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The Unflattering Image of Brazilian Politics in the Polish Media – the Case of Dilma Rousseff's Impeachment

La inolvidable imagen de la política brasileña en los medios polacos: el caso de impeachment de Dilma Rousseff

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Abstract: The Polish media does not report a lot on Brazilian politics, but that changed during the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. The article is an analysis of different sources of news and comments in Polish press and the Internet and tries to synthesize a comprehensive image of Brazilian politics, which was made available to the Polish reader in 2016. It concludes that this image is definitely negative and pessimistic, focuses a lot on corruption as the source of all problems, but rarely touches on the more subtle issues like inequality or racism. Moreover, it is clear that Polish journalists transfer their own political views onto their judgments about the impeached president.

Keywords: Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, media in Poland, 21st century, politics, impeachment.

Resumen: En los medios de comunicación polacos no había mucha información sobre la política brasileña hasta el juicio político de Dilma Rousseff. Este artículo es un análisis de diferentes fuentes de noticias y comentarios en la prensa polaca e Internet e intenta sintetizar una imagen comprensiva de la política brasileña puesta a disposición del lector polaco en 2016. En conclusión, esta imagen es definitivamente negativa y pesimista, se centra mucho en la corrupción como origen de todos los problemas, pero rara vez toca los temas más sutiles como la desigualdad o el racismo. Por otra parte, es evidente que los periodistas polacos transmiten sus opiniones políticas y expresan sus juicios sobre el presidente impugnado.

Palabras clave: Brasil, Dilma Rousseff, medios en Polonia, siglo XXI, política, destitución (impeachment).

Even though Brazil is one of the largest countries in the world, has a top ten economy and strong international aspirations, Polish mass media rarely discuss its politics. Most outlets focus on sports or cultural events, which are of course plentiful. Sometimes some commentary appears to dwell on the country's social problems, which are so extreme in their nature, that even the Polish reader or viewer can find them interesting, although still quite exotic. However, this situation changed considerably in 2016, when some of Poland's biggest news providers commented thoroughly on the impeachment trial of Dilma Rousseff.

This article analyzes the narratives about the Brazilian president's impeachment in Polish mass media to find out what image of Brazilian politics they paint. This seems especially interesting in the context of evolving bilateral relations between Poland and Brazil, which in the last

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decade have been working to become closer trading partners, as can be seen in their strategic plans at the governmental level. So far Poles have little knowledge of Latin America, and the images they get from mass media shape their views and expectations more than any other source. It is therefore important to know if the Polish media is objective enough to not shatter Brazil's image even while it is enduring a political crisis. It is also necessary to answer the following questions: Was the Polish media objective in their narrative? Did they at any point present a position of moral high ground? What words and phrases did they use to describe the impeachment, its context and the entire Brazilian political scene? What can the Polish reader conclude about the impeachment, Brazilian politics and Brazil itself?

The source articles for this analysis were chosen based on their publisher's popularity in Poland as well as their focus (political/economical). They were published in daily newspapers (*Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*) and weeklies (*Polityka*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Wprost*) or appeared in web portals. Among the latter were web portals connected to TV news channels (*TVN24* - tvn24.pl) or radio stations (*Radio ZET* - radiozet.pl), as well as universal portals with general news (*Wirtualna Polska* - wp.pl), or dedicated portals about politics (*wPolityce.pl*) or finance (*Bankier.pl*, *WP money* - Money.pl, *forsal.pl*). The chosen articles were published between December 2015 and early September 2016. Their content and the image of Brazilian politics that it presents when taken as a whole was then compared with the latest comprehensive Polish publication about Brazil – *Brazylia, kraj przyszłości?* (English: *Brazil, the country of the future?*) edited by Janina Petelczyc and Marek Cichy (Petelczyc, Cichy, 2016). The book deals with many subjects and presents a very complete view on political and social matters in Brazil. It is co-authored by numerous specialists and thus may serve as a useful and compact source for comparison.

The chronological narration of the events and the comments in Polish media

The news coverage on Dilma Rousseff's impeachment began early, in December 2015. It contained reports of the proposal by Eduardo Cunha, the President of the Chamber of Deputies of Brazil, who accepted the request to begin the impeachment proceedings. Apart from TV coverage which was not analyzed, some of the first written news appeared in the TVN24 web portal, where they were accompanied by statements of a "deepening political and economic crisis" and messages about the Brazilian political establishment being "close to paralysis in result of a corruption scandal", already creating a very pessimistic outlook (Poważne zarzuty wobec prezydent Rousseff..., 2015; Brazylia: Parlament rozpoczął procedurę, 2015). Print media also did not present the Brazilian situation in bright colors, with *Rzeczpospolita* writing about the "sunken economy", rising inflation and unemployment, comparing it to very

positive past opinions about the Brazilian Bolsa Família social program, the country's growing economy and fast democratization (Jendroszczyk, 2015). December also brought the reports of the mass demonstrations in São Paulo and smaller cities, pointing out the Brazilians' discontent with their country's recession and the Petrobras corruption scandal (Stroje więzienne, spalone trumny..., 2015; Brazylia: wielotysięczne demonstracje, 2015).

The most interesting commentary on December's events appeared in the first January issue of *Polityka*, authored by Artur Domosławski, who is the newspaper's correspondent in Brazil. In contrast to the early news reports, this article was a subjective opinion written by an author known for his fondness for the Latin American left. Domosławski (2016g) used humorous metaphors to describe Brazil's political and economic situation and did not hesitate to state that Eduardo Cunha had always been adept at political intrigues. He was also the first journalist to emphasize the verbal and sometimes physical violence caused by the political turmoil which had not been seen in Brazil for at least two decades. The examples given were those of Congressmen and Congresswomen cursing and shoving each other – actions that were later mimicked by the general population, even among family members, who did not share the same political views. Domosławski recounted the country's previous success in combining economic development and improving social inclusion, yet pointed out the idealistic left's failure to distance itself from corruption. He suggested that Rousseff might only be the scapegoat, singled out to appease the discontented masses, while corruption still stained the political elite as a whole (Domosławski, 2016a).

Polish media had then stayed mostly silent until the investigation of the Petrobras scandal gained more international publicity in March 2015, when the former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva officially became one of the suspects. TVN24.pl posted an explicit headline "The scandal of the century in Brazil" (Skandal stulecia..., 2016) and unlike earlier, in December, this time more media showed interest in Brazil. Many agencies reported on the charges against Lula and his concurrent nomination for a government office, which resulted in a new wave of mass demonstrations against Rousseff (Łomanowski, 2016; Brazylijczycy mają dość prezydenta..., 2016; Gdy przemawia prezydent..., 2016). All the articles described the demonstrations as peaceful, yet unexpectedly large, while some of them hinted that the president might want to protect her predecessor by giving him an immunity connected with the government seat. However, little was written about Lula's quick removal from his new office (Brazylia: burzliwe dni..., 2016). One of the financial web portals observed that Lula's arrest caused a rise in the stock markets, which became optimistic with the possibility for a swift change of power in Brazil (Frączyk, 2016).

Besides the generally objective and non-emotive reports in March, there were two interesting articles which appeared in *Wprost* and *Polityka*. The first one was written by Kamil Nadolski and had a very telling title: "The left finishes off the Amazonian colossus". Apart from

recounting a short history of Lula and the Petrobras investigation, the author focused on the left's responsibility for the economic crisis, which was being made even worse by the huge scandal (Nadolski, 2016). Artur Domosławski however presented a different opinion in his article in *Polityka*. He claimed that the rightist oligarchy, which controlled the justice system and the media, decided to destroy Lula's authority and deprive him of the respect he still had among the poor by implicating him in the corruption scandal. Domosławski observed that Lula's arrest was likely orchestrated to be sensational and all charges against him are still very weak (Domosławski, 2016b).

The following months brought an increasing interest in the impeachment of Rousseff, with many new sources writing about it in April and May. Polish media became aware that the impeachment was not only a possibility, but almost a certainty, after the Brazilian parliament discussed and voted in favor of the procedure in mid-April. Even the newspapers and web portals that ignored the events in December and March began reporting with astonishing frequency. Among them were: *Wirtualna Polska* (Parlament Brazylii za impeachmentem..., 2016), *wPolityce.pl* (Prezydent Brazylii zostanie usunięta z urzędu..., 2016; Parlament za usunięciem prezydent..., 2016) and *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Stasiński, 2016a). The first of these sources also published an interesting commentary by Oskar Górczyński, who compared the political intrigue in Brazil to a screenplay in which there are no positive characters and no foreseeable happy ending. He stressed the scale of the recent scandal, calling it a "world record in corruption", but also observed that Rousseff might have actually been the least corrupt of all people implicated in the investigation, while her political opponents were probably the most guilty. The article concluded that the crisis was an end to an era, which started in 2003 and would certainly paralyze Brazil's institutions in a very difficult year (Górczyński, 2016). At the same time, Jędrzej Bielecki wrote in *Rzeczpospolita*, that because so many of Brazilian politicians were involved in corrupt practices, the country might not only have problems with solving the crisis, but even be left with a worse political system than the one it had (Bielecki, 2016a).

As in previous months, in April some of the more subjective yet entertaining opinions were presented by Domosławski in *Polityka*. First, he cited that the Brazilian left was now calling Vice President Temer a traitor (Domosławski, 2016c). Later, he wrote that the fence, which the police had to install next to the parliament building after clashes with the protestors, would grow to become a symbol of an insurmountable division in Brazilian society (Domosławski, 2016d). His opinion was then expanded in a longer article titled "The counterrevolution of the satiated", in which he once again observed that Brazilians were as much divided as they had been during the military dictatorship. Domosławski compared the Brazilian crisis to the ones in Honduras in 2009 and Paraguay in 2012, where presidents were removed by "bloodless coups" instigated by the rightist oligarchy, whose power had been diminished by the rising influence of other social classes. The journalist attempted to explain to

Polish readers the reasons of the crisis by describing the unfavorable economic conditions caused partially by past mistakes and corruption, which caused the left to lose its moral high ground. Domosławski did not hesitate to paint a negative picture of the judge Sergio Moro, who was leading the investigation on Petrobras, by pointing out his political connections and his ambiguous practices, which favored some people and crushed others. He also used strong words to describe the political violence and hatred, which spilled from the houses of parliament into the streets and homes of all Brazilians (Domosławski, 2016e).

The vote in Brazilian Senate in May, which formally suspended Rousseff and placed Temer in her seat, sparked another series of news and comments in Polish media. Not only did even more sources write about the impeachment, its legal status (*Polityczny thriller...*, 2016) and a new wave of demonstrations (*Senat Brazylii zdecydował...*, 2016; *Impeachment wobec Dilmy Rousseff...*, 2016; *Brazylia: Dilma Rousseff oficjalnie zawieszona...*, 2016), they did so in a noticeably bolder manner. Bielecki wrote an article in *Rzeczpospolita* titled “The carnival of hypocrites” and added an explicit subheadline: “Corrupt senators removed an equally corrupt president from office. What’s next for democracy?” The author continued the narrative from his previous article in the same newspaper and focused on describing Brazilian politics as rotten to the core (Bielecki, 2016b). *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* published another quite negative article in May, written by Mariusz Janik, who described the impeachment as being only the top of the iceberg in a country riddled with corruption, racial conflicts and sexism. He summarized Brazil’s history in the last few decades as a history of corruption, political ineptness and overreaching policies (Janik, 2016). Moreover, *Wprost* published an article titled “The Brazilian soap opera”, containing a negative opinion of the Brazilian justice system and an idea that during the crisis the judges may gain some political ground, while the actual political elite lose it (*Brazylijska telenowela...*, 2016). The problem of possibly renewed racial tensions became the focus of some other articles, which described the all-white-male new government as a reminder of past dictatorship in a country where the majority of people are of non-white or mixed origin (Melnyk, 2016). As with past comments about Brazilian politics, there were some which were sympathetic to the left (Domosławski, 2016f), while others put most responsibility for the crisis on the long leftist rule since 2003 (*Brazylia: upadek lewicy...*, 2016). Whatever the authors’ views, most of them admitted that the impeachment was already a done deal and the August voting would be a formality.

During the 180 days after Rousseff was suspended and Temer was the acting president Polish media kept reporting on the political situation in Brazil. Even though not directly related to the impeachment procedure, new information on corruption in Brazil’s politics was given and commented. This happened after the resignations of Temer’s three ministers. The first was Romero Jucá, who resigned after the emergence of a secret recording in which he discussed ways to stall the Petrobras

investigation. All reports emphasized the loss of authority of the new government and how Jucá was not the only high-ranking politician involved in the huge corruption scandal (Stasiński, 2016b). Then the second minister, Fabiano Silveira, resigned after a very similar scandal involving secret recordings showing his displeasure with the investigation. This event was also reported on in Poland with the added comment, that it gave Rousseff another reason to call her impeachment a “political coup” (*Afera korupcyjna w Petrobras...*, 2016). Later, in June, Polish news providers reported on the resignation of Henrique Eduardo Alves, who was at the time implicated in the Petrobras scandal by a key witness, although the reports did not contain any new critical assessments (*Brazylia: dymisja ministra...*, 2016). After the sensational news about the new government’s problematic staff Polish media went mostly silent until August. There were only a handful short articles whenever a high-ranking Brazilian official said something about Rousseff’s future, like the ones that appeared after Eliseu Padilha displayed some concern about her possible return (*W Brazylii impeachment jeszcze nie przesądzony*, 2016).

August started slowly for Polish readers interested in Brazil, with some news about Rousseff’s proposed referendum, which was supposed to speed up the election and stop her impeachment procedure (*Brazylia: Rousseff proponuje referendum...*, 2016). Before the final trial and the voting in the Brazilian Senate, Polish news providers did not present any new opinions or commentaries, because they were absorbed by the Olympics. There were however, two colorful articles by Domosławski in *Polityka*, in which he once again described the animosity among the Brazilians caused by the political events (Domosławski, 2016g) and presented the sad image of the Brazilian society’s problems, made worse by the huge sports festival. According to the author, the Olympics did not pave the way for a brighter future, as Lula had planned, but instead let the past problems back into the spotlight (Domosławski, 2016h).

The amount of news, reports and commentaries by Polish journalists increased drastically in late August, when the last phase of the impeachment trial began in the Senate on 25 August. They reminded their readers of the charges against Rousseff and predicted that the Senate will undoubtedly remove her from office (*Ważą się losy...*, 2016; *Coraz bliżej ostatecznego odsunięcia...*, 2016; *Brazylia: Senat rozpoczął proces...*, 2016; *Brazylia: ostatnia faza procesu...*, 2016). Before the final vote, the web portal WP money published an interesting interview by Agata Kołodziej with Janina Petelczyc, which was one of the few broad commentaries that appeared at the time in Polish media. The author’s introduction to the interview painted a very unflattering image of Brazilian politics and Petelczyc admitted that the scale of corruption in Brazil was huge and the Petrobras scandal was one of the primary reasons why the Olympics had to be held in unfinished buildings. She emphasized that Rousseff might be one of the very few Brazilian politicians not guilty of corruption, but the president did make a mistake by withholding crucial information in 2014. Petelczyc told the interviewer that Brazil

had lost its chance for greatness, which might benefit other global players, mainly the United States (Kołodziej, 2016).

On 31 August, after 61 senators had voted to impeach Rousseff, most of the Polish news providers promptly informed about it. Among them were those who had barely mentioned the impeachment before. They described the overwhelming paralysis of the whole country during the previous months, the strong evidence against other high-ranking officials in corruption investigations and that the outgoing president called the impeachment a “parliamentary coup”. What was important, the news contained comments about the poor state of Brazilian economy and predictions that it would not improve any time soon (Prezydent Brazylii odsunięta..., 2016; Impeachment prezydent Brazylii..., 2016; Dilma Rousseff nie jest już prezydentem..., 2016; Dilma Rousseff odsunięta..., 2016).

Once again, the most informative and colorful were articles written by journalists somehow connected to Latin America or Iberian culture. Maciej Stasiński wrote an article for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in which he concluded that the systemic corruption, even though it has always been present, now did irreparable damage to the reputation of the Brazilian economic and political elites, while Rousseff became a scapegoat (Stasiński, 2016c). He also suggested that the former president had no supporters left and no demonstrations in her defense were held. However, some media noticed that Rousseff's supporters did go out to the streets of Sao Paulo and clashed with the police (Zwolennicy odsuniętej prezydent..., 2016). Two days later Stasiński wrote another article, which was much more emotional and explicit. He began by stating that the impeachment was caused not by Rousseff's fiscal manipulations, but by her proving that the parliamentarians were not in fact “beautiful, honest and rich” people. According to the author, Brazilian democracy was severely harmed when the punishment became far too severe for the crimes committed by Rousseff. He suggested that the better solution would be to let the people decide instead of the ruling plutocracy, which was afraid of losing its grasp on power and money. In light of the events, Stasiński described Brazilians as being “always late for a date with their destined greatness” – their governments have always failed to deliver on the promise of grandeur and fortune proportional to the vastness of their country. Once again he wrote about Lula and his reforms and how the international financial institutions and liberal media felt safe that he would not become like Hugo Chávez or Fidel Castro and successfully intertwine economic development with democracy and social justice. However, the authority of the former president got severely damaged by the impeachment of his successor and the corruption charges against himself. The article was closed by the statement, that “Brazil is now sourly confronting her own reflection in the mirror” (Stasiński, 2016d). Equally pessimistic views were presented by Artur Domosławski in his short article in *Polityka*, which described the danger that the current situation in Brazil presents to democracy. He stated that the apathy that was spreading amongst the Brazilian people might make it easier for some

parties to reduce the meaning of democracy in Brazil (Domosławski, 2016i).

The image of Brazilian politics in Brazylia, kraj przyszłości?

In their introduction, Petelczyc and Cichy admitted that when they decided to write the book, they thought that Brazil was indeed “the country of the future”. All signs pointed to this fact: all the global sports events, the growing international influence, the social projects that significantly bettered the life of the poor. They asked the question: “What do we in Poland know about modern Brazil? Did it fulfill the prophecy and become the country of the future?” Unfortunately, the political crisis of 2016 proved that the road was still ahead and might be bumpier than previously expected.

The book contains an interview with Ladislau Dowbor, a Brazilian economist, who focused on all the good that Lula did for the poorest in Brazil. He claimed that all the social programs created a large support base for the president, but worried about the old oligarchy. That support however began to wane in 2013, when the response to mass demonstrations was an unnecessary use of violence by the police – an unquestionable political mistake. Dowbor also took notice of the creation of a system of an economic and political boycott by Rousseff’s opposition and emphasized that the rules of the financial system were Brazil’s biggest problem. When the government tried to deal with it, it encountered huge opposition, which eventually led to Rousseff’s trouble and impeachment trial. Dowbor did not hesitate to point out that the oligarchy was working with international corporations and media, diluting and changing the truth, buying the judges and parliamentarians. He concluded that democracy was indeed under attack and its future was uncertain (Petelczyc, Cichy, 2016).

In another chapter, titled “The specter of corruption” (Widmo korupcji), Jarosław Pietrzak dealt with corruption in Brazil. He admitted that Brazil is a corrupt country and Brazilians themselves have always pointed at corruption as one of the biggest problems that their country was facing. The Petrobras scandal was definitely the biggest blow to transparency, but also proved that corruption did not go unpunished any longer. Pietrzak stated that corruption might be a cover topic, which allows the media to stay silent about even bigger problems like inequality, while it also transforms politics from problem solving into a sermon. The author pointed out that Rousseff was definitely not guilty of corruption, but nonetheless became a target of judge Moro, who has always been connected to the neoliberal right. He also described the Brazilian media as working for the oligarchy, being politically motivated and never objective. His essay concluded with statements that inequality is the most pressing concern and the PT party should have done better to change the status quo instead of adapting to it (Pietrzak, 2016).

A very unflattering description of Brazilian politics was also given in the book by Magdalena Walczuk, who wrote that the recent scandals

and the political crisis are an effect of corruption, self-serving, nepotism and clientelism. She summarized the Brazilian political class as unable to distinguish between what is public and private or to plan ahead (Walczuk, 2016: 279-282). The book also contains a large section dedicated to the most pressing social problems, of which the most important one is equality. The issue is accompanied by colonial mentality, racial tensions and sexism. Much attention was paid by the authors to the flawed pension system and public safety. They stated that the governments of Lula and Rousseff had been doing much to alleviate these, but they did not have an easy task and a lot was still to be done.

To summarize, *Brazylia, kraj przyszłości?* presents a noticeably negative and pessimistic view of Brazilian politics. However, the book tries to pinpoint the reasons for the status quo and finds them mostly among social and political problems, which are inherent to the Brazilian society and do harm from the most basic level of life up to the highest echelons of power. Moreover, the authors were rather sympathetic to the Brazilian left, the PT party and former presidents Lula and Rousseff, regarding them as the only viable political force able to implement social and economic reforms which would benefit the whole society.

Conclusions

The editors of Polish newspapers and web portals have been paying varying attention to political events in Latin America, including Brazil. Some seem to be not interested in Latin American politics at all, others rely on single journalists and authors who specialize in Latin American matters, and some have buoyant editorial offices that show great interest in politics on all other continents. Among those with the most information on the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff were: *Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Polityka*, *Wprost*, *TVN24*, *Bankier.pl* and *forsal.pl*. The high amount of information in the latter two sources proves that Polish economists are especially interested in Brazil's political affairs.

Superficially, the nature of news reports was objective, although when taken as a whole narrative, they presented a rather negative image of Brazilian politics. Words like "corruption", "scandal", "affair" and "crisis" were used very frequently, while very little positive phrases appeared to counterbalance the former. The reports definitely focused on Brazil's problems, while marginalizing its successes. Moreover, they placed corruption as the main culprit in the country's crisis, while paying little to no attention to the more convoluted issues like inequality.

In contrast, the commentaries and analyses were noticeably subjective and sometimes very emotional. It was evident, that their undertone was different in media commonly connected to the Polish right and those presenting a rather leftist or liberal world view. The former showed clearly less interest in any Brazilian matters, and if they did show it they focused on how the leftist governments of Brazil brought the political crisis onto themselves. They were also quicker to define Rousseff as corrupt

herself. The latter, especially in the articles by Jasiński and Domosławski, were sympathetic to Rousseff and the PT party, which tried to deliver on its promises but was stopped in its tracks by opposing forces like the rightist oligarchy, corporations and media. The authors with more personal connection to Brazil or Iberian culture were also the only ones pointing out issues like inequality or racial tensions.

In conclusion, all researched sources available to the Polish reader were eventually pessimistic about Brazil's current political state and its future. Domosławski, in his article in September 2016, admitted that Brazil could forever stay "the country of the future", without actually reaching the greatness that awaited it (Domosławski, 2016i). This is mostly in line with what Petelczyc and Cichy wrote in the introduction to their book and what was presented in its body. Both the press, all Internet sources and *Brazylia, kraj przyszłości?* created a negative and pessimistic image of Brazilian politics, while differing only in the nature of their arguments. The Polish reader might sympathize with the impeached president, depending on his own political views, but he did not receive a comprehensive and objective picture of Brazil from the media, unless he drew from more than one source and showed personal critical analysis skills.

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