought that by using the pandemic women will not leave their homes to fight for our fundamental rights, but guess what we didn’t stay at home. We are on the streets day in and day out, on the front lines of this war! We are shouting, screaming, blocking, dancing, painting, demonstrating and fighting all across Poland.15

By taking ownership of the “war,” which Kaczyński otherwise attributes to some more or less unknown forces, and affectively asserting their agency in carrying out protests, women’s rights activists refute the argument about women’s docility and passivity on which the perception of their being the pawns of a conspiracy rests.

Furthermore, in contrast to (at least some) oppositional media which interpret the speech as an offensive move to pre-emptively justify further violence, women’s rights activists take Kaczyński’s affects rather as a defense in the face of great fear and humiliation. A meme posted on the Facebook page of the All-Poland Women’s Strike – one of the main organizers of both the 2020 Women’s Strike and earlier demonstrations – illustrates this well: a still image extracted from the recording of Kaczyński’s address is superimposed on a black background and is accompanied by a quote from one of the key figures of the movement, “Marta Lempart: I am enormously pleased by Kaczyński’s humiliation. He was forced to speak to the people.”16 This sense of women’s agency aligns well with the Foucauldian understanding of resistance as emanating from the body and, therefore, already preceding the power projected on that body (Beckett, Bagguley, & Campbell, 2017). By moving within the affective register to upend the action-reaction dynamic between bio-power and its (women) subjects configured in conservative gender knowledge, women’s rights activists undercut the conspiratorial knowledge offered by Kaczyński at its very root.

Concluding remarks

This article has sought to analyze the entanglements between bio-power and conspiratorial knowledge in the Polish government’s discourse on the 2020 Women’s Strike protests as epitomized in the YouTube video address by Jarosław Kaczyński. In this regard, the article exposed the narrative in which the protests in defense of reproductive rights were recast as a conspiracy bent on the legal, biological, and moral destruction of the Polish nation. While Kaczyński strove to apply a “factual”, (quasi-)cognitive filter to his speech (by means of both the mode of delivery, and by framing abortion legalistically as an issue of constitutional order), what gave it its unmistakably conspiratorial tinge was the affective epistemic capital on which he drew. The humiliation he had felt at having been on the political backburner in the 1990s prompted
him to concoct the idea of a post-communist–liberal conspiracy bent on uprooting traditional and conservative values from Polish public life (Jasiewicz, 2008). The threat posed by the 2020 Women’s Strike of being once again rendered redundant affectively activated his conspiratorial thinking, which subsequently converged with his conservative gender knowledge to spawn an idea of conspiracy geared toward the legal, biological, and moral destruction of the Polish nation. This conspiratorial knowledge worked as a therapeutic shield that protected Kaczyński’s sense of righteousness and positive self-picture in the face of mass mobilization and social anger (see Boyer, 2006).

In addition, I studied a small sample of remediations of the video by oppositional media and women’s rights activists to see how they engaged (quasi-)cognitive and/or affective epistemic capital to refute conspiratorial knowledge disseminated in Kaczyński’s speech. Oppositional media attempted to counter Kaczyński’s conspiratorial knowledge through recourse to seemingly observable and objective evidence. In so doing, they interpreted the address by drawing (overtretched) historical parallels to the 1981 televised speech announcing the introduction of martial law. However, their obsession with the cognitive domain, and simultaneous negligence of affect, had two pitfalls. On the one hand, by relying on tangential “evidence” (a lapel pin, the visual aesthetics of the video), magnified to reveal intentions that were already always known from the past, oppositional commentators produced their own brand of conspiratorial knowledge. On the other hand, their off the cuff dismissals of Kaczyński’s conspiratorial claims as factually baseless musings diverted attention from the affects that motivated those claims and the agents and actions that had provoked such affects. Consequently, instead of supporting the protestors and their cause, some oppositional commentators had the audacity to tone police the demonstrations: “Such actions [attacks on churches] were stupid, completely uncalled for, and harmful for the protestors themselves as well as to the ideal they fight for.” Thus, effectively, the oppositional media neither rejected bio-power nor did they refute conspiratorial knowledge, but merely substituted them with the bio-power and conspiratorial knowledge of their own.

Women’s right activists, in contrast, actively opposed bio-power and employed affective epistemic capital to undermine conspiratorial knowledge promulgated by Kaczyński. Agency, empowerment, solidarity, sisterhood, and the anger of the Women’s Strike flew in the face of the conservative gender knowledge from which Kaczyński inferred the existence of an anti-Polish cabal. Indeed, by tuning in to their subjective experiences and amplifying their embodied knowledge, the protestors did not even explicitly have to engage with conspiratorial knowledge in order to refute it.

In sum, this article dissected the entanglements between bio-power and conspiratorial knowledge, as well as between conspiratorial knowledge and two forms of epistemic capital. In doing so, it provided an insight into some tactics of how (not) to engage with conspiratorial knowledge. Furthermore, while the tentative distinction between (quasi-)cognitive and affective epistemic capital proposed in this article was revealed by a small-scale and purposeful empirical excursion, it may serve as a starting point for future studies dealing with larger and more randomly generated datasets.

Notes
1. https://youtu.be/RJFpNxPr81M
2. http://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/oswiadczenie-prezesa-pis-wicepremiera-jaroslaw-jakub-kaczyńskiego/

fbclid=IwAR1_Pz6PpsGMXpM7j-07Yob8DGH-1zyjR163ES53Si1TiNHNo5lfgglZjJdno
3. Throughout this article, I use “women” inclusively in recognition of the important role that the LGBTQ+ community played in co-organizing the protests. For reasons of inclusivity, I also talk about “(potentially) pregnant,” rather than “female” bodies whenever possible.

4. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4GvtI6k6GP7A0u06ECbvlg
5. https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art453571-komentarze-po-slowach-kaczynskiego-oglasza-stan-wojenny
6. https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/protest-kobiet-ws-aborcji-jaroslaw-kaczynski-komentuje-owiadzenie/8zm3j7t; https://tvn24.pl/polska/jaroslaw-kaczynski-wydal-owiadzenie-naemat-protestow-po-orzeczeniu-tk-ws-aborcji-wideo-4733729
7. https://www.rmf24.pl/raporty/raport-strajk-kobiet/news-kaczynski-wypowiedzial-wojnepoleczenstwu-opozycja-krytykuj,nId,4819008#crp_state=1
8. https://natemat.pl/324875.przemowienie-kaczynskiego-mial-w-klapie-znaczek-powstania-warszawskiego
9. https://www.rmf24.pl/raporty/raport-strajk-kobiet/news-kaczynski-wypowiedzial-wojnepoleczenstwu-opozycja-krytykuj,nId,4819008#crp_state=1
10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8-hsV4VVJI. Another similar mashup can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GiOuU56L1o
11. https://wyborcza.pl/7,16265726446491,dzis-kaczynski-wezwal-do-rozlewu-kwiprawdziwej-i-tego-mu.html
12. https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,11488426446,606,ani-pol-kroku-wstecz-kaczynski-wydal-rozkaz-idiemy-na-pelne.html; https://oko.press/owiadzenie-kaczynskiego-histeria-zagrozonego-satrapy/
13. https://bezprawnik.pl/jaroslaw-kaczynski-odpowiada/
14. https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,11488426446606,ani-pol-kroku-wstecz-kaczynski-wydal-rozkaz-idiemy-na-pelne.html
15. https://youtu.be/ASRfbYoNll0
16. https://www.facebook.com/ogolnopolskistrajkkobiet/photos/a.1544723065553686/5294246313934657/
17. https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,11488426446606,ani-pol-kroku-wstecz-kaczynski-wydal-rozkaz-idiemy-na-pelne.html

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