

*Klaudia Wolniewicz-Slomka*¹

Parliamentary Discourse on Pensions below Minimum: An Analysis on Social (In)justice in Poland

Abstract

In this article, I analyse the discourse on the so called “paltry pensions” – pensions below the minimum – in the Polish Parliament from 2014–2024. The aim of this article is to contribute to ongoing research on the emerging phenomenon of “paltry pensions” in Poland by investigating the opinions of those who shape the pension system and who may be responsible for addressing this issue in the future. I frame my analysis around three categories: problematisation, values and solutions, focusing on social justice and objectives of pension policy. I draw on transcripts of debates from both the upper and the lower house, as well as their relevant committees, analysing content regarding “paltry pensions” derived from 47 parliamentary documents. I employ critical discourse analysis alongside a discursive strategy approach (Wodak and Reisigl 2001). The results show that “paltry pensions” are perceived as a serious problem that requires urgent solutions to ensure that citizens are provided with a dignified and secure future. However, this issue is often omitted in the process of forming public policy, and thus it remains unresolved. In their discourse, Members of Parliament frequently refer to social justice – an issue they strongly believe will facilitate the development of a policy that ensures a more equitable distribution of pensions among citizens. These findings provide insights into the positions of members of the Polish Parliament and enhance our understanding of the current debate on this growing issue.

¹ Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, e-mail: klaudia.wolniewicz@ifispan.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8839-9113>

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Dyskurs parlamentarny na temat emerytur poniżej minimalnej: analiza (nie)sprawiedliwości społecznej w Polsce

Streszczenie:

W artykule analizuję dyskurs na temat tzw. „emerytur groszowych” – emerytur poniżej minimalnej – w polskim parlamencie w latach 2014–2024. Celem analizy jest przyjrzenie się zjawisku tzw. emerytur groszowych w Polsce i poznanie opinii tych, którzy tworzą system emerytalny i mogą być odpowiedzialni za rozwiązanie (lub nie) tego problemu w przyszłości. W badaniu odwołuję się do trzech kategorii badawczych, tj. problematyki, wartości oraz rozwiązań, skupiając się na sprawiedliwości społecznej i celach polityki emerytalnej. Analizą objęłam 47 tekstów ze stenogramów z posiedzeń Sejmu i Senatu RP oraz ich komisji. Wykorzystuję podejście i narzędzia Krytycznej Analizy Dyskursu (Wodak i Reisigl, 2001). Wyniki analizy pokazują, że „emerytury groszowe” postrzegane są przez parlamentarzystów jako poważny problem, wymagający pilnych rozwiązań, jeśli państwo ma zapewnić obywatelom godną i bezpieczną przyszłość. Jak dotąd potrzeba rozwiązania tego problemu ma jedynie wymiar dyskursywny, a problem ten nie został rozwiązany. Parlamentarzyści często odwołują się do sprawiedliwości społecznej – zdaje się, że odwołanie to ma pomóc w prowadzeniu polityki bardziej równomiernego podziału emerytur między obywateli. Analiza dyskursu parlamentarnego uzupełnia istniejące badania zjawiska tzw. emerytur groszowych o wgląd w stanowiska posłów polskiego parlamentu i pomaga zrozumieć stan debaty na temat tego narastającego problemu.

Słowa kluczowe: emerytury poniżej minimalnej, Krytyczna Analiza Dyskursu (KAD), analiza dyskursu parlamentarnego, cele polityki emerytalnej, sprawiedliwość społeczna

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: D73, H55, I31, J18, J32

Introduction

The vast majority of Poles (85%) receive pensions paid by the Social Insurance Institution (SII, known in Polish as Social Insurance Institution, ZUS). Since January 1, 1999, a new pension system has been in place today. The most significant change introduced by this system was the transition from a defined benefit to a defined con-

tribution model, which means that the amount of pension benefits is closely correlated with an individual's total past contributions. Under the current system, the total amount of an individual's past contributions is strongly correlated with the pension benefits they receive.

Where once a sufficiently long contribution period was required to receive a pension, that is no longer the case. Essentially, such an administrative language means that “even people who have paid their SII contributions for a very short period, for example, for only one month or one year, can receive a pension, albeit an extremely low one” (Bieńkowski and Życzyńska-Ciołek, 2023: 54).

This has led to a situation in which some people receive pensions that are lower – and even significantly lower – than the minimum pension as set by the state, which currently constitutes PLN 1780.96 gross (EUR 413). In extreme cases, these paltry pensions amount to a few pennies, hence the term “emerytury groszowe” in Polish, referring to grosz, the Polish Zloty's cent. The number of pensioners receiving below-minimum pensions has increased in the past few years. According to an SII report (2024), almost 400,000 people received lower-than-minimum pensions in December 2023, and this number might potentially increase up to as many as 600,000 by 2030 (Sobolewski, 2022). The system provides the possibility of increasing the “paltry pension” to the amount of the minimum pension, but under the condition of a sufficiently long insurance period (20–25 years). The first time that paltry pensions were paid was in 2009, to women, and then five years later to men, which is a result of the retirement age difference between women and men. As a result, in recent years, the debate around “paltry pensions” has incrementally developed to become an important talking point in Polish society.

Although this article focuses on the discourse about the phenomenon of “paltry pensions” without going into details about who the “paltry pensioners” are, I would like to briefly present them. The majority of those who receive pensions below minimum are women (80.2%). Nevertheless, for several years there has been a growing percentage of men receiving “paltry pensions” (in December 2014–1.2%, in December 2022–19.8%) (SII, 2023: 4). The average age of people receiving these pensions in December 2022 was 66 (for women it was 65.4, for men – 68.4). Szukalski (2023) conducted a survey of 1,309 “paltry pensioners”, among whom 2% had higher education, two-thirds have basic vocational education and 73% are in formal relationships (Szukalski, 2023: 61–62). Given that no sampling frame of “paltry pensioners” exists, these results need to be taken with a pinch of salt.

The following discourse refers to social fairness of the benefits, the concept of social justice, and, more broadly speaking, the objectives of pension policy in Poland. Subsequently, this is an issue that has recently been addressed in the Polish media

(including Bartman, 2024; Biskupski, 2024; Sobolewski, 2022; Szewioła, 2022) and again more recently by researchers (Bieńkowski and Życzyńska-Ciołek, 2023; Szukalski et al., 2023). As it is a relatively new topic of research, it is an area that needs further investigation, not only because of the accelerated increase in “paltry pensioners”, but also because it leads to a number of additional problems. First of all, it reflects different types of inequalities. For example, currently, almost 80% of pensioners with pensions lower than the minimum pension are women, a statistic that cannot be fully explained by the existing differences in retirement age between men and women. In addition, the differences between the pension amounts received are substantial: the lowest pension being paid in 2023 was PLN 0.02 (EUR 0.0046), while the highest was PLN 43,412 gross (EUR 9912.07) (Grochowina, 2024). Secondly, it has had a complex and ambiguous impact on the functioning of other institutions that provide financial support to the poorest individuals receiving pensions lower than the minimum pension. Thirdly, according to the Social Insurance Institution, paying a pension of PLN 0.10 (EUR 0.023) costs the state in the range of PLN 100–150 (EUR 22–34) (Kropiwiec and Kowarzyk, 2022). Finally, below-minimum pensions do not provide retirees with a minimum standard of living; according to the former director of the Social Insurance Institution, Ms. Gertruda Uścińska, “the existence of ‘paltry pensions’ is contrary to the idea of what a retirement benefit is” (Kropiwiec and Kowarzyk, 2022).

The role of parliamentary discourse is significant for several reasons. First of all, parliamentary discourse serves as a forum for cooperative lawmaking. Secondly, it is a tool used by the opposition to facilitate control of the government. Thirdly, it is a space for discussion in which various social actors take part (e.g., Heywood, 2008; Nieć, 2023). Fourthly, as a consequence of the ongoing debate, public problems are defined and their solutions are discussed (Pulkki and Tynkkynen, 2016; Ilie, 2015). Fifth, parliamentary discourse reveals a hierarchy of social values. Finally, it sets policy goals. Moreover, as observed by Cornelia Ilie (2015), “discourses enacted in parliament not only reflect political, social, and cultural configurations in an ever-changing world, but they also contribute to shaping these configurations discursively, cross-rhetorically, and cross-culturally” (Ilie, 2015: 1). Thus, taking into consideration the role of parliament in shaping social and legal reality, it is both crucial and important to analyse the parliamentary discourse on pensions lower than the minimum pension.

The main aim of this article is to reconstruct the opinions of lawmakers about “paltry pensions”, especially in the context of social justice and the objectives of the pension system in Poland. Readers will find this research to be of particular interest for several reasons. First, it focuses on the rules for granting social benefits, which

for social policies based on insurance models around the world are universally similar. Second, it sheds light on the phenomenon of “paltry pensions”, which, relatively speaking, still remains a new area of study and research in Poland (Bieńkowski and Życzyńska-Ciołek, 2023; Szukalski et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it is a social issue prevalent in public discourse and may need to be addressed by the government in the near future. Third, the attitude of parliamentarians towards the issue of “paltry pensions” could have an impact on the way Poland’s pension system is implemented, but not necessarily so.

Theoretical and Methodological Assumptions of the Analysis

I have adopted several basic theoretical and methodological assumptions. Firstly, the research perspective of this article belongs to an approach called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which focuses on the relations between language and society and goes beyond the linguistic dimension of discourse. CDA assumes that discourse is an inherent element of the social world and is the driving force in social constructions (Fairclough and Duszak, 2008: 16). Its main aim is to reveal hidden meanings, power relations, and the reconstruction of knowledge in analysed discourses (Kopińska, 2016: 315). Depending on the approaches within CDA, discourse can be defined differently (Meyer, 2001: 20–29). I have decided to follow the definition implemented by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl (2017): discourse is “a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action, socially constituted and socially constitutive, related to a macro-topic, linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors who have different points of view” (Wodak and Reisigl, 2017: 89). As the subject of this article is parliamentary discourse, which I recognise as belonging to the discourse of politics, I also refer to its definition by Marek Czyżewski (2004): “the discourse of politics is therefore the statements of people belonging to the power elite, related to the political roles and functions performed by these people” (Czyżewski, 2004: 23).

Secondly, I discuss linear methods in the formulation of public policy. (e.g., Anderson, 2011; Howlett, 2011; Lasswell, 1956; Smith and Larimer, 2009), in particular the heuristic stages model of public policy by Michael Howlett and M. Ramesh (2011). In particular, Howlett and Ramesh’s model serves in this article as the starting point for analysing how pensions policy is created at the central level. The model presupposes that the process of creating public policy corresponds to several phases

of applied problem solving. It enumerates five stages in the policy cycle: (1) agenda setting, (2) policy formulation, (3) adoption (or decision-making), (4) implementation, and (5) evaluation, which refers to five phases of applied problem solving: (1) problem recognition, (2) proposal of solution, (3) choice of solution, (4) putting solution into effect, and (5) monitoring results. In our case, the stages of agenda setting and policy formulation very often take place in Parliament – especially when it comes to pensions policy, which is by and large created at the central level. The model is therefore highly relevant and helpful when analysing parliamentary discourse around creation of a national pensions policy. While I am aware that these phases can happen concurrently and in a more disorganised manner, for the purpose of this article, I treated them as linear stages, starting with the problem recognition phase. I assume that “paltry pensions” are already perceived as a problem due to the growing number of pensioners receiving them, including the consequences they imply. Members of parliament may also point to other problems resulting from below-minimum pensions. Therefore, analysing parliamentary discourse is essential because it may or may not be the first step towards initiating crucial changes in pension policy.

These two approaches that I combine in this article are complementary. The heuristic stages model organises the processes of formulating public policy, helping to identify and focus only on the stage that takes place in Parliament, while critical discourse analysis helps extract the opinions of lawmakers on the “paltry pensions” phenomenon that may (or may not) lead to the next stage – implementation of policy.

Thirdly, the discussions on pension systems are dominated by intergenerational justice (e.g., Beetsma and Bovenberg, 2009; Concialdi and Lechevalier, 2004; Johnson et al., 1989). In this article, I focus on the understanding of social justice, which refers to the distribution of goods in society. The fundamental subject of social justice is social structure, or more precisely, the way in which the main institutions distribute rights and obligations, as well as determine the distribution of benefits resulting from social cooperation (Rawls, 1994: 17–18). It is necessary for the longevity of society as a whole (Smith, 1989: 127) and is the basis of security, prosperity, and social order (Goleński, 2013: 12). It is very often linked to equality (Goodin et al., 1999; Szarfenberg, 2014). The distribution of wealth can be determined according to a set of simple principles (i.e., equally, according to someone’s needs, according to someone’s effort or status) (Ossowska, 1948; Ziemiński, 1992) or complex principles (i.e., several of them related to one another) (Nozick, 2010, original 1974; Rawls, 1971; Weale, 1983). I refer to Perelman’s and Ziemiński’s approach to social justice and hypothesise that there are two discursive approaches towards it, as highlighted in the selected materials: a) each will receive equally, and b) each will be compensated for their efforts. The first example promotes the idea of more equal pensions

for those who receive pensions lower than the minimum pension, while the second example accepts that people are compensated for the work they contribute and that the state holds no responsibility for their financial situation. In the broader context, this discussion refers to the debate between supporters of a welfare state and upholders of a liberal approach. Apart from the issue of social justice, the article identifies and analyses other values, such as dignity or safety. And finally, referring to the objectives of pension policy, its main goal is to provide participants with an income after they retire from a lifetime of employment or a lifetime of professional activities (Góra, 2003). There are also other objectives to consider, including poverty prevention, income redistribution, ensuring a dignified existence, and stimulating economic growth (Barr and Diamond, 2014; Jedynak, 2019).

The broader context is important for this analysis and the interpretation of its results. According to Oorschot's research (2006), the perception of social justice and broader welfare state differs according to the region people live in: "in countries where national resources for social protection are low, as is the case in the Central and Eastern European countries, people tend to differentiate more strongly along the deservingness criterion of identity in terms of 'us' versus 'them' (in order to preserve the little there is for 'ourselves'), while in a context of affluence, such as in the Netherlands and in the Scandinavian countries, people tend to differentiate more along lines of incapacity, that is, the deservingness criterion of control" (p. 37). However, since the "paltry pensions" are a relatively marginal phenomenon they, do not spark such a heated debate, especially not in the "us" versus "them" axes. This is particularly true in the Polish social context in the researched years, where there are no specific groups who are consistently seen as beneficiaries of social welfare, and therefore cannot feed the "us" versus "them" debate.

I have tried to answer the following research questions based on initial assumptions and in reference to three categories: problematisation, values, and solutions:

1. Do members of the Polish Parliament perceive "paltry pensions" as a social problem?
2. What values do they refer to? Is social justice among them? How is it understood?
3. If they perceive pensions lower than the minimum pension as a social problem, what solutions do they propose? How do they relate to the objectives of pension policy?
4. Which discursive strategies do they apply when discussing problems such as values and solutions?

The discursive analysis of these categories will allow me to identify the place of "paltry pensions" in the parliamentary discourse, particularly in the context of the processes of forming policy.

Materials and Research Method

The primary subject of analysis is “content” derived from transcripts of debate (2014–2024) as published by the Polish Parliament in both the upper house (the Senate) and the lower house (the Sejm) and including their relevant committees. The period of the analysis is significant because, starting in 2014, below-minimum pensions were paid to both women and men (Women began receiving them in 2009, due to their earlier retirement age).

Since pensions lower than the minimum pension were not introduced through any specific act or regulation (they were rather a by-product of the 1999 reform), the relevant content can be found in various documents related to the topic of pensions in general. Therefore, the analysis of the parliamentary debate on “paltry pensions” is not a linear analysis of the individual steps taken in creating and implementing the law. The analysis is also not a comparison between the opinions of different parties regarding “paltry pensions” – it focuses on the overall discourse around the phenomenon rather than highlighting and analysing the political differences.

The selection of the materials was achieved using 22 key words (due to the specificity of the Polish language, I am not able to translate all of them into English because some of them are identical, i.e., in Polish: ‘emerytura groszowe’ and ‘groszowe emerytura’ give different results, and yet their translations are the same: ‘paltry pensions’): “paltry pensions”, “paltry pay-outs”, “hungry benefit(s)”, “hungry pension(s)”, “below the lowest pension”, “below the minimum pension”, “from the lowest pension”, “from the minimum pension”, “than the lowest pension”, “than the minimum pension”, “poverty pension” and their definitions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Collected Research Material

	Lower house (Sejm) documents	Lower house (Sejm) committees	Upper house (Senate) documents	Upper house (Senate) committees	Total
No. of documents referring to 22 key words	62	31	11	12	116
No. of documents both referring to 22 key words and focusing more on “paltry pensions”	27	15	3	2	47

Source: author’s own research.

The Parliamentary Corpora website (in Polish: Korpus Dyskursu Parlamentarnego) was searched using the selected 22 key words. A total of 116 documents were gathered. Out of this number, 47 documents contained statements much more focused on pensions lower than the minimum pension (see Table 1). As a result, these doc-

uments were the focus of additional discursive analysis, which is presented in this article. In the remaining documents, “paltry pensions” were mentioned so briefly that they do not constitute an unit analysis.

The gathered documents were encoded using the categories problematisation, values, and solutions, which were input into the Atlas.ti programme. The first code, “problematisation” relates to the content in which social problems are formulated. The code “values” is defined in terms of what is considered desirable, worthy, and valuable – that is, the goals of human aspirations, as expressed by the author. The last code “solutions” refers to texts in which the parliamentarians identify what should be done to resolve the “paltry pensions” problem.

Texts selected in this way were further analysed, examined, and coded using the discursive strategies described by Wodak and Reisigl (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2001). They define discursive strategy as “a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices, including discursive practices adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological, and linguistic aim” (Wodak, 2001) and indicate referential/nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation, and intensification/mitigation discursive strategies (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 104). All of the discursive strategies were applied consistently across all transcripts. Discursive strategies relate to problematisation, values, and solutions.

Findings

The discussion of a lower than minimum pension can be found in different documentation, partly because it is the subject of more than one legal document (e.g., an act or a regulation). “Paltry pensions” are most often discussed in the context of the pension system reform as implemented in 1999, the indexation of pensions, the rise of the retirement age, and the general situation of the older people throughout Poland. It is also heavily connected to the discussion around pensions for women who have given birth to at least four children, including those who have not worked or have worked only for a short period of time (which is, in turn, related to the recent introduction of parental supplementary benefit). “Mama 4+” (“Mum 4+”) is a parental supplementary benefit introduced in 2019 to support men and women who had raised at least four children and, for this reason, were not able to work. Though not officially considered part of the pension system, it is granted to the primary caretaker of at least four children upon retirement age (60 for women and 65 for men). The total sum of this benefit is equal to the lowest pension (PLN 1780.96 in 2024), but is subject to deduction in accordance with any pension granted to the

recipient (e.g., if the recipient of the benefit is also granted PLN 200 as a pension, this sum will be deducted from their Mum 4+ benefit) (Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy, 2024).

All of the discursive strategies are presented in the collected materials, one of which, perspectivisation strategy, may be analysed in reference to the whole parliamentary discourse instead of linking it separately to problematisation, values, and solutions. There are no differences in constructing perspectives throughout the whole discourse or in relation to the aforementioned three categories. The “us” and “they” groups are divided along the lines of government vs. opposition. Depending on who speaks, “we” means a coalition partner or opposition party, and vice versa. This discourse evaluates “our” actions positively, and “our” objective is to improve the situation of Polish retirees (example 1):

Example 1

We have introduced a project that is well received, “Mum 4+,” meaning that for all those mothers who have not earned pensionable service, we give this lowest pension benefit (...) We didn’t take anything away from anyone; we just created a new programme that works. (Stenographic report of the 5th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 13, 2020).

At the same time, “their” actions are described negatively, and “they” are accused of worsening the negative financial situation of pensioners in Poland (example 2):

Example 2

This is why, we have requested that the periods worked on a mandate contract be counted as a pensionable service, so that the multitude of people currently receiving junk pensions can at least count on having this modest minimum pension. You also rejected this amendment. (Stenographic report of the 25th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on January 20, 2021).

Lawmakers are much less likely to adopt other perspectives, such as those of retirees.

Owing to the particulars of the discourse under analysis, other participants, such as the director of SII or trade union representatives, participate and offer their viewpoints accordingly.

In the next three parts devoted to problematization, values, and solutions, I refer to the following discursive strategies: referential/nomination, predication, argumentation, and intensification/mitigation.

Problematization

The focus of problematization centres on the diagnosis of the problem. The vast majority of parliamentarians view pensions below the minimum wage as a serious problem, which they express openly and directly.

Example 3

The problem of paltry pensions and lack of seniority was recognised by the ministry in the pension review that was prepared and presented to the House. In 2016, the ministry signalled that such a problem was emerging. (Transcript of the meeting of the Committee on Petitions (159th) of November 21, 2018).

In this context, the problem is defined as dramatic, urgent, serious, unresolved, requiring state action, or a problem with which the state will continue to struggle. A critical assessment of paltry pensions is frequently accompanied by arguments pertaining to numbers, putting particular stress on the extremely low level of benefits. “Not to mention the infamous record of 4 grosze. Such a pension: 4 grosze” (Stenographic report of the 11th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on May 6, 2020) or emphasising the dynamics of it in recent years (example 4):

Example 4

We have more than 166,000 benefits below the minimum pension, while 90% are above 500 PLN, i.e., reaching the minimum. I would like to point out that from December 2011 to December 2017, the number of such benefits increased by almost 75%. (Record of proceedings of the meeting of the Committee on Social Policy and the Family (137th) of July 2, 2018).

Drawing attention to the rapid increase in the number of retirees receiving pensions lower than the minimum also serves to reinforce the message (“record growth”), which is more often than not accompanied by rhetorical questions: “So a dramatic problem arises: what will retirees live on?” (Stenographic report of the 5th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 13, 2020), or comparisons: “We do not want hungry pensioners; we do not want dramatic stories about old people having to choose between medicines and heating or buying food” (Stenographic report of the 5th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 13, 2020), and repetitions: “we do not want to” (Stenographic report of the 5th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 13, 2020).

Concurrently, many parliamentarians have highlighted other problems arising from pensions lower than the minimum pension. One of these problems is poverty, which particularly affects women, as illustrated by the following statement: “The poverty of Polish retirees is increasing, not decreasing. 85% of the poorest retirees are women” (Stenographic report of the 5th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 13, 2020). Other problem include the looming economic collapse in Poland or irrational spending on the administrative service around “paltry pensions” paid by SII (example 5):

Example 5

It is a task for all of us to solve the problem, as the cost of all the work dedicated to calculating and paying this benefit is many times greater than the amount of the benefit itself. It is unreasonable for such benefits to exist. In view of this, it is necessary to consider how to solve this problem so as not to hurt those who have been paying into the insurance, while at the same time freeing the SII from work that lacks rational justification. (Record of proceedings of the meeting of the Committee on Social Policy and the Family (137th) of July 2, 2018).

The predicates used when discussing problems that are a direct result of “paltry pensions” are in relation to poverty (“growing”), the financial situation of retirees (“tragic”), and SII expenses (“irrational”). Of the numerous arguments made by parliamentarians regarding these problems, some include evidential numbers – such as noting that 85% of those with paltry pensions are women [auth. – it is a statement from 2020; now this percentage is lower – 78.7%]. —and references to finances, including specific amounts and indicators like the minimum level required for a dignified existence. Moreover, other disputatious strategies are noted. The MPs refer to the responsibility of governing citizens, and they compare Poland to other countries (example 6):

Example 6

This fact puts us, as parliamentarians, under an obligation to care for the fate of the Polish pensioner. As is well known, their pensions deviate from European standards and often force them to live on the brink of minimum subsistence. Any real help that will be felt directly by Polish pensioners deserves consideration and should be adequately supported by the MP's activity. (Stenographic report of the 8th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on January 13, 2016).

When addressing such issues, numerous reinforcements – such as repetitions and rhetorical questions – are frequently used. However, this is not the only technique applied. For instance, MPs remain convinced that (example 7):

Example 7

We know that solutions ensuring good pensions for Polish citizens, quality education, accessible healthcare, and a European standard of living are not only possible but also cost-effective, and entirely feasible – here and now, in Poland. This is supported by the success of similar solutions in other European countries, expert opinion, and even mathematical calculations, as we have thoroughly analysed the costs. (Stenographic report of the 44th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on December 14, 2021).

In parliamentary discourse, apostrophes are frequently used (e.g., “Members of the Lower House!” and “Mr. Speaker”). These rhetorical devices apply to all three categories: problems, values, and solutions.

Only individual members of the Polish Parliament fail to recognise “paltry pensions” as a significant issue, openly referring to them as marginal. Below-minimum pensions have been described as a “marginal phenomenon [auth. – at the time], which should be recognised as incompatible with the idea of the right to a pension – a benefit that should guarantee social security and be subject to further analytical work” (Record of proceedings of the meeting of the Committee on Social Policy and the Family (137th) of July 2, 2018). Another argument concerns the legal framework and structure of the pension system introduced in 1999. The issue of “paltry pensions” is a direct consequence of how the system was constructed. The former president of SII questioned these pensions, even referring to them in quotation marks as “pensions”, while also comparing them to the of pension systems in other countries.

She stated (example 8):

Example 8

I don't think these can be considered functional pensions for their intended purpose, and the assumption that a single contribution of a few zlotys grants the right to a pension is not a good paradigm in pension schemes. Most systems are now moving away from such an arrangement. (Transcript of the proceedings of the Committee on Social Policy and Family Affairs, 137th report, July 2, 2018).

Such statements encapsulate the essence of what the social security system is and shift the discussion towards designing a better version. At the same time, in my opinion, they shut down the whole conversation because they exclude below-minimum pensions.

Values

It is evident that throughout this debate, one value that dominates above all others: social justice. Frequently considered the most common, it is also regarded as the most important. Based on theoretical assumptions, social justice is understood either as the equal distribution of financial resources or as distribution according to work contribution. However, it is most often associated with the equal distribution of financial resources. Consequently, MPs frequently highlight inequalities between different groups, such as women and men (example 9):

Example 9

I was pleased to hear about equal pay for men and women for the same work. This is a very left-wing slogan. But what about pensions? Women are among the 2 million pensioners who receive paltry pensions or none at all. 86% of women belong to the lowest income group and are at risk of poverty (Stenographic report of the 1st sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, November 19, 2019).

Or, inequalities may also be observed among specific groups of retirees (example 10):

Example 10

It is not acceptable, Minister, to create such a disparity where a general receives a 16,000–18, – zloty pension while hundreds of thousands of people receive only 1,000 zlotys net. This is simply undignified for this country and its citizens, and as MPs, we should oppose this and demand increases not of 50-, but at least of 200–300 zlotys. Thank you. (Applause). (Stenographic report of the 25th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, January 20, 2021).

There are numerous examples to consider when discussing below-minimum pensions, which makes it easier to distinguish between what is just and what is unjust. For instance, some MPs see no important difference in the way pensions are allocated between mothers who have raised four children and those who have raised just one. Other examples include disparity between working mothers with one child

and non-working mothers who have raised five or six children, as well as mothers of disabled children, who are more often than not at severe risk of receiving pensions below the minimum amount.

Substantially fewer MPs supported the idea that pension amounts should be determined by the amount of work and effort contributed by the worker (examples 11 and 12). Some also argued that a minimum working period should be an obligatory condition for receiving pensions. In their view, anyone working for just a few months should be excluded from being eligible for a state pension. This particular stance states quite clearly that the state should not be held accountable for “paltry pensions”.

Example 11

About Mothers 4+. We supported this project because it was needed. That's right – very good. But it also introduced a certain injustice. It is something to think about. What do mothers report at the meetings? A mother comes in and says, “I gave birth to five children and went to work. I worked for 25 years and paid my contributions. And today I have the same pension as a mother who also gave birth – we are very grateful to her for that, and she needs that pension – but it should be differentiated. Maybe we should think about it – to simply respect and reward this professional activity. If someone has worked, the pension should not be equal, but higher. (Stenographic report of the 5th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 13, 2020).

Example 12

And that's not all: of these 233,000 pensioners with starvation pensions, more than 85 % of them are women. After all, they didn't all give birth to four children, so they are the ones who are mainly doomed to these starvation pensions. Unfortunately for them, there is no help. (Stenographic report of the 25th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on January 20, 2021).

Example 13

We believe that the length of service is indeed important. It is hugely ridiculous when pensions of just 5 zlotys are paid out by the SII. This issue needs to be regulated. It cannot be that someone has worked only for a few months is eligible for a. It is a world-wide rarity that you can work for two, three, or four months and receive a pension benefit that is not dependent on the length of service. (Record of proceedings of the meeting of the Committee on Social Policy and the Family (61st) of February 8, 2017).

The amount of effort that a worker puts into their work is a value in and of itself. Safety and dignity are fundamental ideas of social justice. MPs have discussed the

need for decent-sized pensions that allow individuals to lead a peaceful life and maintain a certain level of financial security. Naturally, this responsibility falls to the state, whose role is to “guard the economic security of citizens”. (Stenographic report of the 25th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of January 20, 2021).

All the values listed above are closely interconnected, as they tend to co-occur. They are also described as desirable – an assessment shared by the majority of parliamentarians. The arguments used to support this position refer to individual well-being, trust in the pension system, the economic interests of the state, and the large number of retirees living on below-minimum pensions. These arguments are reinforced when addressed directly to specific individuals in the debate: “That’s probably why, Mrs. Chairman, you also want our seniors to have decent pensions”. (Record of proceedings of the meeting of the standing subcommittee on social policy (10th) of July 5, 2023).

Therefore, the goals of pension policy correspond to a suitable category of values. As a result, MPs emphasize that it is the government’s responsibility to ensure retirees are properly supported – an approach intended to foster confidence and trust in the state and, in turn, give people hope for a better life by implementing solutions that are truly beneficial to them:

Example 14

The overriding goal of government should be to ensure that Poles have a good and dignified life, that their basic needs are met, and not in a shabby way, but at the highest possible level. This is our primary objective. (Stenographic report of the 25th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, January 20, 2021).

The way in which the goals for the state are formulated, together with reference to security and justice, clearly indicate the direction in which changes in the pension system should go.

Solutions

Many parliamentarians have demanded that there be a holistic debate on the reform of the pension system. “The pension system simply has to be reformed. As I said, I and colleagues with a PESEL similar to mine are unlikely to get a pension from Social Security”. (Stenographic report of the 5th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 13, 2020). Certain MPs have indicated that specific solutions exist, such as incorporating work performed under a mandate contract in the retirement period – an issue closely related to the problem of below-mini-

minimum pensions. Additionally, proposals have been made to raise the retirement age in order to encourage people to remain in the workplace longer, and to introduce citizen pensions. To qualify for such a benefit, individuals would also need to meet minimum insurance contribution requirements. The formulation of these claims is closely linked to how the issue is understood: the issue is typically identified and immediately followed by a proposed solution (example 15).

Example 15

As far as the issue related to so-called paltry pensions is concerned, there is, of course, a wider problem. It results from the 1998 reform of the social security system. Here, we would like to propose solutions so that there is an appropriate length of pension service, according to the benefit. I think this will also be an answer already for the future, not solving the situation we have at the moment, because this system has been in place, as I said, since 1998. (Stenographic report of the 49th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on February 23, 2022).

The application of a prediction strategy showed that the solutions should be complex and conjunctive, the debate sincere, and the actions systemic and effective. This often-used argument underlines the role of the state.

According to MPs, the state should take responsibility for their citizens, demonstrate a readiness to take action, and actively pursue pension system reform. Other points of contention concern statistical data, which are directly linked to how the problem is diagnosed, as well as assurances that implementing changes will result in increased benefits. This is then further reinforced by rhetorical questions aimed at the government. Also, rather interestingly, sometimes MPs make personal references to listeners' experiences: "Most of us already have retirees in our families. These are our parents, who would not be able to support themselves without our help" (Stenographic report of the 79th sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of April 3, 2019). In the analysed discourse on "paltry pensions", all the discursive strategies are present. Table 2 presents the results of this analysis with reference to three categories: problematisation, values, and solutions.

Table 2. Results of the discursive analysis according to three analytical categories

Analytical category Discursive strategies	Problematisation <i>What is perceived as a social problem?</i>	Values <i>To what values do the parliamentarians refer?</i>	Solutions <i>Which solutions are proposed?</i>
Perspectivisation <i>Which perspectives are presented?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – mainly perspectives of coalition and opposition; – perspectives of retirees 		
Nomination <i>How are social problems/values/solutions constructed?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “paltry pensions”; – poverty; – deterioration of the national economic situation; – irrational expenditures by the SSI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – social justice; – dignity; – security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – debate on the pension system in Poland; – including work under mandate contracts in retirement period; – introducing a citizen's pension; – promoting professional activity beyond retirement age; – raising the retirement age
Predication <i>What predicates are assigned to social problems/values/solutions?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – dramatic, unresolved, serious, or marginal (social problem); – increasing (poverty); – tragic (financial situation of retirees); – irrational (expenses) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – desired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – complex; – joint; – serious; – systemic; – effective
Argumentation <i>What argumentative strategies are used?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – numbers; – law; – other pension schemes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – individual well-being; – trust in the pension system; – economic interest of the state; – numbers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – numbers; – responsibility and willingness to act; – organising the pension system; – promised higher benefit
Intensification/Mitigation <i>What linguistic/rhetorical means were used to strengthen/weaken the message?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – apostrophes; – rhetorical questions; – comparisons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – apostrophes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – apostrophes; – rhetorical questions to the government

Source: author's own research.

Conclusions

The parliamentary discourse around “paltry pensions” is uneven and covers a range of pension-related topics. The topic itself is rarely discussed by parliamentarians. There are likely two main reasons for this: either MPs consider “paltry pensions” to be recent or marginal phenomenon, or they do not view it as a pressing issue requiring immediate intervention. Also, there is no external pressure on parliamentarians (e.g., from the media or international institutions) that might force them to implement any solution. However, when parliamentarians refer to this topic, they admittedly call for action, and below-minimum pensions are discursively described

as a serious problem that requires a quick fix. This perception stems primarily from the increasing number of retirees receiving pensions below the minimum threshold and the resulting consequences for various state systems and institutions, such as SII and social assistance services). Nevertheless, the problem of “paltry pensions” remains largely confined to discourse and receives little attention in the actual policy-making process. No steps have yet been taken to initiate a substantive debate, introduce legislation, or bring a bill to a vote.

The discussion around “paltry pensions” also highlights the issue of inequality among different social groups, especially, as previously shown, among women. Indeed, MPs do acknowledge that low pensions for women stem from life-long pay disparities, the unequal division of family and professional responsibilities, and shorter employment histories. However, rather than focusing on addressing this growing issue, parliamentarians appear more preoccupied with political infighting, advancing partisan narratives, glorifying their own achievements, and minimizing those of their opponents. At the same time, the narrative lacks substantive content, offering no real, in-depth reflection on social justice or a broader vision of the welfare state. Although certain questions have been raised, they fail to address even the most basic needs and do not challenge the fundamental principles underlying Poland’s pension system.

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