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# Thankful Enough? Gratitude and Ingratitude in Politics

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**Abstract.** Robert van Krieken notes that Norbert Elias provides one of the most systematic sociological descriptions of the social and historical dynamics of various processes driving the pacification of hostility and the dismantling of antagonism. He states that Elias «wrote about the emotions that drive such antagonism, including aggression, anger, embarrassment, fear, shame, happiness, sadness, hatred, repugnance and disgust, and alongside his concern with the ways in which antagonism in human relations has been pacified over time» (van Krieken 2024: 22). Van Krieken lists a wide range of emotions, which surprisingly excludes gratitude. Gratitude is, in fact, as significant in the dialectical process of civilization/decivilization as national pride. This article aims to analyze the dialectic of gratitude/ingratitude as political emotions; fill a gap in Eliasian sociology by including gratitude as a key emotional factor in the pacification and/or antagonization processes; show how gratitude serves to discipline international partners. Based on the example of US–Polish–Ukrainian relations in the aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this text demonstrates how the expression of and demand for gratitude shaping the boundaries of international solidarity.

*Keywords:* Gratitude, Civilizing Process, Sociology of Emotions, Diplomacy, Polish-Ukrainian Relationship, Solidarity, Trump.

On March 23, 2025, Erica L. Green (2025), a White House correspondent for *The New York Times*, argued that “when it comes to diplomacy, Mr. Trump wants an implicit or explicit display of personal gratitude from American allies.” Regarding Donald Trump’s transactional approach, Green cites Michael Froman, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, and suggests that Trump “sees aiding U.S. allies as a favor, rather than as a cornerstone of foreign policy that will pay dividends down the road” (Green 2025). According to Green, this marks a fundamental shift in the approach to international affairs. If you want protection, “you have to show respect to the boss”—an attitude that makes emotions and personal relationships essential to political success. In her commentary on Trump’s behavior at the start of his second term, political scientist Natália Bálint (2025) states that “the diplomatic rules that have existed since 1648 have come to an end.” She adds: “The whole thing is nothing but psychology.”

Chantal Mouffe (2002: 8) observes that the concept of psychology as politics is problematic for classical theories of democratic politics, which operate within the frameworks of interest, reason, or morality. In the context of the demand for gratitude, emotions such as passion and resentment become the driving forces of politics (van Krieken 2024). In this conception of politics, “psychological manipulation is the most powerful tool” (Bálint 2025).

Regarding support for Ukraine in the war with Russia, gratitude had already served as a political tool in Poland more than a year before Trump's infamous "You've got to be more thankful" remark to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office on February 28, 2025. At the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the discourse surrounding Polish–Ukrainian relations included references to a "festival of gratitude" between the two nations. Since the invasion's beginning, the dialectic of gratitude/ingratitude has become part of the public sphere in Poland. It has served both to pacify antagonisms between the two nations and as a tool for generating hostility (Mouffe 2002; Elias 1996). At the end of 2023, Polish transport workers and farmers blockaded the border with Ukraine, accusing Ukrainians of ingratitude. Banners on tractors labeling Ukrainians as "ungrateful motherfuckers" were as stunning as Trump's demand for gratitude from Zelenskyy in the Oval Office. They were shocking not only to Ukrainians but also to many Poles—especially those who, for more than eighteen months, had helped over 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. The banners reflected public emotions surrounding the grain trade: Poles felt that cheap Ukrainian grain was flooding the country and that Poland was inadequately protecting both its farmers and consumers of grain products.

In the aftermath of the 2023 parliamentary elections, in which liberals triumphed over populists, historian Timothy Garton Ash (2023) proposed that the world should take inspiration from Poland. Nevertheless, I argue here that Poland offers an even more significant lesson within the emerging paradigm of international relations, namely the process of managing relationships and political antagonism through gratitude. The clash between Poland and Ukraine reveals gratitude as both a socializing force and a tool that reinforces international hierarchies. To emphasize the political role of gratitude, I will contrast Trump's demands for Ukraine's gratitude with the mutual expressions of gratitude between Poles and Ukrainians at the full-scale war's outset, which turned into accusations of ingratitude by the end of 2023.

## GRATITUDE AND INGRATITUDE AS POLITICAL EMOTIONS: A SIMMELIAN-ELIASIAN PERSPECTIVE

This article takes a sociological approach to gratitude, enriched by insights from other disciplines. In recent decades, research on gratitude has flourished<sup>1</sup> (Locklear *et alii* 2022). Scholars note that receiving expressions of gratitude increases prosocial behavior (Franzese, Seigler 2020). Adam M. Grant and Francesca Gino (2010) write: "when helpers are thanked for their efforts, they experience stronger feelings of self-efficacy and social worth, which motivate them to engage in prosocial behavior." I emphasize the relational and processual nature of gratitude rather than treating it as a state, namely a feeling of appreciation, fulfillment, and positive acceptance of life,

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<sup>1</sup> Beside philosophy and theology, gratitude has become the object of study in psychology (Emmons 2004), history (Burroughs 2020), management (Locklear *et alii* 2022; Yu, Chaudhry 2023), sociology (Cantó-Milà 2012), and health sciences (Davis *et alii* 2016). Positive psychology and health sciences empirically study how gratitude positively affects mental, emotional, and physical states (Huston *et alii* 2024). They also examine therapeutic interventions and personal learning practices aimed at fostering gratitude and appreciation (Franzese, Seigler 2020). Cross-cultural research reveals key differences. For example, people in a collectivist culture (China) are less likely than those in an individualist culture (America) to express gratitude to close others (Rotkirch *et alii* 2014). Moreover, authenticity strengthens gratitude: recipients feel more grateful when the assistance seems driven by personal choice rather than external pressure (Lin *et alii* 2024).

or as a trait—that is, a grateful disposition toward responding to positive experiences in life (see McCullough *et alii* 2002). I treat the dialectic of gratitude/ingratitude as historical and not universal (see Floyd *et alii* 2018) phenomenon. My focus is not on gratitude as such, but on how it connects—or divides—people. While expressions of gratitude maintain the relationship, demands for gratitude or accusations of ingratitude can become tools of domination and submission.

In his wonderful essay on gratitude, Georg Simmel (1908) argues that the initial act of giving expresses a form of freedom that one can never fully reciprocate. Mees van Hulzen (2021: 113) explains:

According to Simmel, the first gift that is given in a circle of gift exchange, is given in full spontaneity; there is no duty attached to it, not even the duty to show gratitude. This unique characteristic of the first gift makes it that it is impossible to fully reciprocate that what has been given. Although it is rather doubtful whether there is no duty attached to the first gift, it does however seem reasonable to argue that the initiative of the first gift can never be fully reciprocated. The consequence of this is that there always will be a certain imbalance or inequality within gift exchange.

Therefore, we can assert that no matter how the recipient expresses gratitude, they may always face accusations of ingratitude. As we will see, both Trump and Poles accusing Ukraine of ingratitude exploit the fact that, within the moral space of gratitude, it is “impossible to fully reciprocate.” Zelenskyy, in turn, appeals to the “spontaneity” and “unconditionality” of the “first gift” when demanding support for Ukraine in the war against Russia. By contrast, the “festival of gratitude” brought Poles and Ukrainians closer together. I show how gratitude becomes a tool through which social actors affirm or challenge social distance.

According to Simmel, gratitude signifies loyalty, while ingratitude represents a betrayal of moral memory. Much like other social forms identified by Simmel—such as competition, subordination, super-ordination, division of labor, and coquetry (Simmel 1992; see Cantó-Milà 2012: 10)—the dialectic of gratitude and ingratitude makes both individual and collective motives socially “shareable and understandable” (Cantó-Milà 2012: 10). The act of demanding gratitude or accusing someone of ingratitude similarly functions as a way of articulating and legitimizing human motives within a social context. A demand to repay a debt of gratitude invokes specific past events—namely the original act of giving. The potency of gratitude as a political emotion lies not in rational calculation or self-interest but in its rootedness, which I suggest we can understand in three interrelated dimensions:

- moral—based on distinctions between good and evil, and on defining who belongs to a moral circle (Abend 2014; see Rapior 2023). The “ungrateful” may face symbolic exclusion or dehumanization;
- factual—grounded in tangible acts of giving and receiving. The recipient cannot deny having received the gift (Mangone 2019). The act of giving, regardless of its ambiguity, serves as both proof and justification of the demands for gratitude. The criticism of colonialism aptly illustrates the ambiguity of gratitude (Burroughs 2020);
- cognitive—built from collective and individual narratives of giving and receiving, often shaped by the media and digital communication (see Anderson 1983).

Elias focuses on specific historical experiences rather than abstract theories (Heinich 2014). His concept of figurations emphasizes that the primary relationship he examines is not a causal one,

but a relationship of “simultaneity.” Similarly, Simmel highlights the “primacy of synchrony over diachrony” (Waizbort 2013: 182; van Krieken 2000; 2019), as well as the idea that interaction rests upon the state of “one alongside the other” (see Lichtblau 1994: 545). Following the Simmelian-Eliasian lens (Waizbort 2013; Bucholtz 2013), I examine the power of gratitude as a political instrument and demonstrate how it may transform into ingratitude in struggles over political interests.

Robert van Krieken (2024) notes that Elias provides one of the most systematic sociological descriptions of the social and historical dynamics of various processes driving the pacification of hostility and the dismantling of antagonism. He states that Elias

wrote about the emotions that drive such antagonism, including aggression, anger, embarrassment, fear, shame, happiness, sadness, hatred, repugnance and disgust, and alongside his concern with the ways in which antagonism in human relations has been pacified over time (van Krieken 2024: 22)

Van Krieken lists a wide range of emotions, which surprisingly excludes gratitude. This article aims, among other things, to fill this gap. Gratitude is, in fact, as significant in the dialectical process of civilization/decivilization as national pride. We can consider gratitude a part of pacifying aggression, but also emerging antagonism. This article aims to analyze the dialectic of gratitude/ingratitude as political emotions; fill a gap in Eliasian sociology by including gratitude as a key emotional factor in the pacification and/or antagonization processes (van Krieken 2024); show how gratitude serves to discipline international partners. Based on the example of US–Polish–Ukrainian relations in the aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this text demonstrates how the expression of and demand for gratitude connect to shaping the boundaries of international solidarity.

#### METHOD: ETHNOGRAPHY OF TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND MEDIA DISCOURSE OF GRATITUDE AND INGRATITUDE

This article represents interpretive sociology (Weber 1930; Kaufmann 2004). “Influenced by Weberian and Schützian sociology, interpretive sociology aims to reconstruct the life-worlds of social agents” (Angermüller 2005). The expression of “life-words” takes the form of social episodes—specific events occurring at a given time. I recreate the interactive construction of such episodes—for example, by presidents deliberating in one room through their mutual exchanges of words, gestures, and emotions—and their subsequent interpretation by other social actors, such as the media, other politicians, and the public.

I examined the dialectic of gratitude/ingratitude between Poland and Ukraine since 2023 as part of ethnography of transnational solidarity activism and the support provided to Ukrainians by Polish volunteers. As part of this research, I conducted twenty-five semi-structured in-depth interviews with Polish and Ukrainian volunteers and activists involved in transporting dual-use equipment—cars, buses, excavators, and drones—from European Union (EU) countries to Ukraine. The interviews took place between September 2023 and March 2025. During these conversations, I addressed the topic of the Polish farmers’ and transport workers’ protests at the Polish–Ukrainian border at the turn of 2023 and 2024, as well as the Zelenskyy–Duda conflict.

In the three interviews conducted after March 2025, I also asked about tensions between Zelenskyy and Trump. Additionally, together with Tomasz Detlef from the University of Warsaw, I examined how Polish media discourse after 1989 frames gratitude to identify “affective-discursive canons” (Wetherell *et alii* 2015) shaping the narratives of Polish–Ukrainian gratitude during Russia’s invasion. We used the MoncoPL corpus to track diachronic changes in the usage of *wdzięczność* (gratitude) and *wdzięczny* (grateful), including morphological variants, since 2010. The analysis of Polish discourse, the in-depth interviews, and two-year participant observation of humanitarian aid—including two field works in L’viv and Kyiv—provided empirical material that I subsequently analyzed using the Simmelian-Eliasian framework.<sup>2</sup>

I personally experienced the blockade of the Polish–Ukrainian border by Polish farmers and the transport industry in late 2023. Returning with a humanitarian convoy from Kyiv, we passed an over thirty-kilometer-long line of trucks waiting to enter Ukraine. A friend of mine showed me a photograph of the tractors with a banner that read: “No more hospitality, ungrateful motherfuckers.” Just hours earlier in Kyiv, Ukrainian volunteers had thanked me for supporting their country. In an in-depth interview several days later, a Ukrainian volunteer offered a commentary on the protests that had taken place at the border: “Confusion, not understanding what is happening in Polish politics—because before, there was solidarity—and now that confusion is growing, because we have this crisis with the trucks.”

Yuval Feinstein (2024: 122) argues that research on national and international emotions “still tends to use an axe rather than a scalpel to dissect affective experiences.” It often conflates anger with fury, hatred with dislike, fear with anxiety, shame with humiliation, and pride with enthusiasm. As Lloyd Cox (2020: 143) observes, scholars who identify discrete emotions—such as shame, humiliation, hate, fury, or resentment—in specific nation-building or wartime contexts seldom examine them in depth. Building on Cox’s critique, I investigate concrete manifestations of a single emotion—gratitude. Maéva Clément and Simon Koschut (2024: 394) contend that one must study emotions as “intrinsic elements of power and governance in world politics,” and I focus on expressions of gratitude to demonstrate how this emotion—whether intentionally orchestrated or situationally evoked—creates hierarchies between states. By illustrating the theatricality of politics (Fitzgerald 2015), I reveal a novel form of diplomacy, in which charismatic figures rather than abstract market forces—“anonymous as the weather” (O’Toole 2025b)—shape interstate relations through televised emotional influence. Drawing on case studies, I trace how gratitude undergoes instrumentalization, and conclude by reconsidering its diplomatic implications.

In the following section, I examine how the dialectic of gratitude and ingratitude mobilizes the societies of nation-states toward cooperation or hostility (Elias 1996; van Krieken 2024). The six points below offer concrete examples of how the diplomacy of gratitude and ingratitude unfolds, and how gratitude operates as a political emotion.

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<sup>2</sup> I presented the findings at the October 2024 “Future of Central and East European Studies” conference in Warsaw; at two Borderland Researchers’ Seminars in Gruszki, on the Belarus–Poland border—the first paper focused on similarities and differences between activism on the Belarus border and pro-Ukraine activism, and the second entitled “Gaza–Ukraine–Poland: Genocide, War, and Borders of Solidarity”; at the December 2024 “Social Figurations: Long-Term Processes, Present Concerns and Future Directions” conference in Prague, where Detlef and I delivered a paper entitled “Festival of Gratitude, Outbursts of Ingratitude: Polish–Ukrainian Interdependence during the Russo–Ukrainian War”; and at the RUTA Conference, held in Uzhhorod at the end of June 2025.

## “SAY THANK YOU”: HOW GRATITUDE BECAME A POLITICAL FAULT LINE

On March 9, 2025, the BBC reported:

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Elon Musk clashed with Poland’s Foreign Minister over the use of the tech billionaire’s Starlink satellite internet system in Ukraine. Musk wrote on X that Ukraine’s “entire front line” would collapse if he turned the system off. Radoslaw Sikorski responded, stating that Poland had paid for its use in Ukraine and that any threat to shut it down would prompt the search for an alternative network.

Rubio replied to Sikorski on X:

And say thank you, because without Starlink, Ukraine would have lost this war long ago, and the Russians would be on the border with Poland right now.

Musk added:

Be quiet, small man. You pay a tiny fraction of the cost. And there is no substitute for Starlink.

This incident occurred ten days after a meeting between Zelenskyy and Trump, along with Vance, in the Oval Office (February 28, 2025), during which the US President accused his guest of ingratitude. Let me summarize the conversation with several key quotes that capture the meeting’s tone:

Trump to Zelenskyy: “You have to be thankful.”

Vance to Zelenskyy: “Have you said thank you once this entire meeting?”

Zelenskyy to Vance: “A lot of times ... I say thank you to the American people.”

Zelenskyy to Vance: “Have you ever been to Ukraine to see the problems we have?”

Vance to Zelenskyy: “Offer some words of appreciation for the United States of America and the President who’s trying to save your country.”

Trump to Zelenskyy: “You don’t have the cards.”

Trump to everyone: “This is going to be great television.”

After leaving the White House on Friday, Zelenskyy posted on X:

Thank you America, thank you for your support, thank you for this visit. Thank you @POTUS, Congress, and the American people. Ukraine needs just and lasting peace, and we are working exactly for that.

CNN reports (Dale 2025) that Zelenskyy thanked America and US leaders thirty-three times before the visit. According to an analysis by UNITED24 (Brizard 2025), Zelenskyy has publicly expressed gratitude to the USA ninety-four times since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022.

## “NO ONE SHOULD FEEL SORRY FOR HIM”: INGRATITUDE AND PRIVILEGE

The Nobel-peace prize winner Lech Wałęsa joined former Polish political prisoners and wrote a letter to Trump:

We watched the report of your conversation with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with fear and distaste. We consider your expectations regarding the expression of respect and gratitude for the material assistance provided by the United States to

Ukraine, which is fighting Russia, to be insulting. Gratitude is due to the heroic Ukrainian soldiers who shed their blood in defense of the values of the free world.

After its publication, left-wing Polish journalists mocked the letter: “Trump won’t read it anyway,” they scoffed ironically (Wójcik 2025). Right-wing commentators began to criticize Sikorski for provoking, in their view, Poland’s greatest ally—the USA. But the biggest stir was caused by a liberal journalist and former US correspondent, Piotr Kraśko, when speaking on the Polish 24-hour commercial news channel TVN24, owned by the American media conglomerate Warner Bros. Discovery. TVN24 has accustomed its viewers to hearing criticism of Trump and right-wing Polish politics on the channel (see Wójcik 2025). Yet Kraśko defended Trump, arguing that he was rational and fact-based (Ciesielska 2025):

[Trump says:] “You’re having a problem with army recruitment, because people don’t want to join the Ukrainian military.” At which point Volodymyr Zelenskyy interrupts him. But excuse me—Poland’s Minister of Defense, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, in a radio interview, literally said: “Poles are angry when they see young Ukrainian citizens driving luxury cars and parking them outside five-star hotels in Poland.” If anyone wants to claim they haven’t noticed that many young Ukrainians don’t want to serve in the Ukrainian army, then they must not have stood on any street corner in Poland—because we see it every day.

Nationalist presidential candidate Karol Nawrocki expressed similar sentiments about Ukrainians in Poland during the 2025 campaign. At rallies, he repeated claims that Ukrainians behaved badly in lines to see doctors and that their children took Polish kids’ places in schools (Dymek, Gielzak 2024a). Nawrocki considers it unacceptable for Ukrainians to live better lives in Poland than Poles do. Unsurprisingly, nationalists felt thrilled by Kraśko’s comments—he confirmed their narrative and collective imaginaries about Ukrainians in Poland. As one right-wing newspaper wrote, “Kraśko fried the brains of TVN24 viewers.”

Kraśko’s words caused a storm in Poland because he publicly broke the line dividing Polish liberals from the Polish right. He violated the unwritten rule of “Which side are you on?” (Bromwich 2019). But Kraśko spoke with the voice of the liberal center, not only with that of the right. Importantly, liberal Prime Minister Donald Tusk pushed through legislation allowing for a temporary territorial suspension of the right to apply for international protection. The February 2025 law introduced a new term into the Polish legal order: “instrumentalization of migration.” This marked the legal recognition of migration as a weapon rather than a human movement (Rapior 2022). Moreover, the liberal presidential candidate in 2025, Rafał Trzaskowski, proposed cutting child benefits for Ukrainian children.

Kraśko’s remarks about Ukrainians in Poland echo the Trump administration’s statements made after the arrest of Mahmoud Khalil, who had become a public face of the pro-Palestine student movement at Columbia University and Barnard College in 2024. *The New York Review* (Abu El-Haj 2025) writes:

The day after Mahmoud’s arrest, another recently formed group called the Columbia Jewish Alumni Association praised his detention on social media: ‘Reportedly, Khalil’s green card is being revoked. Good. A green card is a privilege that millions wait years for. So is studying at Columbia. Khalil threw them away... No one should feel sorry for him.’

One can interpret Kraśko's utterance as suggesting that living in Poland—just as in the USA, according to the Columbia Jewish Alumni Association—is a privilege, especially because Ukrainian men do not have to fight and die in their own country. Kraśko's and Nawrocki's words imply that Poland spends vast amounts of money on refugees, while Ukrainians live in luxury hotels and drive limousines. According to Kraśko's reasoning, these behaviors “piss off” hard-working Poles, which, in turn, creates a sense of injustice: Poles toil while Ukrainian freeloaders enjoy the good life. In short, Kraśko's comments perfectly illustrate the logic of thinking through ingratitude: Poland hosted Ukrainians after the full-scale invasion, and all they do is flaunt themselves in our country, unaware that living in Poland is a privilege—to borrow the justification used for Khalil's arrest.

### COLLAPSE OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION

In contrast to historian Timothy Snyder (2025), who felt outraged by Trump's behavior and accused him of engaging in antisemitism in the Oval Office, Kraśko accused Zelenskyy of ingratitude and rudeness:

They [the USA] spent that money on Ukraine, and now Volodymyr Zelenskyy speaks to the President of the United States in a way that no living American has ever, ever heard someone speak to their president.

Regardless of whose behavior we consider to have crossed the line in the Oval Office—Zelenskyy's or Trump and Vance's—the event sent shockwaves across Europe. Cultural studies scholar Agata Sikora (2025) comments on the Oval Office encounter as follows: “If you're experiencing a mix of emotions—fear, anxiety, dread, the urge to flee—this is an appropriate reaction to the realization that the deepest internalized assumptions about the world have turned out to be completely inadequate.”

Ukrainian journalist living in Poland, Olena Babakova (2025), addresses the collapse of collective imagination in the Oval Office in a similar vein:

After February 24, 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, for three years we were afraid that nuclear superpowers would start firing intercontinental missiles at each other—and at us. ... But where is the manual for what to do when those superpowers suddenly decide to become buddies?

Babakova underscores the breakdown of the collective belief that the USA would always be our ally and a pillar of the global order. The collapse of collective imaginaries is something different from an individual mental breakdown, but as Elias (1996: 19) wrote, such “disturbance” “are scarcely less in strength and in capacity to cause suffering than the individual neuroses.”

As we have seen, Trump's demand for gratitude from Zelenskyy triggered shock, anger, fear, and dread. At the same time, among those supporting Trump and the USA, and criticizing Zelenskyy and Ukraine, it sparked satisfaction and a sense of justice. A Polish center-left commentator (Dymek, Gielzak 2025) diagnosed the current Polish right as follows:

The topos of an ungrateful Ukraine is, I would say, the core of the Polish right's narrative at the moment. We distinguished ourselves in supporting Ukraine, and Ukraine was

ungrateful to us. We can't punish them now—how could we? At most, we can kick them in the shins by taking away their child benefits. But the Americans—they could crush them into the ground, and there's an expectation that they will.

Echoing Elias (1996), Sikora could note that the emotions listed in this quote affect an individual body and mind, yet they are not individual in nature: emotions “feed off collectively shared imaginaries, and are triggered by culturally constructed scenarios.” The shock caused by Trump's demand for gratitude from Zelenskyy is thus not a personal psychological crisis, and, as Sikora writes, its solution is not individual therapy. According to Sikora, the core issue lies in the absence of new forms of collective imagination—or, as Babakova articulates it, the lack of interpretative frameworks that enable comprehension of the current sociopolitical condition.

## “GREAT TELEVISION”: THE POLITICS OF GRATITUDE/INGRATITUDE AS A MASS SPECTACLE

Trump summed up the clash with Zelenskyy by saying it was “great television.” Van Krieken (2024) says that the contemporary media loosen the norms of proper behavior. Moral transgression has become an everyday occurrence on the Internet. As a result of intensified competition and the trivialization of content—including, for example, the mixing of advertisements with images of genocide (see Sonntag 2003)—the communication sphere has become increasingly emotional (Krajewski 2023). Sociologist Marek Krajewski writes:

A symptom of this growing transgressiveness is not only the pornification of representations or the vulgarization of language, but above all the widespread practice of deceiving others—pranks—which form the core of so-called *netlore*. The overabundance of these forms of communication clearly reflects the entertaining nature of the internet and the dominance of content designed to grab our attention and amuse us (Krajewski 2023: 33).

One could see Trump's demand for gratitude as a prank—were it not for the fact that it carries serious consequences for millions of people (Pomerantsev 2024). For Americans, however, it is “great television” because, as critics of US foreign policy point out (Chomsky, Robinson 2024), the USA tends not to concern itself with the fate of people living in distant and, from its perspective, irrelevant countries. Trump knows how to manipulate emotions (Bromwich 2019) and embodies the inherently theatrical dimension of politics (Fitzgerald 2015). In the realm of psychological manipulation (Bálint 2025), international law, human rights, the constitution, or norms of etiquette lose much of their significance. What matters is the division between friends and enemies (see Schmitt 2007).

Several years earlier, in July 2017, Trump gave a speech in Warsaw's Krasinski Square to a crowd that admired him. He thanked Poland for being one of the few NATO countries that spent the recommended percentage of GDP on defense, as he had urged. He said:

Thank you. Thank you, Poland. I must tell you, the example you set is truly magnificent, and we applaud Poland. Thank you.

The crowd in Krasinski Square erupted in cheers. The US president had just confirmed that Poland was one of America's best friends. In 2025, however, the Trump administration

demanded gratitude from the Polish government. Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole (2025a) notes that in 2017, a nationalist government was in power. O'Toole writes: "Poland made the mistake of ditching a hard-right Catholic nationalist government (which was in office during Trump's visit in 2017) for Tusk's centrist coalition."

The foreign minister from whom Rubio and Musk demanded gratitude, namely Sikorski, is a member of Tusk's centrist government. Sikorski has repeatedly stated that Duda—who belongs to the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party—has excellent ties with the Republicans, so he should use his influence on Trump to ensure support for Ukraine, as it aligns with Poland's national interest. However, Duda never succeeded in convincing Trump of the Polish *raison d'être*. The Trump administration is strategically communicating a clear moral message to the television-viewing public (O'Toole 2025a). This administration views Tusk's centrist government as an enemy and the nationalist PiS government as a friend. From the former, it expects submission and words of gratitude; to the latter, it offers thanks—for doing exactly what Trump wanted.

#### EMOTIONS AS DIPLOMACY: THE ZELENSKYY–DUDA CLASH

Just like in the case of the Zelenskyy–Trump clash, the audience and the media significantly shaped the Zelenskyy–Duda conflict. In September 2023, New York and the UN headquarters became the stage for a dispute over Ukrainian grain exports to Poland. This time, it was Zelenskyy who played the role of the one stirring political emotions.

The Zelenskyy–Duda case concerned moral rather than material escalation: instead of material threats, the presidents exchanged accusations of gratitude and ingratitude. Zelenskyy's narrative suggested that Poland violated norms of solidarity and, more than that, was a "stage" or "useful idiot" of Russia. Although Zelenskyy did not use these terms himself, they often appeared in the Polish discourse and reflected the tone of his remarks:

We launched a temporary sea export corridor from our ports. And we are working hard to preserve the land routes for grain exports. And it is alarming to see how some in Europe play out solidarity in a political theatre—making thriller from the grain. They may seem to play their own role but in fact, they are helping set the stage to a Moscow actor.

The confrontation with Duda brought international attention to the issue of Ukrainian grain transit—though the world soon reframed the problem as a regional dispute between Poland and Ukraine. Moreover, Zelenskyy's symbolic intervention carried greater weight. Grain is a powerful symbol in Ukraine—a country shaped by agriculture and the memory of the Holodomor. The image of Ukrainian grain spilled on Polish tracks shocked Ukrainians, while Zelenskyy's suggestion that Poland was playing on Russia's stage provoked Polish resentment—historically, Poland perceives Russia as a hostile actor.

The following day, Duda responded with anger, reducing Zelenskyy to the role of "a drawing man." Poland had given Ukraine substantial assistance, and Ukraine should be grateful. Duda said:

It's a bit like rescuing a drowning person. Anyone who's ever participated in saving a drowning person knows they can be extremely dangerous; they can drag you under. Their fear, adrenaline—they can simply drown the rescuer. They say a drowning person will grasp at straws, and they truly grab whatever they can.

Elias might see the conflict between Duda and Zelenskyy as an example of “double bind processes” and “elimination contests”—an escalation that could lead to violence. Clément and Koschut (2024: 382) write: “A diplomacy of anger constitutes a concerted, vehement and open display of anger at all levels of government in response to a perceived violation of rules by another state.”

The “friendship” between the two countries, born after February 24, 2022—when Poles welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their homes and the country sent weapons to Kyiv—gave way to geopolitical interests in which neither side wanted to back down. When returning to Ukraine from New York, Zelenskyy made an unofficial stop in the Polish city of Rzeszów, at the airport through which Poland routes weapons for Ukraine. There, he awarded medals to a Polish medic serving at the Ukrainian front and a Polish journalist covering the war for domestic audiences. Zelenskyy's gesture played into the internal Polish divisions: the liberal opposition emphasized the role of civil society in supporting Ukraine, while PiS and right-wing journalists credited the government. The largest television station, where the decorated journalist works, broadcast footage of Zelenskyy shaking hands with “Polish–Ukrainian heroes.” The media spectacle and politics have become indistinguishable. David Bromwich (2019) observes: “The media today occupy the same world as politicians, and that is a problem.” The media spectacle is therefore not just a presentation of a political position or an argument; it is politics itself (Wark 2013).

Several weeks after the clash with Duda in New York, Zelenskyy called on Tusk to appear at the Ukrainian border by February 24, 2024, to resolve the “grain crisis.” According to the largest Polish-language web portal, Onet.pl, the crisis emerged right after the Russian invasion and gradually intensified. Initially, Poland was meant to serve only as a transit corridor for Ukrainian exports, but its system proved unprepared for this role (Dziennikarze Onetu 2024). Poland's ban on the import of agricultural products from Ukraine, introduced in autumn 2023, exacerbated the grain dispute. Agriculture Minister Czesław Siekierski announced that the embargo would remain in place until Poland negotiated a satisfactory agreement with Ukraine. Ukraine protested and filed a complaint against Poland with the World Trade Organization (WTO). On February 24, 2024, a representative of Zelenskyy traveled to the border. At the same time, Tusk met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Polish war correspondent Zbigniew Parafianowicz (see Dymek, Gielzak 2024b) mocked the Ukrainian gesture: “It can't be that an official in a military jacket summons the Polish Prime Minister to the border. Shared interests are resolved through diplomacy.” Geopolitical realists often interpret emotions in international politics as a sign of immaturity (Turner, Roberts 2023). Yet it is not good old rational diplomacy, but psychological manipulation and emotional moralizing that now shape politics. The Ukrainian spectacle at the border sparked commentary in the Polish media: was the gesture of Ukrainian officials an act of goodwill or a display of cynicism? Performative capacity to produce political spectacle and the ability to express emotion appropriately—and for a target country to correctly interpret those emotions—all form the actual core of international diplomacy.

## DIPLOMACY BY EMOTIONS: PERFORMING GRATITUDE

Following van Krieken (2024), I argue that the diplomacy of emotional spectacle is a space of Nietzschean resentment. Trump knows it, and so does Zelenskyy. The latter began the press conference in the Oval Office in February by showing Trump photos of Ukrainians killed by Russian airstrikes. Instead of empathy, the images elicited Trump's anger—a reaction interpretable as resistance to emotional manipulation; Vance accused Zelenskyy of running a “propaganda tour.” The Zelenskyy–Trump meeting thus became an example of resentment politics (Fassin 2013)—just like the earlier clash between Duda and Zelenskyy.

As Simmel emphasizes, gratitude resists codification, and thus legal norms cannot serve to regulate politics in this realm. When it comes to gratitude, communication abounds with emotions and moralization. Paradoxically, Trump's remarks to Zelenskyy in the Oval Office gave Polish nationalists a sense of belonging. They said that the leader of Poland's most important ally, namely the USA, confirmed their way of thinking. These remarks validated the nationalists' habitus, their emotional and mental dispositions, according to which Ukraine should be thankful to Poland (see Dymek, Gielzak 2025). Trump's critics, meanwhile, were shocked. The demand for gratitude divides the world into the good and the bad—those who belong to the moral sphere and those placed outside following their failure to show proper appreciation.

In New York, Zelenskyy compared Poland to an actor on Russia's stage, thus morally condemning Poland for blocking Ukrainian grain exports and thereby violating the principle of unconditional support in a just and defensive war with aggressor—a norm recognized by Western countries but not by the Global South, which largely refrained from condemning Russia after February 2022 (see Spektor 2023). At the same time, Zelenskyy did not mention the global supply chains, logistics systems, and corporate interests that regulate the movement of goods and services behind those moral norms. In contrast, Duda emphasized that Poland had its own interests and would prioritize them. He added that Poland saved Ukraine from Russia and therefore deserved Ukraine's gratitude. Both Zelenskyy and Duda practice international politics through the performance of a moral spectacle.

Analyzing the above examples and the contexts of gratitude/ingratitude, we can conclude that moral norms serve to discipline international partners. Zelenskyy's anger at Poland highlights a breach of the Western norm of support for Ukraine. Duda's anger emphasizes the violation of the norm that assumes gratitude for aid. Moreover, this anger is performative: Zelenskyy performs anger at the UN General Assembly, and Duda does so in front of television cameras. Diplomacy by emotions requires an audience—and not just any audience, but one with the power to pressure the shamed state. The performativity of emotion proves to be a regulator of international relations, and emotional arousal becomes a strategy for managing the expectations of both partners and spectators in the geopolitical theater.

## DISCUSSION: THE OBJECTIFICATION OF GRATITUDE

Following Elias (see Heinich 2014), I observe local, precisely situated contexts that enable me to explore broader social phenomena. I demonstrate how the diplomacy of emotions seeks to shape the organization of social desires, namely what people want and what diplomats expect people to want. According to Tomasz Żukowski (2025), in the Zelenskyy–Trump clash, Trump’s public demand for gratitude reveals “power and [serves to] sadistically enjoy superiority, all while maintaining a sense of innocence and one’s own greatness.” As Żukowski observes, the dialectic of gratitude/ingratitude functions as a fantasy. Nicole Pepperell (2016: 14) notes: “Elias immediately recognizes and calls out the ideological character of Nazi anti-Semitism, and harshly criticizes other theorists who attempt to find a ‘rational core’ of interests that could underlie the ideology.”

Numbers and facts become irrelevant when national pride is at stake. Similarly, Polish political demands for Ukrainian gratitude do not have roots in practical interests. From a pragmatic perspective, the Ukrainian refugee presence in Poland is beneficial. According to a report by the state-owned National Development Bank, in 2024, Ukrainian migrants contributed 15.21 billion PLN (3.6 billion EUR) to the Polish state budget. At the same time, Poland spent 2.8 billion PLN (665 million EUR) on child support payments (“Family 800+”) for refugee children. Nonetheless, both right-wing and liberal candidates for president in the 2025 Polish election advocated for a reduction in the support provided to Ukrainian children. A similar logic of obscuring facts through a spectacle of gratitude emerged when Rubio demanded expressions of thanks from Sikorski. Less than a month before the Zelenskyy–Trump clash, Sikorski noted in *The New York Times* that Poland spends nearly five percent of its GDP on defense—NATO’s highest share—and has ordered tens of billions in US military equipment since 2022. He wrote: “We have become one of the U.S. military industry’s most important customers” (Sikorski 2025). Following Elias, the “rational core”—billions of euros spent on American weapons—was irrelevant to Rubio’s spectacle of demanding gratitude. Seeking to advance national interests through the diplomacy of gratitude (Power 2016), Rubio ultimately reaffirmed international hierarchies before a global audience. In this sense, gratitude, pride, and shame do not dissolve into thin air; they are as real as facts and numbers. We can conclude that emotions become embedded in the mediatized environment (Wark 2013)—they are a tangible reality we can see, touch, and experience firsthand (Urry 1999).

When the USA urged Zelenskyy to leave Kyiv in February 2022, he famously replied: “I need ammunition, not a ride.” The sentence reappeared thousands of times in Western media and became a symbol of the war’s outset. Timothy Snyder (2022) compares it to one of the most famous defenses of democracy—Pericles’s funeral oration. Ukrainians felt proud of their president; in March 2022, 91% of Ukrainians supported Zelenskyy. On the Western international stage, he became a hero. In his talk in the UN General Assembly in 2023 and at the press

conference in the Oval Office in 2025, Zelenskyy tried to mobilize recognition for Ukraine's heroic resistance and empathy for its suffering population. By linking Poland and the grain issue with Russia, Zelenskyy touched on a sensitive nerve: the Polish sense of national pride and identity, namely what it means to be a Pole.

To understand the deep sense of humiliation some Poles felt upon hearing these words, one must consider both the complex Polish–Ukrainian history (Chruślińska, Hrycak 2022) and the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, many Poles took pride in their response: over 6% hosted refugees, and one in six volunteered to help Ukrainians—remarkable numbers by any standard (Bilewicz 2024: 41). Gratitude followed, not only from Ukrainians but also from figures like Pope Francis, President Joe Biden, and Ursula von der Leyen. Gratitude became tangible. In 2022, we witnessed a “festival of gratitude” in Poland. Ukrainians organized thank-you marches in Polish cities, cleaned a park in Tarnów, and filled public spaces with murals showing intertwined Ukrainian and Polish flags, postcards with doves flying between the flags, and thank-you messages on social media. This gratitude took a visible, material form—creating shared expectations about what giving and receiving thanks should feel like (Skey 2006).

The expressions of gratitude confirmed the generosity and moral integrity of the Polish nation, and made the ideal of the righteous Pole into a geopolitical and national reality. When referring to a different context which also applies here, Elias (1996: 323) notes: “It gave them [Poles] a reward: the proud and pleasurable feeling that they were acting in accordance with their ideal. National ideal and national reality were not poles apart.” Images, words, marches, and the Ukrainian flags Poles displayed in their homes at the war's outset serve as mediators between idea and reality (Lash, Lury 2007). The images of scattered Ukrainian grain hurt Ukrainians, while suggestions that Poles are playing into Russia's hands hurt Poles. Van Krieken (2024: 34) emphasizes “how the linkage of civilizing and decivilizing processes works can only be properly understood with a grasp of the central role played by the form taken by media communication and the workings of *resentiment*.” The expression of gratitude, demands for gratitude, and accusations of ingratitude create a social space in which resentment becomes visible and materialized through media-processed gestures, words, and actions.

## CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC DIPLOMACY OF GRATITUDE

Following Simmel and Elias, I understand expressing gratitude as a bond-forming action, one that draws partners closer together. In contrast, demanding gratitude or accusing someone of ingratitude is a polarizing act. The effectiveness of these acts depends on media channels and the audiences who witness episodes of gratitude or ingratitude.

I argue that gratitude/ingratitude as political emotions do not merely use mass media as a transmission tool—they *are* politics, in the sense that they mobilize audience emotions. Elias studied a broad spectrum of political emotions that lead to tension, hostility, and antagonism—including aggression, anger, embarrassment, fear, shame, happiness, sadness, hatred, repugnance, and disgust (van Krieken 2024: 22). He analyzed these emotions to show how antagonism in human relations “has been pacified over time” (van Krieken 2024: 22). As Simmel demonstrates, expressing gratitude pacifies aggression and highlights mutual dependence between partners. However, the demand for gratitude can serve as a veil for the use of brute force and extreme

self-interest (Żukowski 2025). This Janus-faced nature of gratitude makes it a useful tool for conducting strategic diplomacy (Mitchell 2025). As A. Wess Mitchell argues, diplomacy is “an instrument of strategy that states use to survive amid the pressure of competition,” rather than a means of promoting values or constructing supranational norms (see Kissinger 1994). Strategic diplomacy serves national interests. Following Mitchell, we can see examples of expressing or demanding gratitude as diplomatic strategies aimed at securing planned forms of reciprocity. In shaping reciprocal relations, stronger states enjoy greater leverage, but weaker states are not without agency. This agency depends both on the elites’ negotiation skills and on society’s role. For instance, in Poland, it was the people and civil society—not the state—that performed the “festival of gratitude”. After his clash with Trump, Zelenskyy experienced increased domestic support in Ukraine. These examples demonstrate that the formation—or, to use Elias’s term, the shaping of reciprocity figurations—is unpredictable and may lead to unintended consequences (Boudon 1977).

In this text, I focused on the historical narratives of specific political events. This approach differs from efforts that “carefully reconstruct and analyze the complicated strategic calculations in which diplomats regularly engage” (Trager 2016: 207). My aim was to situate these political/diplomatic events within their broader social context. By analyzing how politicians use gratitude rhetorically to evoke emotions—both positive and negative—I have shown how acts of demanding or expressing gratitude socialize political actors and reproduce international hierarchies. As in Elias’s analysis of Nazism, the “rational core” or factual credibility of the media spectacle is not the key concern; what matters is the performance of pride, greatness, and superiority—staged for a viewing audience, including heads of state. I have demonstrated how the international politics of gratitude—as seen in the Zelenskyy–Trump, Sikorski–Rubio, and Zelenskyy–Duda clashes—translate into the domestic dynamics of gratitude, with Poland as the case study. The aim of this article was to show how gratitude—an emotion Elias did not explicitly study—structures the political space of a nation. Elias (1996) undertook a similar project in his analysis of national pride in *Studies on the Germans*. While he approached national pride through a *longue durée* perspective, I focused on a shorter period (2022–2025), which entailed intensely felt gratitude and saw its political instrumentalization as an emotion.

Following Simmel, who shows that social motives become “shareable and understandable” through the expression of gratitude or the accusation of ingratitude, I argue that within an international context, such expressions and accusations function as orientation points for national elites to guide our emotions. Natàlia Cantó-Milà (2012: 14) writes that according to Simmel, gratitude “links people strongly to their society” and creates a sense of belonging. The demand for gratitude—expecting “thank you” or expressions of appreciation—creates a sense of belonging too, but not through inclusion or empathic interest in the other. Rather, it works by creating “the ungrateful outsider.” The gratitude–ingratitude dialectic in strategic diplomacy reinforces hierarchical domination.

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