

# Deep Symmetrism? A Populist Strategy for Political Communication and Beyond

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**Abstract:** The concept of *symmetrism*, even more so *deep symmetrism*, does not appear in academic literature as a distinct field or topic. The purpose of this article is to elucidate the essence of this phenomenon, believing it constitutes an important concept that bridges politics and persuasion in contemporary politics. Deep symmetrism is assumed to be the generative mechanism of political struggle in the context of the growing strength of populist argumentation, supported by the actions taken by autocratic politicians when they are allowed to utilize wider resources. Symmetrism, originally a metanarrative, has evolved into a comprehensive system of duplicating social institutions (*doppelganging*) for the purpose of orchestrating political influence. As such, it closely connects to the history of propaganda and disinformation. The foundation for this article is an analysis of political communication and its contexts during the 2023 election campaign in Poland, as reflected in mediated political discussions.

**Keywords:** deep symmetrism, disinformation, propaganda, post-truth, *doppelganging*

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of *symmetrism* denotes a significant manifestation in contemporary political communication. Nevertheless, it has yet to attain recognition as an established academic term within the disciplines of political science or media and communication studies. The term has gained traction in Polish public discourse, particularly among journalists and political commentators, who employ it to critique other participants in the ongoing debate, seeking to voice concerns for the well-being of democracy based on the argument that it poses

a threat to democratic norms (Janicki & Władyka, 2023). Or conversely, in line with the argument that accusations of false symmetry are misplaced, because the objective is to overcome polarization (Czepiel, 2022). Owing to the heated nature of these disputes, *symmetrism* has become a highly charged term in public discourse, one that carries strong emotional undertones – most frequently of a pejorative kind.

Who, then, is labelled a *symmetrist* in the Polish disputes that have unfolded since 2016? Typically, it is a journalist or politician who

...incomprehensibly maintains an equally critical distance from both Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] and Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform]<sup>1</sup> [...] in the name of so-called objectivity. [...] This becomes the perfect alibi for autocrats, allowing them to become part of the ‘rules of the game’, to impose their terminology, and to enforce acceptance of a new political order (Janicki & Władyka, 2023).

Thus, polarization provides the framework underlying the definition. But beyond this, the notion reveals two underlying layers for anchoring the phenomenon within theoretical frameworks. First, *symmetrism* is realized as a communicative practice that can be deployed instrumentally to obscure unethical behavior through the manipulation of public perception and awareness. Second, it is framed by the principles of objectivity and truth, so it invokes journalistic standards. Consequently, the concept of *symmetrism* embodies two inherent dimensions: one communicative, the other normative.

At its core, *symmetrist* conduct rests upon the persuasive use of the argument to symmetry – a form of cognitive proportionality perceived as natural or intuitive. It is so, because symmetry is deeply embedded as a constant motif in nature and evolution, as well as a fundamental principle in art, mathematics, or architecture. Neither the natural world nor the world we have created can be imagined without symmetry (Hahn, 1998). In social relations mirroring has become the natural defensive mechanism – as reversing the situation, rejection, and repression. It is correlated with the substance of projection, which concerns the assignment of social blame.

One of its defining features is that it operates as a second-mover tactic, deployed by an actor responding to accusations of having done or said something wrong. The tactical objective lies in turning the accusation back on the attacker, mirroring

<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, the largest and deeply polarized Polish political parties are Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) – hereafter referred to as Law and Justice – and Platforma Obywatelska (PO) – hereafter referred to as Civic Platform.

the charge, thereby shifting blame and neutralizing the original allegation (Van Eemeren, Garssen, & Meuffels, 2009; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O’Loughlin, 2014).

This objective is served by a range of well-honed rhetorical techniques that vary in tone and intensity. The identification and systematization of these techniques constitute the analytical core for this analysis.

Redirecting attention to the opposing side may well stem from objectively sound reasoning or even from honorable intentions to balance the picture. Yet, equally, it may serve as a deliberate distortion of reality. In such cases, it ceases to be a neutral act of balance and becomes a weapon of propaganda. Having said that, it must be acknowledged that *symmetrism*, like propaganda, presents a similar dilemma to scholars including myself: how to reconcile a neutral term – capable of denoting phenomena that are ostensibly grave and detrimental in their consequences? How can one reconcile the legitimate, and in many respects commendable, call to safeguard democracy with the task of describing and assessing a phenomenon that may, in fact, pose a threat to it?

Naturally, context remains crucial – as ever – not only for grasping the underlying nature of the process under study but also for delineating the theoretical assumptions that guide its analysis. It is from this convergence that the theoretical framework for analyzing *symmetrism* is derived.

At the broadest level, there is the premise that the rapid spread of *symmetrism* has been enabled by the mounting crisis of liberal democracy across the world, the resurgence of autocratic mechanisms of governance, the success of populism as a pathway to power, and the intensification of political and affective polarization (Reiljan, 2020) as cumulative social effects. It is assumed here that phenomena such as *authoritarianism*, *polarization*, *populism*, and *post-truth* are mutually reinforcing and frequently co-occur, to form a new and distinctive ecosystem of the *new authoritarianism* (Applebaum, 2025).

What is important, this ecosystem contributes to the erosion of conventional norms of truth and lie – ushering in the condition of *post-truth*, which can be understood as the cumulative result of populist persuasive communication and the increasing isolation of communities within information and opinion silos (McIntyre, 2018). Another prominent author making a similar point is Moisés Naím, who argues that this system exhibits the integral, three-part nature of the “3Ps”: *populism*, *polarization*, and *post-truth* (2022)<sup>2</sup>.

*Symmetrism* fits significantly within this constellation for at least three key reasons: it offers a simple yet effective model of argumentation – highly compatible with populism; it relies on binary oppositions – perfectly aligned with the

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, populism is understood as providing climate for seizing power, polarization has the aim of maintaining power by exacerbating conflicts within the framework of resentment and fear, and post-truth constitutes the cumulative effect of strategically deploying techniques aimed at generating confusion about factuality and truth within public life (Naím, 2022).

logic of polarization; and it adopts a relaxed, if not dismissive, attitude toward truth-based argumentation, easily linked to mechanisms of discreditation and the rhetoric of contempt.

The body of collected material serves as the foundation for the systematization of descriptive categories, as well as for the formulation of models of *symmetrist* communication. The database also includes purposefully chosen case-specific examples drawn from different national contexts, most notably: Russia (Vladimir Putin, since 2012), Hungary (Viktor Orbán and Fidesz, since 2010), Italy (Matteo Salvini's *Lega Nord* after 2013, and *Fratelli d'Italia* under Giorgia Meloni since 2022), the United States (Donald Trump during 2017–2021 and currently), the United Kingdom (Boris Johnson between 2019–2022), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro, 2019–2022), and Venezuela (Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro from 2000 to the present) – not to mention numerous individual cases from across the globe.

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis is based on two collections of mediated interactions that were initially identified as related to *symmetrism*: one comprising cases from Poland, and the other consisting of international examples.

The case-specific representations drawn from international contexts were made based on a targeted search of websites belonging to media outlets and non-governmental organizations which took part in fact-checking and clarifying issues that gave rise to heated public controversies: climate change, Covid-19, Brexit, governmentally sponsored organizations (GONGO), RyanAir flight 4978, alleged secret operations of the Russian spies, and war in Ukraine<sup>3</sup>. The collection of international examples was intended to explore generic mechanisms of controversy in which *symmetrist* reasoning is employed.

The purpose of the Polish collection was different. It provides the primary dataset at a pragmatic level. Over the period from 2015 to 2023, the author systematically compiled a collection of examples illustrating the rhetorical strategies and persuasive techniques employed by leading political actors. Specifically, it was assumed that the most appropriate unit of analysis would be *mediated political interaction* (Thompson, 1995), within the genre of opinion journalism, specifically in mediated political disputes. This format accurately reflects the nature of binary conflict and polarization, quite often with a journalist being

<sup>3</sup> The following websites were included: time.com, theguardian.com, the-independent.com, lemonde.fr/en, bbc.com, itv.com, reuters.com, euronews.com, voteleavetakecontrol.org, gijn.org [Global Investigative Journalism Network], epde.org [European Platform for Democratic Elections], osce.org [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe], amnesty.org [Amnesty International], discuss-data.net.

an active participant. These premises served to explore the recurring patterns of persuasion. Therefore, five programs were selected from the reputable media known for presenting both sides of the political cleavage<sup>4</sup>. For this article, the analysis was limited to a set of 100 examples. This number proved sufficient, as the core mechanisms began to recur, while no new patterns were emerging.

The applied method of final analysis would be that of a qualitative content analysis, making use of the reconstruction of the pragmatic mechanisms of constructing *symmetrist* argumentation. One might find here the idea described by Kathy Charmaz as focused coding (2014) – with the focus placed on formal structures of argument, as well as the categorial reconstruction understood as explained by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark in their approach to thematic analysis (2019, 2021, 2022).

The analysis enabled the description of the generic forms of *symmetrist* argumentation along with the identification of the characteristic modes of its application. Approaching *symmetrism* as a persuasive mechanism, its full potential becomes visible once an autocratic politician attains power. This leads to a fundamental question: has *symmetrism* exhausted its function at the rhetorical level, or does it transcend beyond that? Why wouldn't autocratic politicians in power take full advantage of their resources to showcase their successes?

## GENERIC MODEL OF SYMMETRIC POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND ITS PRAGMATIC EXECUTIONS

*Symmetrism*, as was suggested, takes on a defensive-offensive nature as a specific response to an accusation. The reversal of the argument draws upon the rhetorical figure of *tu quoque*. We find it in the biblical principle “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (John 8:7, New International Version). Initially, Jesus' metaphor was an appeal to empathy, honesty, and restraint in the exercise of authority or judgment (Brown, 1966), thus constituting the very essence of humanism – human imperfection. Yet, in terms of ethical standards, Jesus' words have become a metaphor employed to denounce double standards, that is, hypocrisy.

The *tu quoque* principle is widely applied in sophistic traditions as a generator of *ad hominem* argumentation. Its simplicity generates its power, so it is hardly surprising that it started to be systematically facilitated in politics.

<sup>4</sup> Kawa na ławę [Straight Talk Over Coffee] and Fakty po Faktach [Facts After the Facts] on the liberal channel TVN 24, Minęła 20 [After 8 PM] on the Law and Justice-biased TVP Info, Siódmy dzień tygodnia [The Seventh Day of the Week] on the liberal Radio ZET, and Wybory w TOKU [Elections on TOK FM] on the left-leaning progressive radio station TokFM.

In modern times, the technique has been refined to perfection in Russia, where its origins date back to the Tsarist era. One of the classic examples is the famous Russian counter-argument: “And you are lynching Negroes.” Its source lies in the actual words of the Russian Minister of the Interior, Vyacheslav von Plehve, in 1903, in response to Western accusations against Tsarist Russia following the Kishinev pogrom. Von Plehve is reported to have said: “The Russian peasants were driven to frenzy. Excited by race and religious hatred, and under the influence of alcohol, they were worse than the people of the Southern States of America when they lynch negroes” (Lindemann, 2000, p. 378).

Equally meaningful are the efforts undertaken by Russia in the early 1930s to mask this strategy by joking. We find an example in the campaign run by the satirical magazine of the Russian Communist Party Moscow Committee *Bezbozhnik u Stanka* (Pospelovsky 1988) – read in Great Britain and the U.S. – which in the 1930s popularized the slogan as a stock response of the “Russian computer” to questions posed by Western journalists about the low standards of living in Russia. The accompanying campaign spread across Europe, and the joke gained resonance in numerous languages worldwide.

*Tu quoque*, consciously employed, is said to be closely integrated with the practices of Russian disinformation since its institutional set up in 1923 (Pomerantsev, 2014; Rid, 2020). In XXI century it still finds its crucial place as a one of the principal mechanisms in hybrid warfare, where creating *post-truth* has become one of the strategic goals (Galeotti, 2019).

*Tu quoque* has worldwide application. It was used to refute one of the three charges against Admiral Karl Dönitz at the Nuremberg Trial, accused of ordering German submarines to sink neutral vessels without warning. Dönitz’s counsel demonstrated that the Allies had engaged in the same practice – as in 1940, when the British Admiralty ordered to sink all vessels in the Skagerrak on sight. Similar orders were given by Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the U.S. commander-in-chief, when the United States initiated unrestricted submarine warfare against Japan (Zabecki, 2007). Here, the *tu quoque* strategy eased the severity of the accusation by suggesting that “your side does the same”, in a fair criminal trial.

But as a key generative mechanism of *symmetrism* it unlocks a full spectrum of persuasive stratagems<sup>5</sup>, structured around a simple model of rebuttal, which can be illustrated using the following elements: p, q – issues discussed, A and B – politicians of opposite sides, *neg* – negative value (blame assign), *pos* – positive value (credit assign), J – journalist (as: interviewer, mediator, biased interlocutor, symbolic prosecutor etc.), Public – public opinion.

<sup>5</sup> Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines a stratagem as “a carefully planned way of achieving a particular goal or of dealing with a particular problem, often by using a trick”. So it is more than a mere rhetorical device – it takes the form of a move in a game, assuming it carries a strategic dimension combined with tactical cunning.

The mediatised interaction usually consists of several rounds, which, for this study, are here reduced to three basic ones:

STAGE 1. ACCUSATION

A/J→B (A/J frame p with *neg*, assigning blame to B)

STAGE 2. DEFENSE AND COUNTER-ATTACK

B→A/J: B rejects the accusation and mirrors it back with *neg*, claiming A is equally or more guilty

STAGE 3. POLARIZING SELF-DEFINITION

B→Public: B reframes their own role in terms of *pos/neg*, by manufacturing blame to A and mutually assigning credit to themselves

This sequence is reproduced in a limited number of variants, including the more or less active role of a journalist. Politicians perform specific communicative roles within a polarized spectacle. They aim to dominate their opponents through blame attribution and stigmatization, aligning these tactics with the party's message of the day and spin. This type of interaction kept resurfacing across all the examined programs.

Model-wise, politician B, in their rebutting an accusation, essentially limits themselves to one of the following four options: *denial of source or actor's credibility, denial of facts, whataboutism, and bothsidesism*. These four manifestations of *symmetrism* merit a more in-depth analysis.

The collected data show that denial remains the most frequently used application. It manifests itself in two versions. The first and most common version refers to the dichotomy between truth-telling and lying, as well as its variant – the dichotomy between invoking a credible versus a deceptive source of information. Below is a script for this stratagem.

STAGE 1. ACCUSATION

A/J→B (A/J frame p with *neg*, assigning blame to B)

STAGE 2. DENIAL BY DISCREDITATION OF INTERLOCUTOR / SOURCE

B→A/J: B does not directly deny p, but undermines A's or J's credibility as a truth-teller, or their source

STAGE 3. POLARIZING SELF-DEFINITION

B→Public: B reframes their own role in terms of *pos/neg*, by manufacturing blame to the other actor and mutually assigning credit to themselves in terms of truth vs lies / credibility vs unreliability

A notable example is the Polish case involving the unauthorized use of Pegasus during the 2019 election campaign and subsequent period. The endless media duels between Law and Justice and the liberal opposition provide numerous pragmatic manifestations of *denial*. The model below focuses on the generic variants of Politician B's rebuttal.

#### STAGE 1. ACCUSATION

J→B: We have learned that the head of the Civic Platform's campaign (...) was surveilled using the Pegasus system. Doesn't this story shock and disgust you?

#### STAGE 2. DENIAL (PRAGMATIC VARIANTS)

- B1: It did not happen. It is a fake. Russian propaganda.
- B2: Which "Pegasus" are you talking about? The horse with wings?
- B3: No, I haven't heard about it, I don't know, I am busy these days...
- B4: Perhaps it was so, but it needs to be checked.
- B5: These are just media reports, not facts. I don't comment on that.
- B6: It surely comes from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, so it's not credible.
- B7: How do you know that? That's impossible.

Apart from option (B1), which is a fundamental denial, the subsequent variants allow for a soft avoidance of the accusation while retaining the opportunity for a rebuttal, in line with reasoning based on the fallacy of false conditioning: "Since I don't know anything about p, therefore p is false, and if you claim that p happened, you are manipulating". These primary versions of playing ignorant (B3, B4, B7) complement mockery and ridicule (B2), a perfect trick to avoid substantive discussion. A less elegant variation is the discrediting of the source of information, either in the most general form (B5) or by using the stigmatized symbol of the liberal voice (B6) associated with Law and Justice.

It confirms that a characteristic feature of contemporary public debates is the overuse of references to truth-telling and lying. Of course, this is a double-edged sword. The overuse of such a weapon may lead to a severe devaluation of truth, which is definitely worth noting, due to broader social consequences.

A similar stratagem, *denial of facts*, has also firmly established itself. The method of denying a real event may seem nonsensical; yet, its irrational nature only reinforces its persuasive appeal. Striking examples include the denials issued by states such as China or Russia when accused of violating international law and human rights.

Starting from China, according to activists, there is a network of mass detention camps holding more than a million ethnic minorities as prisoners in the western region of Xinjiang. Former detainees have described being tortured during interrogation there, living in crowded cells, and being subjected to a brutal daily

regimen and party indoctrination that drove some people to suicide (Martina, 2019). The provincial governor replied: “These kinds of statements are completely fabricated lies, and are extraordinarily absurd.” “They are the same as boarding schools,” and the personal freedoms of the “students” were guaranteed. These “boarding schools” are not concentration camps – that are “home to millions of Uighurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities” (Martina, 2019).

When ex-Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found poisoned in Salisbury in 2018, British commentators pointed to the Russian secret services’ use of the Novichok nerve agent. Prime Minister Theresa May declared that this was the pure form of Novichok, and it was highly likely Moscow stands behind the attack. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s reply could serve as a textbook example of *denial plus tu quoque*. He said that the nerve agent was never produced in the Soviet Union or Russia, but also “this formulation was in the inventory of the United States, Britain, and other NATO states” (Reuters, 2018).

The stratagem of *denial of facts* operates according to the following scheme:

STAGE 1 – ACCUSATION (AS ABOVE)

STAGE 2 – DENIAL OF THE FACT

B→A: B rejects the factual basis of the accusation, claiming it never happened or the evidence is false.

STAGE 3. POLARIZING SELF-DEFINITION

B→Public: B reframes their own role in terms of *pos/neg*, by assigning credit to themselves and manufacturing blame to the interlocutor by questioning their sense of realism

The next stratagem, *whataboutism*, is arguably the most well-known one from the literature on international relations, and stories about diplomats redirecting public attention toward other issues when blamed for something. Interestingly, this stratagem sometimes functions as a synthesis of all forms of *symmetrism* – e.g., in the empirical analysis by Wilfred M. Chow and Dov H. Levin (2024). We contend, however, that this is not entirely justified, since there are apparent differences in the underlying mechanisms of argumentation among them. Whereas the basic principle of *tu quoque* is strictly mirroring, *whataboutism* consists in shifting attention to an issue different from p. It fully deserves the name of “distractive *symmetrism*”.

*Whataboutism*’s name derives from the English expression “what about”, a ready-made formula for launching a *symmetrist* rebuttal. Linguist Ben Zimmer (2017) notes that the term was first coined as “whataboutery” and “the whatabouts” in reference to the Irish Republican Army in the 1970s; however, it gained

widespread currency in Russian propaganda during the Cold War. It unfolds in accordance with the following model:

STAGE 1. ACCUSATION (AS ABOVE)

STAGE 2. DIVERSION OF ATTENTION

B→A/J: B does not refute the charge, but diverts attention by raising a different issue (q) linked to A, attaching *neg* to it

STAGE 3. POLARIZING SELF-DEFINITION

B→Public: B reframes their own role in terms of *pos/neg*, by redirecting the audience's attention to an alternative issue, which casts A in a negative light.

The *Washington Post* reporter Dan Zak opens his illuminating article on *whataboutism* with the following sequence taken from Donald Trump's responses to accusations:

What about antifa? What about free speech? What about the guy who shot Steve Scalise? What about the mosque in Minnesota that got bombed? What about North Korea? What about murders in Chicago? What about Ivanka at the G-20? What about Vince Foster? If white pride is bad, then what about gay pride? What about the stock market? What about those 33,000 deleted emails? What about Hitler? What about the Crusades? What about the asteroid that may one day kill us all? What about Benghazi? (Zak, 2017)

These examples show how deeply this persuasive structure is intertwined with a natural defensive reaction. A specific, slightly more detailed example of Trump's rebuttal on Charlottesville's riots in August 2017 provides contextual depth. After the clashes in August 2017, white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and members of the Ku Klux Klan gathered near the statue of Confederate leader Robert E. Lee for the "Unite the Right" rally and violently confronted counter-protesters. President Trump, siding with the radicals, opposed the idea of dismantling Lee's monument by arguing: "Robert E. Lee? What about George Washington? George Washington was a slave owner – are we going to take down statues to George Washington? How about Thomas Jefferson?" (Zak, 2017).

The last stratagem, *bothsidesism*, adds one more dimension. It skillfully waters down the attribution of blame. In this case, the essence of the persuasive mechanism is relativization, producing the impression that both sides are equally guilty, or just that "everybody is the same". Whereas *whataboutism* seeks to divert attention from B's guilt, *bothsidesism* advances the claim that guilt belongs to everyone.

This creates a particular difficulty in identifying unequivocal examples of *bothsidesism*. It often becomes a well-disguised stratagem – since it is crucial to distinguish between the deliberate distortion of blame attribution by a propagandist and the natural, good-faith attempt to identify fault in a wider context.

The EU-mandated Tagliavini inquiry into the 2008 Russia–Georgia conflict clearly demonstrates this. The report indicates that Georgian forces were the first to open fire (but did so in response to prior Russian provocations). For this reason, much media coverage portrayed the situation as one of shared responsibility. As the report states: “In the mission’s view, it was Georgia which triggered off the war” (while acknowledging earlier Russian provocations) (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2009). One might ask, were Russia and Georgia truly equally at fault at the time?

*Bothsidesism* often triggers relativization through generalization. This can be observed, for example, in UN reports on the Yemeni civil war from 2019, which characterized the conflict as a “collective failure, collective responsibility,” and detailed possible war crimes committed by multiple parties involved (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019). However, one can find a paradigmatic example of *bothsidesism* in the renowned Ben Rhodes’ book, “After the Fall” (2021), with a point made, that Vladimir Putin came to power not by convincing people that he was honest, but by convincing people that... everyone was corrupt. Such generalization disarms any accusation of corruption – once it becomes the norm. What matters is that “he is really our guy.”

The structure of *bothsidesism* unfolds in the following way:

STAGE 1. ACCUSATION (AS ABOVE)

STAGE 2. MANUFACTURING EQUALITY OF BOTH SIDES (FALSE BALANCE)

B→A/J: Instead of directly rejecting the accusation, B reframes the issue by asserting that both sides are equally guilty.

STAGE 3. POLARIZING SELF-DEFINITION

B→Public: B reframes their own role in terms of *pos/neg*, by positioning the issue as a general systemic problem rather than their own responsibility

The four identified stratagems relate directly to *symmetrism*; however, there is no doubt that, at the level of rhetorical composition, they can intersect with other tropes, such as those documented in the context of relativization – e.g., *minimization*, *false normalization*, *trivialization*, *temporal distancing* (“it was a long time ago”), *ironization*, *mockery*, or *sarcasm* (EUvsDisinfo, 2021).

Building on what has been said thus far, let’s venture an operational definition of *symmetrism*. It is a political persuasive strategy, whereby communicative

actions are aligned with the principle of mirroring to disarm the arguments of the opponent. It is basically a second-mover activity employed by actors against whom credible accusations of wrongdoing have been raised. Its essence lies in neutralizing the charge by shifting guilt and shame onto the accuser, indicting them in turn on the grounds that they are, in fact, in a similar position (Van Eemeren, et al., 2009). The intended effect of such a strategy is to undermine the opponent’s credibility, to arouse doubts about their motives and integrity – in short, to portray them as a hypocrite.

In Table 1 we take into account all of these variants of *symmetrism*, to reaffirm their key distinguishing features.

**Table 1. Symmetrist stratagems, their specific objectives and modes of execution**

Stratagems	Core mechanism – tactical objective	Core mechanism – mode of execution
<i>tu quoque</i> [general idea]	shifting blame back by claiming symmetry of guilt	“You accuse us of mishandling p, but you did the same (or worse)”
<i>denial of credibility</i>	undermining accuser’s standing as truth-teller	“Why believe A? They lie, they lack credibility”
<i>denial of facts</i>	rejecting factual basis of accusation	“That never happened, p never occurred / evidence is false”
<i>whataboutism</i>	diverting to different and negative issue tied to A	“Talking about p? What about q under A? That was worse”
<i>bothsidesism</i>	equalizing guilt (claim: both sides are the same)	“Problems with p exist on both sides; A is no better”

Source: Own elaboration

## FROM SYMMETRISM TO DEEP SYMMETRISM

The forms of *symmetrism* described have been rhetorical in nature. However, discourse is not just language, but rather a multilayered social practice that connects language with power, ideology, and cognition. Discourse, therefore, involves connecting words and ideas to institutional processes that encompass power relations and ideological legitimization (van Dijk, 2008).

When Dmitry Dubrovsky, a professor at Columbia University claims that *whataboutism* extends beyond rhetoric, adding that “it is not only a narrative practice; it is real policy” (Dubrovsky, as cited in Kurtzleben, 2017), he supports the claim that the logic of *symmetrism* ought to be interpreted comprehensively,

with the inclusion of a fourth stage, as only then does its capacity to permeate reality and exert a totalizing force become fully apparent:

STAGE 1. ACCUSATION

STAGE 2. DEFENSE AND COUNTER-ATTACK

STAGE 3. POLARIZING SELF-DEFINITION

STAGE 4. THE PERFORMANCE OF DISCOURSE LEGITIMIZATION (in ways determined by the resources and the politician's confidence and sense of impunity)

B→Public: B grounds its policy by setting up the environment of controlled normative power institutions

The essence of Stage 4 lies in extending rhetoric to institutional normative guarantees, which shows why taking control over the judiciary and the media is so crucial. These are the bodies that define the normative order: the courts, the tribunals, the watchdogs. Public narratives surrounding current developments reveal an increasing use of *symmetrism*-related terminology particularly that associated with that stage – such as *Doppelgänger* or *Doppelstaat*.

The German *Doppelgänger* means “double-goer” – a person's ghostly double or counterpart<sup>6</sup>. The term *Doppelstaat* points to the normative and institutional state dualism – a legal concept that legitimized the takeover of political control of the Nazi German state during WWII, when the politicized “will of the people” was an excuse for mirroring legal institutions by the totalitarian rulers (Fraenkel, 2006).

We have been witnessing a similar process of state dualism in Poland after 2015, with the mirroring of institutions like a new chamber of the Supreme Court, a new formula for the National Council of the Judiciary, or the National Media Council – all introduced by Law and Justice. It is telling how difficult it was for language to keep up with institutional changes, as its users tried to encompass an entire range of *symmetric* entities: judges and *neo-judges* or *duplicate judges*, courts and *non-courts*, decisions and *non-decisions*, journalists and *non-journalists*, all framed within the added context of blurring the distinction between reality and *neo-reality* of a *double state*.

<sup>6</sup> In eighteenth-century Romantic literature it was used by Jean Paul in Siebenkäs, where he described a sinister double of a living person (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Since then, the term has also appeared in relation to propaganda, for instance, in reference to the current stage of Russia's disinformation war of 2024, named with the expression *Operation Doppelgänger* (Frühwirth et al., 2024).

The idea of a *symmetric* reality was perhaps best represented in the division of the Cold War, where two systems competed with one another in every detail. However, striking examples still prevail, such as the Intervision Song Contest. Initially launched from the 1960s to 1980 on the Eastern side, it was intended to mirror the original Eurovision Song Contest. It has recently been reinstated by Vladimir Putin, who on 3 February 2025 ordered the return of the Intervision by decree. Only friends were invited to promote “the real music”<sup>7</sup>.

Vivid illustrations of institutional mirroring can be found worldwide in many autocracies. They include key state authorities, such as the National Constituent Assembly in Venezuela (2017), the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly (a second parliamentary chamber, constitutionally framed in 2024), or the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland, in which the previous bench of judges was replaced by biased politicians appointed by the parliamentary majority.

One of the more intriguing domains is the mirroring of non-governmental organizations, by setting up the so-called GONGOs (*government-organized non-governmental organizations*). In Hungary, it is the CÖF–CÖKA (Civil Cooperation Forum), a government-funded organization that organizes “peace marches.” Its purpose is to demonstrate that there also exists a “pro-government variant of civil society” (Narsee, Negri, et al., 2024).

Russia offers an abundance of examples, some of which stand out for their boldness – such as the non-governmental World Without Nazism, founded by Boris Spiegel, a member of the Russian Federation Council. Its declared purpose is the “monitoring of Nazism,” especially in the activities of institutions critical of Moscow, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, or Memorial (Kirchick, 2015). The operations of WWN make it possible to adapt the scope of the concept of Nazism to the objectives of the Federation’s policy. Another definitely notable example is the Russian Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, established in New York (2009–2015) and Paris (2009–present), and sponsored by President Putin. Its stated mission was “to study Western democracy and offer recommendations for its improvement,” as well as “to provide a symmetrical response to the allegations of Freedom House about human rights violations in Russia” (Kanevskaya, 2014; Wayback Machine, 2024).

The next example comes from Azerbaijan. In 2024, the incumbent president, Ilham Aliyev, who has held office since 2003, won a fifth consecutive term with over 92% of the vote. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe stated that “the elections did not offer voters genuine political alternatives [and were] overly restrictive of fundamental freedoms.” By contrast, a *symmetrist* institution, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, hired by the authorities

<sup>7</sup> Sergey Lavrov stressed that “Intervision would be free of perversion and abuse of human nature, as we saw in the Paris Olympics” (Novaya Gazeta, 2005).

and composed of 16 local members together with an ad hoc group of friendly “international observers”, issued a statement declaring that “the elections have been transparent, credible, and democratic” (Andrusz & Ivanishcheva, 2024).

All of these examples support the assumption that the institutional layer of *symmetrism* cannot be separated from its rhetorical layer, as the two mutually condition and reinforce each other. In view of what is at stake – put grandly, the future political order and the shape of democracy – it is worth pursuing the most meticulous possible explanation of this fascinating phenomenon.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The experimental analysis of the impact of *symmetrism* in public diplomacy on American society (Chow & Levin, 2024) demonstrates its effectiveness. The American public is becoming increasingly inclined to reject U.S. practices toward other states as justified, and even shifting its perception of what constitutes the norm in international relations. These results are relevant to all comparable societies.

The analysis of *deep symmetrism* presented here leads to three questions open for discussion. First, why are the potential long-term and adverse effects of symmetrism reasonably considered relevant? Second, if these hypothetical effects indeed constitute a threat, how might they be countered? Moreover, how does deep *symmetrism* fit into the normative standards and best practices of journalism, due to its alleged impact on perceptions of truth and objectivity?

From the perspective of normative concern for the common good, it is justified to claim that *symmetrism* is a tool of propaganda that proves harmful when driven by the ill will and cynicism of politicians or journalists. Furthermore, that has probably always been – and now more than ever – timely.

At this point, one may attempt to sketch, using the broadest strokes, the fundamental issues at stake. One such area is the domain of social knowledge, traditionally grounded in facts perceived as objective events. Through *symmetrism*, what is claimed here, the boundaries of objectivity and factuality begin to blur: any event can be denied, dismissed as fake, interpreted as manipulation, or framed as a hostile media construction; relativized, or cloned with a mirrored evaluation. Furthermore, any well justified judgment can be recast as falsehood, and any fabricated news can be sold as fact.

Thus, the overdose of *symmetrism*, together with polarization, in the service of bad intentions may ultimately dismantle the very conditions for perceiving truth – the central cognitive value upon which social order and consensus depend. One piece of evidence pointing to justifiable cause for alarm is provided by the findings of the Pew Research Center (2019), showing that voters of the two largest

U.S. parties could agree on the truth of basic facts only in 23 percent of cases combined. This must be considered striking, given that the phenomenon is surely not confined to the United States – but develops in every system with rising levels of autocracy, lowering trust in public institutions, and electoral cynicism.

Can anything be done to counteract the tendency, and if so, how? As always, in the face of the prevailing political winds, the first response that comes to mind is one of skepticism. Yet it is also clear that, as always, there remains the possibility of broadening our knowledge about *symmetrist* mechanisms, of learning to recognize their potentially harmful manifestations in public and political communication. It is also possible to ensure that each *symmetrist* tool is explicitly named and promptly denounced as soon as it is deployed. Expanding social awareness at this level of political communication is always greatly needed.

One might even consider initiating a serious discussion involving opinion-forming journalistic and media environments, widely regarded as independent and responsible, as well as bodies that might reconsider professional media standards, with the aim of more actively banning practices marked by a distinctly *symmetrism* with anti-democratic intent.

The above proposal is bold, and may appear as naïve as it looks unrealistic – for in a market-based system of independent media, any attempt to impose operational rules inevitably amounts to interference with conventional freedoms. That is true, but let us look at the other side – the compelling grounds to recognize that *symmetrist* practices indeed converge with the standards of mainstream media, even those regarded as paragons of journalistic objectivity, with the BBC at the forefront.

This became apparent in public debates on such topics as climate change, vaccines, migration, or the aggression against Ukraine. In the case of climate, *symmetrically* interpreted professional standards led to justification of presenting scientific knowledge on an equal footing with the views of climate deniers and unscientific assumptions. The “death of expert knowledge” resulting from populism (Nichols, 2017) generates a void that is frequently occupied by self-proclaimed pseudo-experts. In their report, the British Parliamentary Committee on Science and Technology wrote: “Some editors appear to be particularly poor at determining the level of scientific expertise of contributors in debates, putting up lobbyists against top scientists as though their arguments on the science carry equal weight” (Bawden, 2014). It is exactly about the BBC presentation of climate change. The BBC, however, did not relent, arguing that “even if science dominates, political decisions on climate are about values, choices, and policies, so skeptics must be given space in order for the audience to see resistance to climate policy and debate about its costs and consequences” (Sweney, 2018).

In other words, the professional principles of impartiality and pluralism served the BBC as justification – when claims grounded in broad scientific

consensus were treated as only an option. BBC Radio 4 – for example – was many times giving the floor to Lord Nigel Lawson, a popular politician in Margaret Thatcher’s government, the Brexit supporter, and climate skeptic (Sweney, 2018).

The use of false equivalence to ensure media appeal, under the guise of upholding journalistic standards, is no joke – as in the oft-quoted parody of a television talk show: “Tonight, we’ll be talking to a scientist about the solar system. To balance her views, we’ve invited a member of the Flat Earth Society” (Wikimedia Commons contributors, n.d.). This makes a fundamental problem, closely linked to the populist idea to replace the voices of experts with the voices of “ordinary people,” pronouncing their own truths.

*Symmetrist* “second-opinion science” and journalistic practices of false balancing – or even the privileging of advocates of “alternative truths” – ought to be recognized as violations of professional standards of news journalism. This issue could be pushed further, in line with the continuation of our present discussion, to the question of whether it makes sense to invite anti-democrats and populists into democratic debate at all.

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