

## **Activity 5**

# **Analyzing the impact of disinformation on the society**

### **D5.2. Report**

#### **Visual structures of disinformation in Poland**

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## Introduction

The subject of the analysis were 342 disinformation messages (fake news) from January 2020 - December 2022, the element of which was a static visual message that did not have the character of a video. In the first step, the portal <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/list> was used, and then the links (provided on this portal in fact-checking texts) to the fake news archiving programs used by AFP fact-checkers. Disinformation messages containing videos were excluded from the area of analysis, on the assumption that their reception and function within disinformation messages is different.

The survey covered three areas::

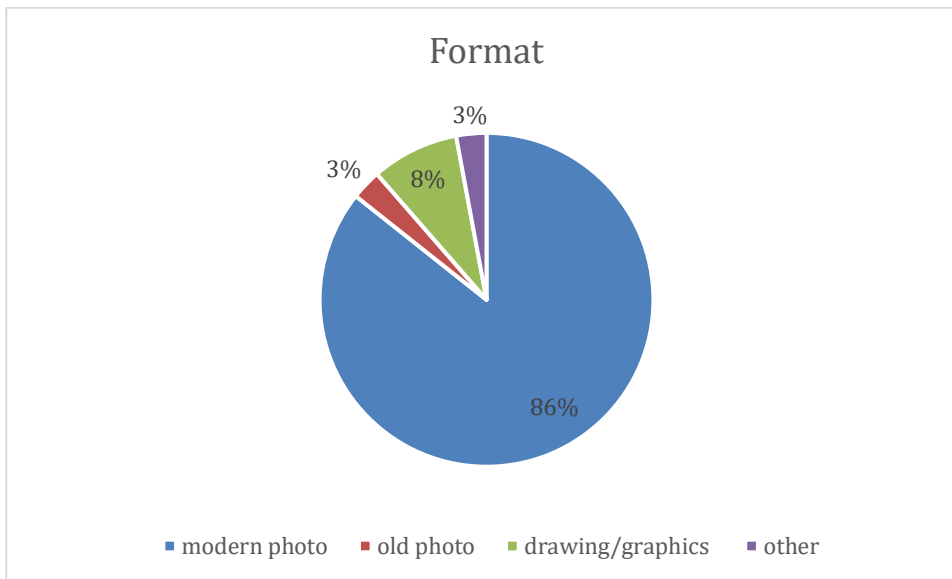
1. the form of the message (how?)
2. the content of the message (what?)
3. and the function of the message in relation to the text and in relation to the recipient (for what purpose?)

## The form of the message

In terms of **format**, the vast majority of the messages analyzed are modern photos<sup>1</sup>, which are reportorial in nature. Graphics are few in number. An interesting, although limited, trend is the inclusion of old photos, mainly in the context of telling stories from the past, but also exposing public figures. Detailed data is shown in the chart below:

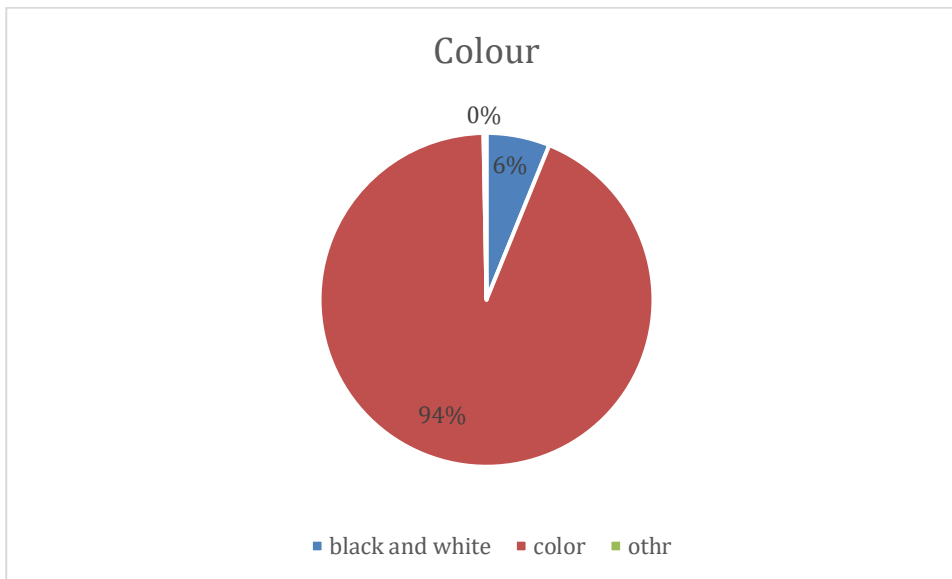
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<sup>1</sup> For this reason, later in the report the term „photo” is used to describe the entire dataset.

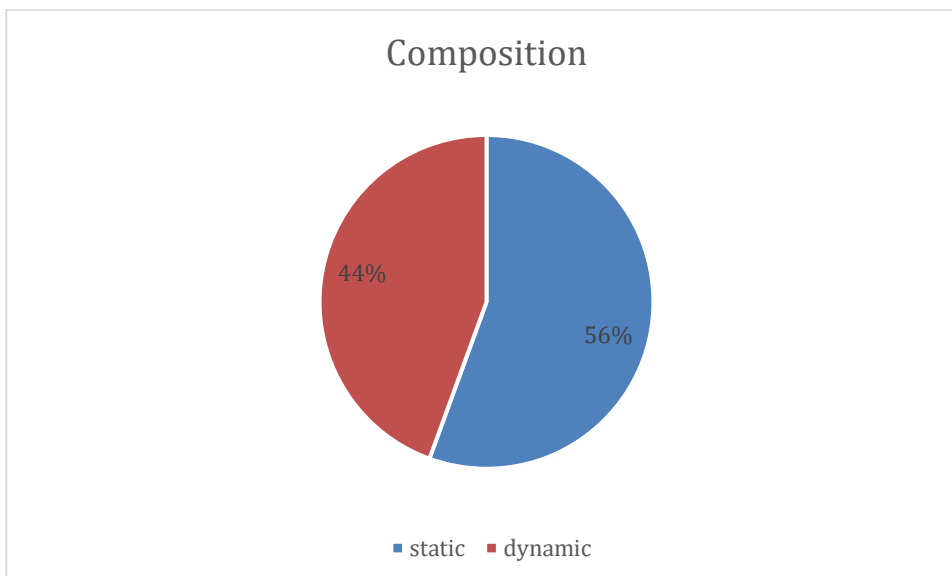


*Rysunek 1 Old photo in function to expose public figure*

In view of the above, it is not surprising that the vast majority of visual representations are in **color**, while a small portion are in black and white (one monochrome photo in shades of green was also observed, which was included in the "other" category). Detailed data is shown in the chart below:

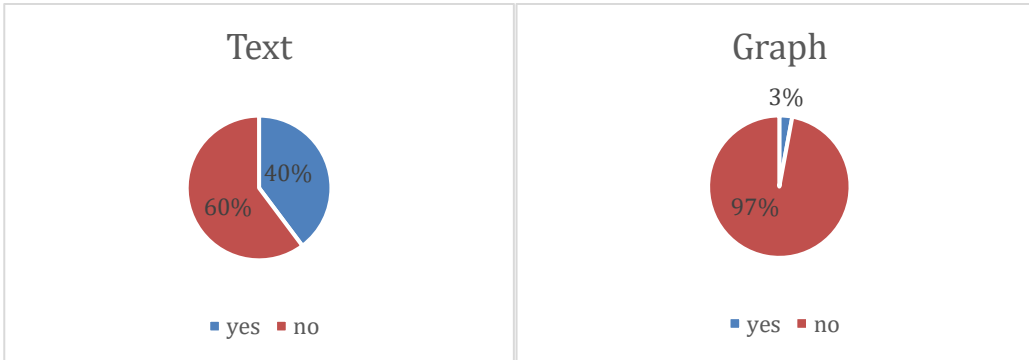


In terms of **composition**, we observe a slight preference for static over dynamic composition:



It should be considered interesting that a significant part of the visual representations are accompanied by **additional text** (superimposed on the image) or take the form of graphically processed text (in a small part). This treatment serves to direct the way the message is interpreted and is often decisive for its emotional overtones, for example. A small portion of visual messages also take the form of charts. Details are shown in the charts

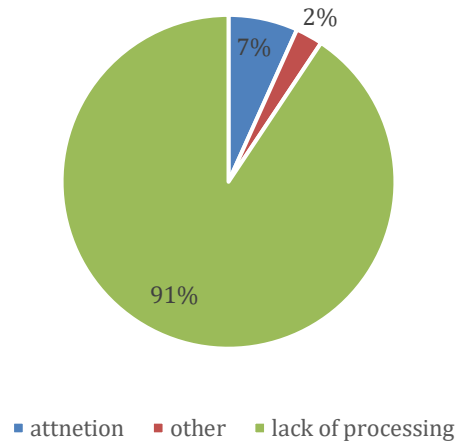
below:



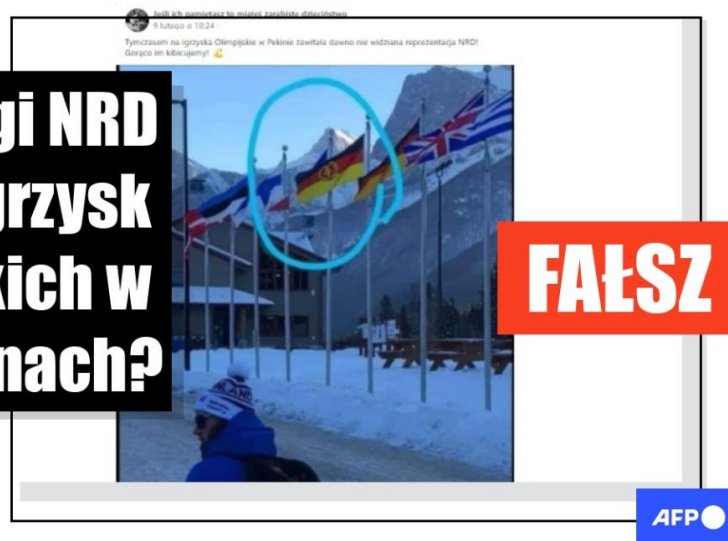
Rysunek 2 Text and chart as visual communication

Another category refers to **additional elements** that appear on photos as a result of their pre-publication processing. Photos subjected to additional processing (by, for example, superimposing something on them) are few in number, but it is noteworthy that a certain proportion of them are nevertheless processed. This is a very distinctive treatment - consisting of adding an arrow, underlining or circling a particular element. It is meant to draw attention to a particularly important element for the disinformation narrative, which might not be noticed by the viewer.

### Additional elements

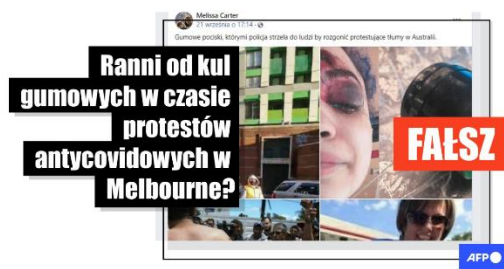
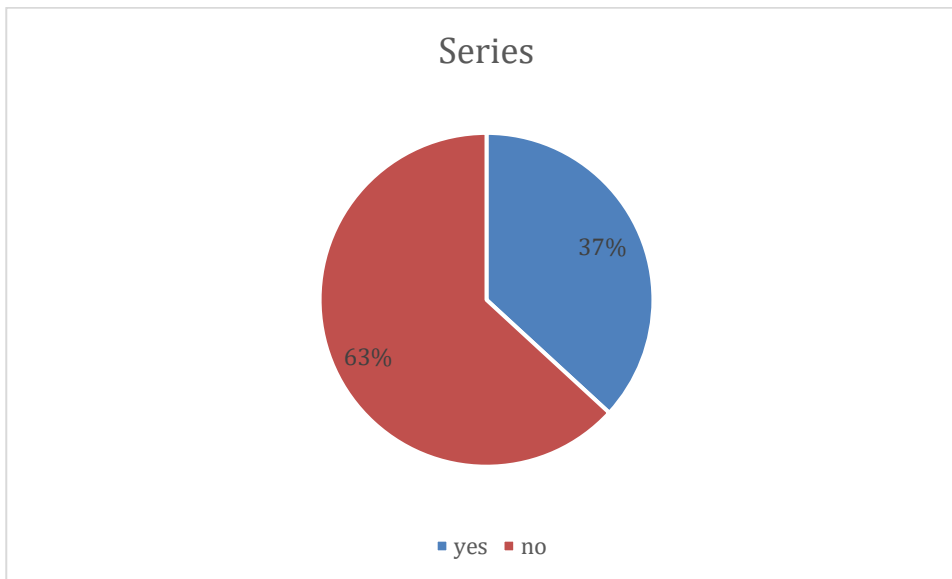


**Zdjęcie flagi NRD  
z Igrzysk  
Olimpijskich w  
Chinach?**



Rysunek 3 Highlighting an element in a function of attracting the viewer's attention

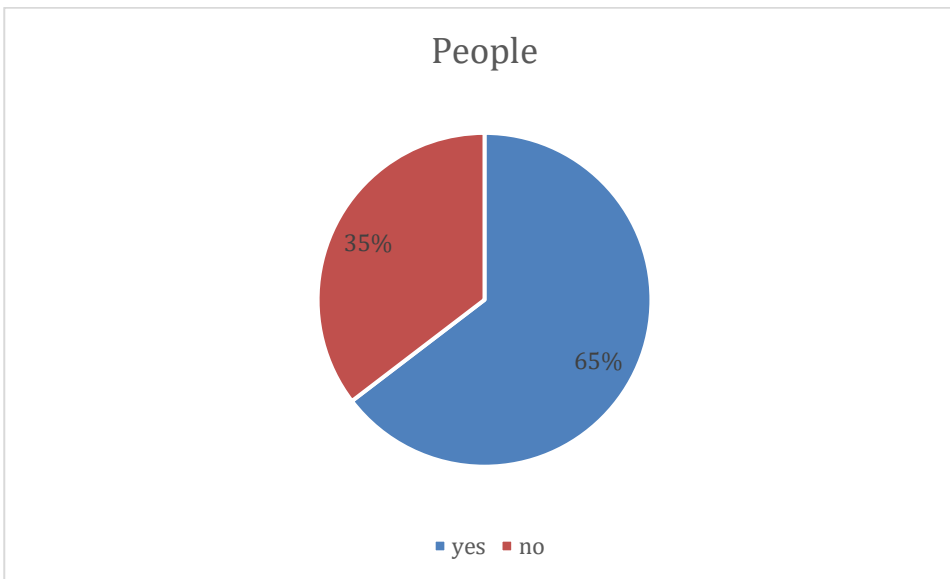
It is also characteristic that pictures in disinformation messages are combined in **series** - most often in connection with an effort to reveal an alleged conspiracy/hidden truth or to show the "truth" about reality.



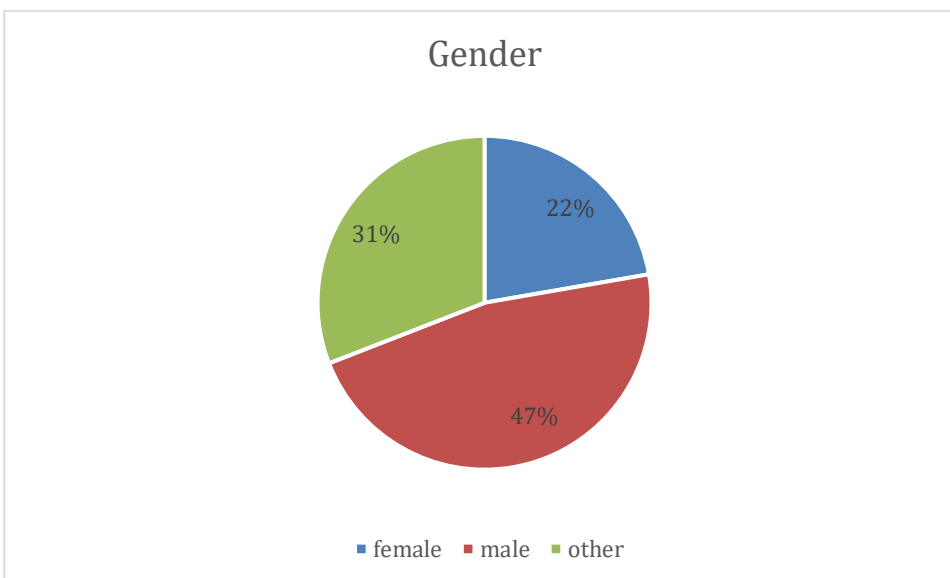
Rysunek 4 Series

## Content of visual messages

Regarding the content of visual messages, the question was asked first of all in what part of these messages **people** appear as objects that are an important part of the composition. The analysis indicated a clear dominance of messages that present human figures.



In terms of **gender**, the vast majority of people depicted in disinformation messages are men. It is worth noting that the "other" category referred to situations in which it was difficult to determine the gender of the people depicted in the photo, or those where there were mixed-gender groups in the photo. On the other hand, the basis for classification in the appropriate category ("men" or "women") was the presence in the photo of only women or only men (individually or in groups). Detailed data is shown in the chart below:

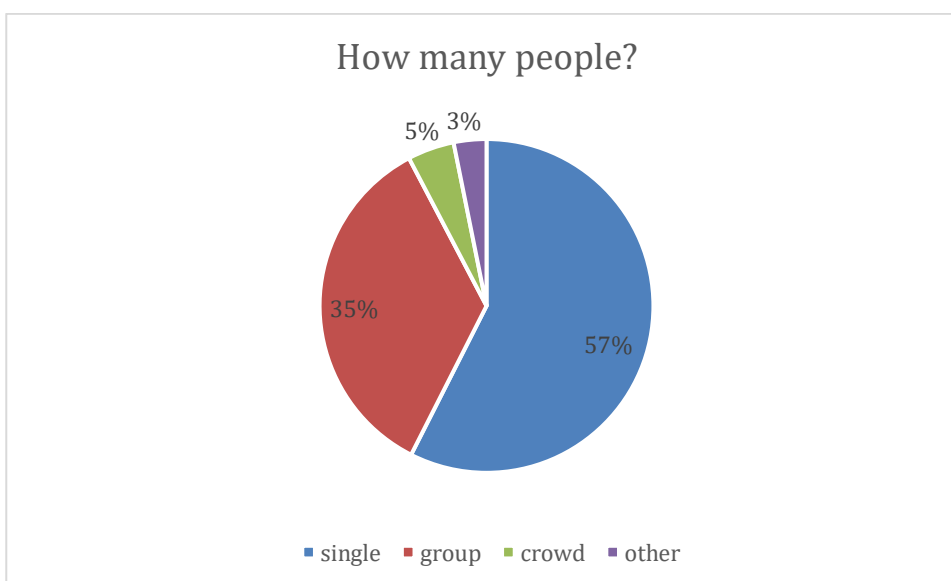




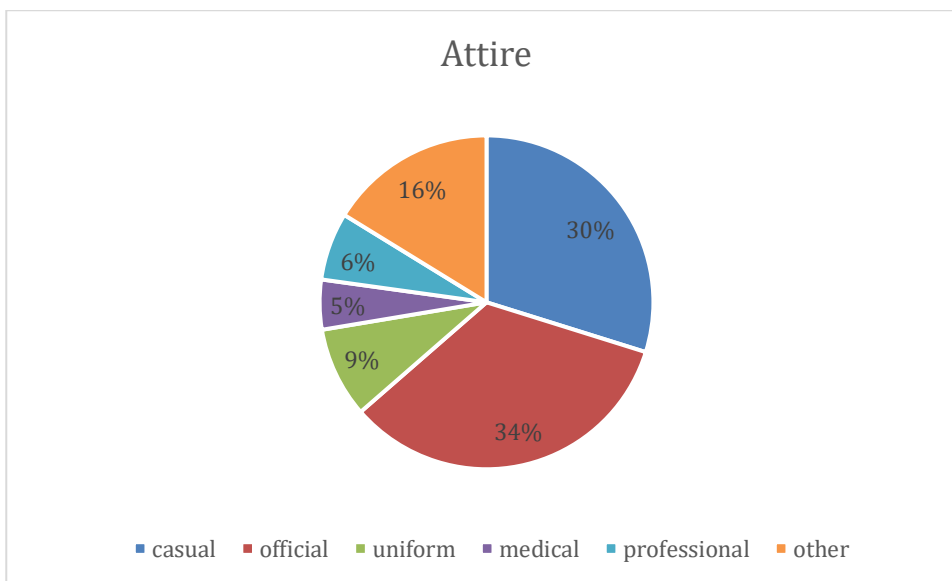


Rysunek 5 Gender: men

The visual messages analyzed were also found to vary in terms of **the number of people** depicted. However, it is noteworthy that the predominant part is the depiction of one person. This is probably related to the subject matter in general and the dominant narratives in the disinformation messages (discussed in the report on language and communication structures), especially the presentation of negative narratives about specific individuals (who are then shown in photographs). Detailed data is shown in the chart below:



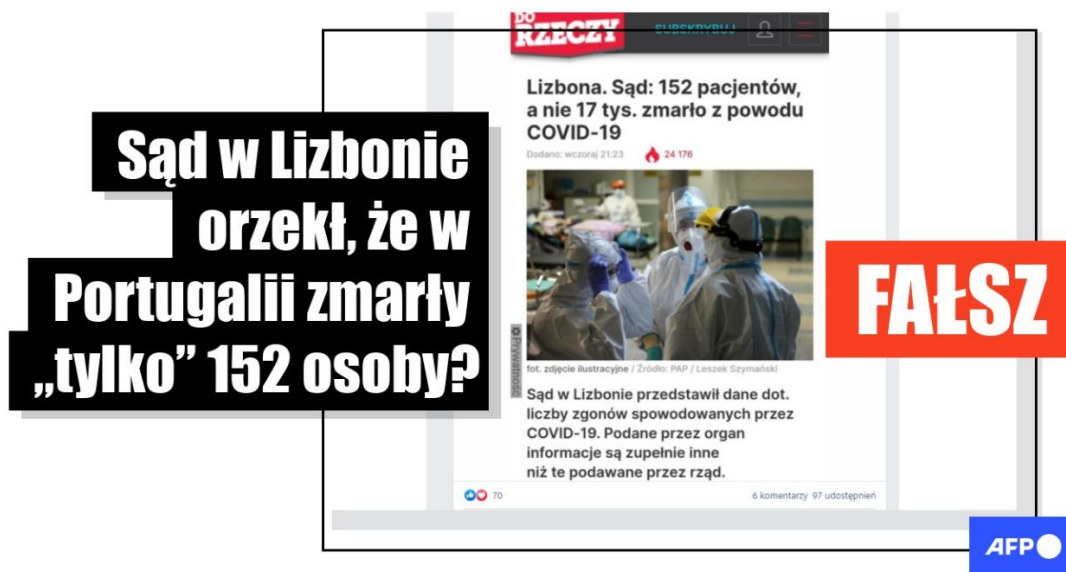
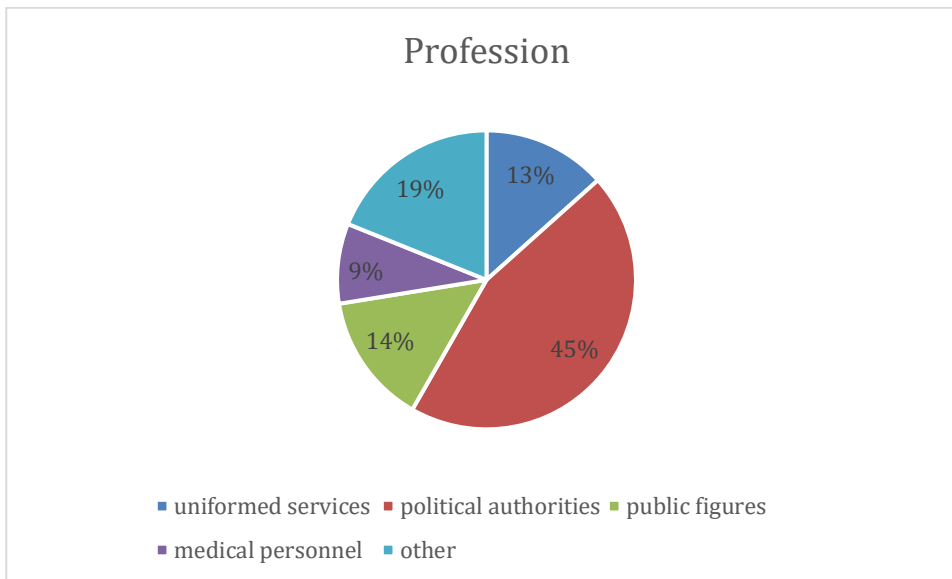
The people depicted in the photos are most often **dressed** in everyday (casual) or official attire. Casual attire is associated with people presented in a positive or neutral context, while official attire is most often the attire of representatives of the broadly understood social elite, whose actions and statements are subjected to criticism (these are mainly suits). Uniform is the attire of the police or military. The category of "professional attire" includes the attire of, for example, priests or sportsmen and was deliberately treated separately from the category of "medical attire". Detailed results are shown in the chart below:





Rysunek 6 Attire: uniform

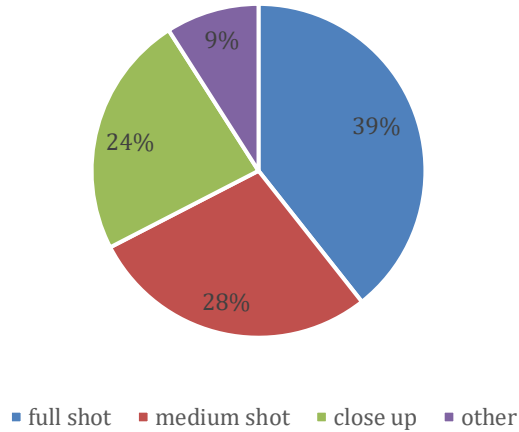
The above results are confirmed by an analysis of the **professions** represented by the people in the photos (assessed mainly on the basis of their attire, but also the context of presentation and media recognition of specific people). It is worth noting that the clear communication of a profession is associated in the vast majority of cases with a negative assessment of its representatives. The category "political authorities" includes representatives of governments, presidents, government officials and representatives of WHO-type institutions. Detailed data is shown in the chart below:



Rysunek 7 Medical personnel

To analyze the **position of the figure** in the photo, the categories of film set were used. Accordingly, a distinction was made between medium shot (showing the figure from the waist up); full shot (including the cowboy shot - and therefore showing the whole figure or the figure from the knees up); close-up (and also semi-close-up - showing the figure's face, possibly with the shoulders). The details are shown in the chart below:

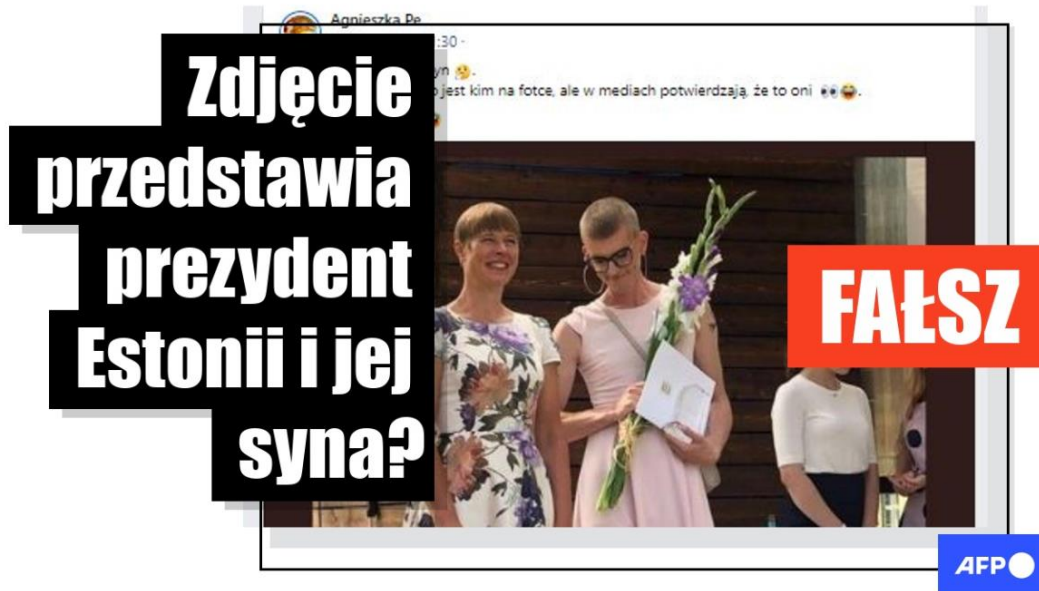
### Character framing



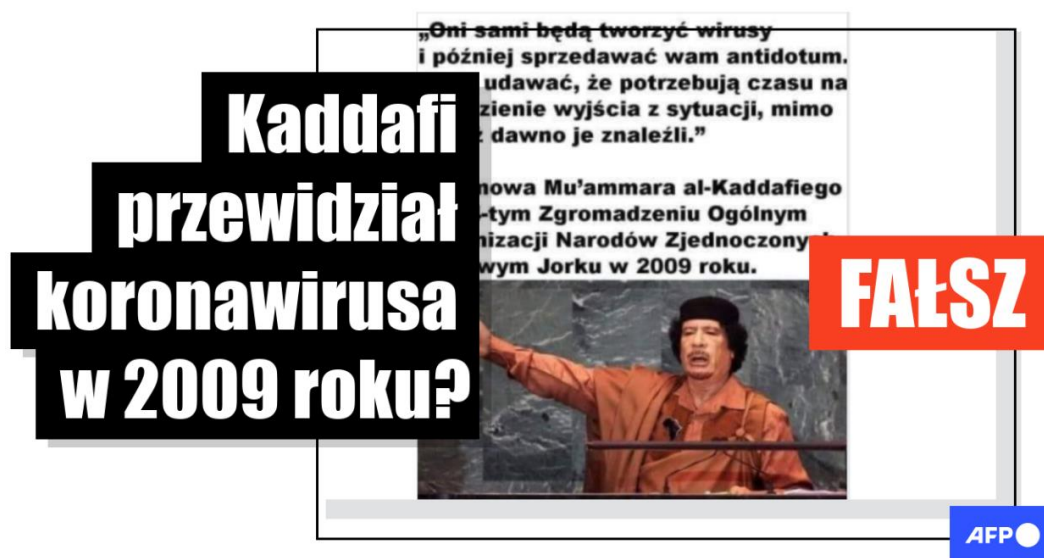
**Zeleński sprzedał  
17 milionów hektarów  
ziemi zagranicznym  
inwestorom?**



Rysunek 8 Close up



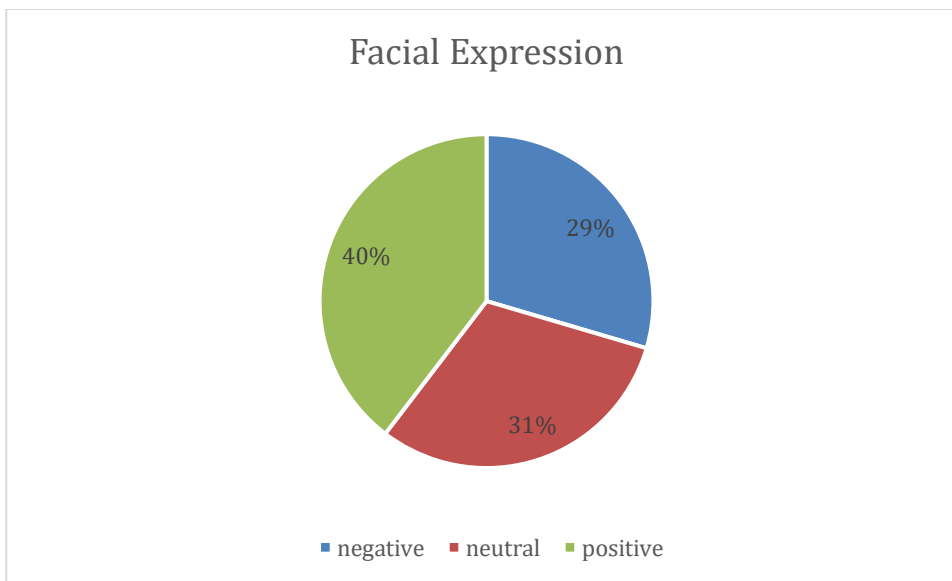
Rysunek 9 Full shot



Rysunek 10 Medium shot

Another category refers to the **facial expression** of the person(s) presented in the photo. The analysis concerned only those depictions where facial expressions were observable and assessable according to the accepted criteria. It is worth noting that negative facial

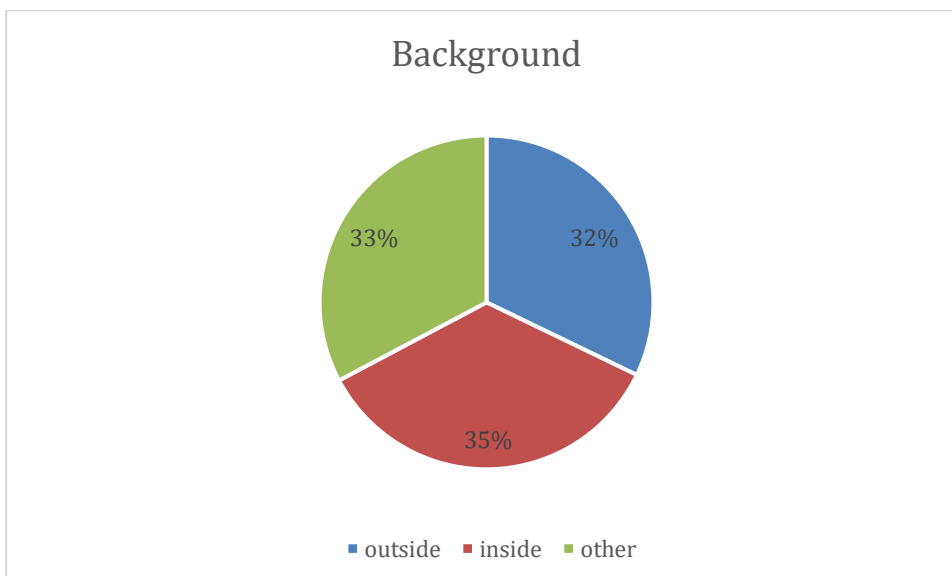
expressions do not dominate over positive and neutral facial expressions (in total). However, it should be emphasized that the data presented below do not refer to the type of emotionality of the entire visual message. Very often, for example, we see a politician with a positive facial expression in a photo, but the context of the presentation makes the overall tone of the message negative. The data on the emotional characteristics of the facial expressions of the people depicted in the photos are shown in the chart below:





Rysunek 11 Faces of people in photo connotes different emotions than the whole message

Issues related to what kind of **environment** the character appears in were also analyzed. It was considered possible to identify two unambiguous situations: outside and inside. The category "other" includes such visual messages whose background was ambiguous or abstract. As can be seen in the chart below, balanced results were obtained in terms of this variable:

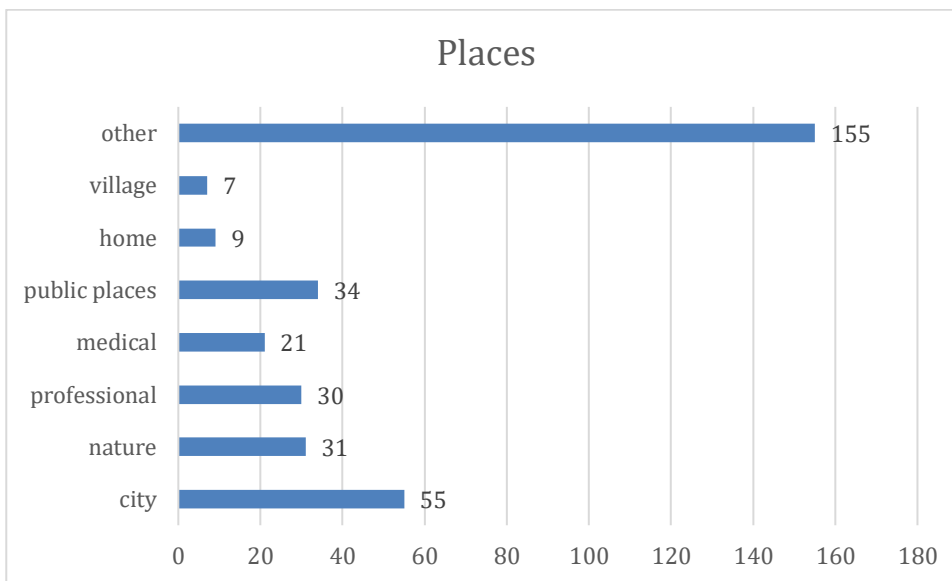




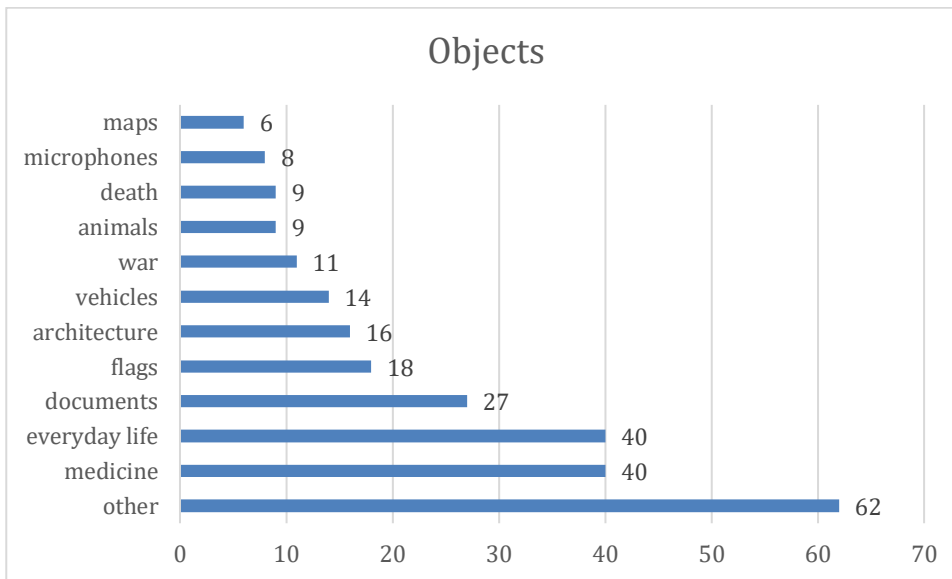


Rysunek 12 Outside

An attempt was also made to point to a specific **place** depicted in the picture. This attempt, of course, could not yield conclusive data, since the place essentially depends on the subject matter of the message. Noteworthy, however, is the significant predominance of the urban landscape over the rural landscape. The "other" category includes such visual messages whose background was ambiguous or abstract. The "public places" category includes, for example, a cemetery, a store, a church, a sports hall, a school or a street about which it is impossible to determine whether it is located in the city or the countryside. Detailed data is shown in the chart below:



The same is true of the question of what kind of **objects** are presented in the photos. Only those depictions with identifiable objects were analyzed. The "other" category includes objects that appear in a very limited way (e.g., a stick, barrel, etc.). In view of the dominance of the pandemic theme, the high ranking of medical equipment is not surprising. On the other hand, the highly ranked category of "everyday life" involves a very wide range of items (such as furniture, clothing, books, etc.). An interesting category is documents, whose relatively high position is explained by an interesting and characteristic phenomenon of fake news. Namely, documents are presented as objective evidence to confirm something, their photos are often accompanied by almost no additional commentary. Detailed data is shown in the chart below:



zakaźność COVID-19 jest największa na początku okresu choroby."

Link do artykułu  
Link do jednego z badań

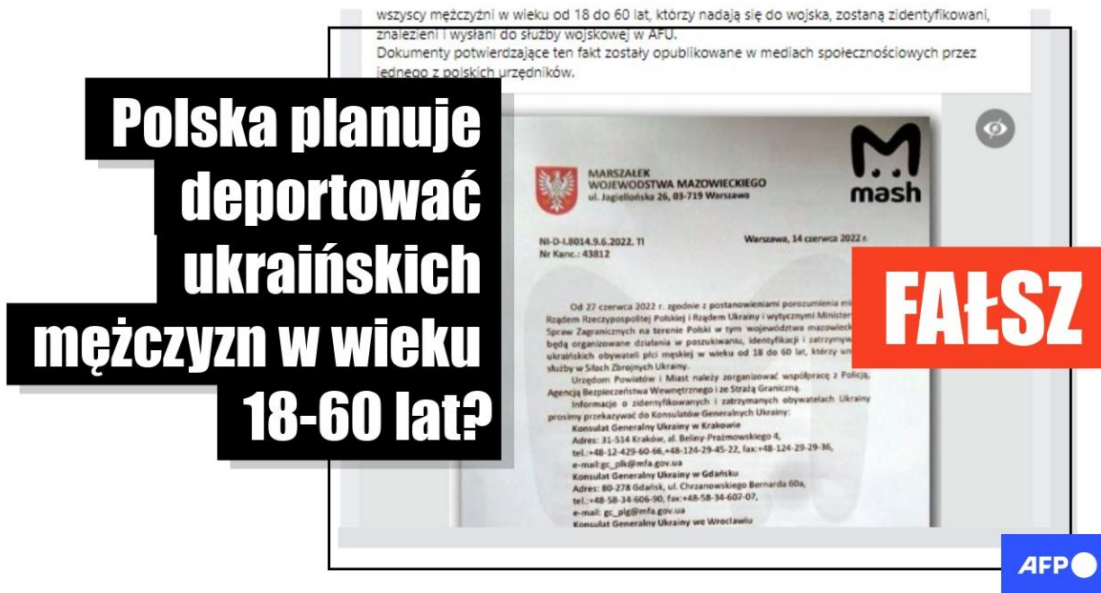
# Szwecja zrezygnowała z testów PCR?

# FAŁSZ

564 57 komentarzy 1,5 tys. udostępnień

AFP

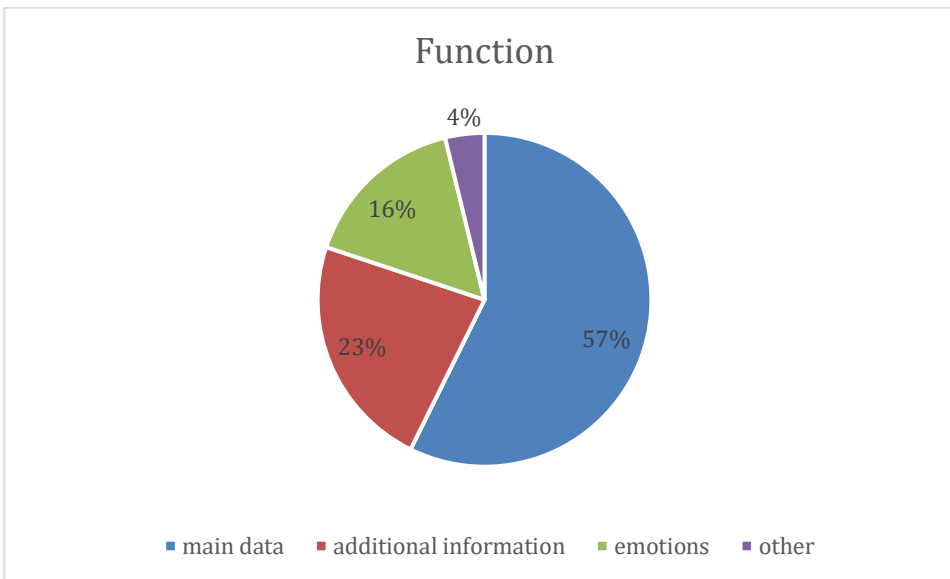
Rysunek 13 Objects: "medicine"



Rysunek 14 Objects: "documents"

## The function of visual messages

In this context, the main thing that was studied was what function visual messages have in **relation to the textual messages** they accompany. As can be seen, the function that is associated with the presentation of primary data is definitely dominant. This refers to the situation when a photo "speaks for itself" - it presents a document, an alleged fraud or an observed situation. In this function, visual messages become the essence of disinformation messages (they constitute them). As can be seen, disinformation is strongly dependent on such messages. In some cases, the visual message complements the textual message ("additional information" - for example, by presenting a photo of the person in question), and relatively often - it reinforces the emotional message, most often in the context of negative emotions. Detailed data is shown in the chart below:



Rysunek 15 Function: additional information



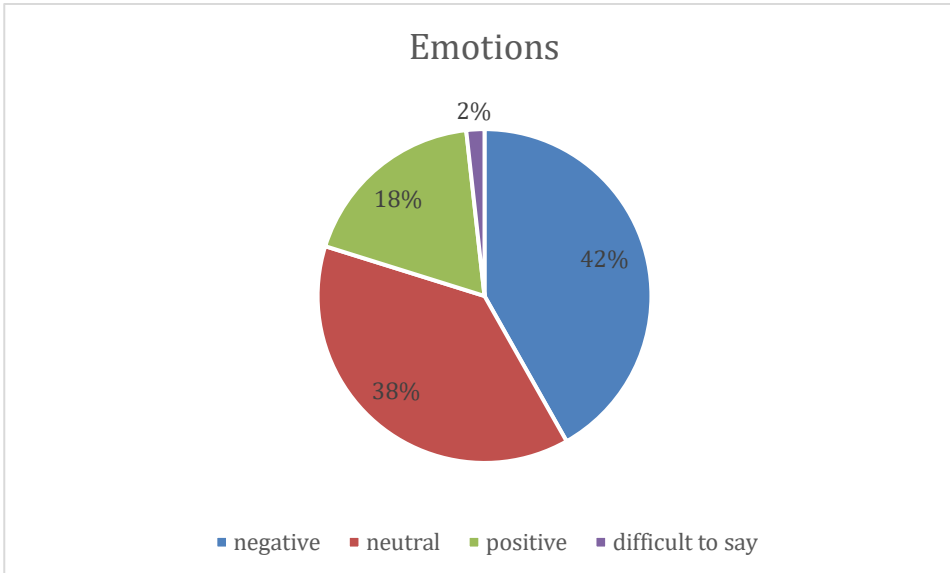
Rysunek 16 Function: main data



Rysunek 17 Function: emotions

As for **emotions** encoded by visual messages, negative emotions dominate. However, it is worth noting that there are fewer of them than neutral and positive emotions (in total).

Detailed data is shown in the chart below:



Rysunek 18 Negative emotions



Rysunek 19 Positive emotions

## Main conclusions

1. In terms of form, the visual materials accompanying disinformation messages are overwhelmingly contemporary photos, resembling reporter photos, i.e. the kind the audience can find in institutional media.
2. The occurrence of text superimposed on photos and arrows, underlines or circles superimposed on the photo can be considered as specific elements characteristic of visual disinformation messages. The text directs the interpretation (often completely changing its vector in relation to the original photo), while elements of the second type serve to draw the viewer's attention to the important (according to the sender) parts of the photo, which, for example, reveal hidden facts or conspiracies. A photograph in the function of a disinformation message leaves the viewer with less freedom of interpretation than a classic reporter photograph. Such elements should also arouse suspicion in the proces of reception.



3. Most of the analyzed visual messages present people, individuals rather than groups, more often men than women. This phenomenon is related to the dominant narrative tendencies observed in disinformation messages.
4. The dominant category, in terms of the profession of the people shown in the images, is that of "people in power" (people who serve as ministers, presidents, government officials, and head global institutions). These people are overwhelmingly depicted in negative contexts. In opposition to this category is the category of "ordinary people," who suffer the negative consequences of government decisions, suffer or, on the other hand, revolt.
5. The framing of the figures in the analyzed messages is varied, with a slight dominance of the full shot.
6. Facial expressions of people presented in the photos in terms of coded emotions are varied, but it is worth noting that the positive facial expression of the person presented in the photo often does not translate into a positive emotional overtone of the whole material (irony or directly expressed criticism appears).
7. The space presented in the analyzed messages and the objects that appear there are varied. However, it is noteworthy that relatively often there are pictures of documents.
8. The above observation correlates with the fact that the main function of visual messages in the context of disinformation is the direct presentation of data. This is a communication situation in which the photo "speaks for itself," it is the photo that shows what the alleged lie or conspiracy is about. A disinformation message without such a photo loses its meaning. That's why it's so important to present documents, but that's also why photos in disinformation messages often appear in series.
9. The emotions encoded by photos accompanying (or constituting) disinformation messages are varied, with a predominance of negative emotions.

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- 2024 (contract no. 5213/CEF/2021/2).

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