PILOT PROJECT

OBSERVING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING ELECTIONS

AEGEE Election Observation Mission to the 2019 European Parliament Elections

23-26th May

Pilot project about Social Media observation during elections within the AEGEE Election Observation Mission

FINAL REPORT

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AEGEE Election Observation Mission to the 2019 European Parliament Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This pilot project developed and tested a new methodology to systematically observe social media in the context of the European Parliament Elections 2019.

- A total of 83 young candidates and 35 parties in 18 countries have been observed during the three week campaign period.

- The majority of social media campaign messages and content were positive in 87% of the candidate profiles and 73% of the political party profiles.

- About 17% of candidates and 34% parties conveyed a negative attitude towards the European Union in their posts. Several "exit" movements have been mentioned in the posts and comments across all observed countries.

- Parties had a more aggressive attitude towards electoral competitors than candidates: 54% of parties attacked in their posts candidates or parties.

- In almost half of the parties' profile, the use of discriminatory language in the comments was observed.

- Candidates and parties did often share information about campaign events in the form of Facebook events, pictures and videos of rallies and links to external websites.

- In a few instances, Facebook was used to report official and unofficial complaints about possible violations of the electoral laws.

- About 3% of candidates and 6% of parties published calls for campaign donations.

- The most frequent topics discussed across all countries during the campaign were working conditions, corruption, climate change and immigration.

- Some urgent questions need to be addressed such as better defining the objectives of social media observation, assessing how it would be possible to integrate this type of observation in EOMs and how and when the strengthening of regulatory framework is required.

- A systematic online observation could help all core team members in EOMs to gather additional information in their respective fields of competence.

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Disclaimer

All persons involved in this project worked on a volunteer basis. The findings of this pilot project should be strictly interpreted as the results of the observation of our sample of candidate and parties and not as a generalization of the online campaign activities of all candidates and parties running for the European Parliament Elections 2019.

Preface

Young people in Europe today face multiple challenges when it comes to their participation in elections. In order to understand these challenges, it is an interesting and necessary exercise to see elections through the eyes of young people themselves.

Over the past five years, AEGEE Election Observation has deployed more than 600 young observers on 20 missions throughout Europe - relying on established methods of international election observation.

However, recent technological innovations are rapidly changing the way political communication is done. This has become very visible in recent elections. The present concept is our first attempt to capturing these emerging „new" patterns of communication in a systematic way.

AEGEE Election Observation has then developed a pilot methodology on online and social media observation that has been included in its Mission to the 2019 European Parliament Elections. This mission was composed of different modules with the purpose to assess youth engagement into electoral process: long-term researches on specific case studies; stakeholders interviews; Election Day(s) procedures observation and the social media analysis addressed in this report. Before the election day(s), 48 young observers attended a four days training prior to their deployment in 18 member states. The findings of the whole observation are outlined in the mission Final Report.

Thomas Leszke, Executive Director AEGEE Election Observation

1. Introduction

Social Media has rapidly gained importance in political campaigns since the late 2000s. However, traditional election observation missions have not yet started to fully include social media in election observation missions, still maintaining the focus on traditional media outlets such as TV, Radio, Newspapers, and billboards. While these outlets remain relevant, social media should be incorporated into election observation as an instrument to complement traditional media.

The observation mission of the European Parliament elections 2019 by AEGEE Election Observation provided us with the opportunity to test this innovative methodology. We observed random samples of Facebook pages of candidates and political parties in the 18 countries where the mission teams have been deployed. Due to the novelty of this type of observation, this observation has been reported separately from the AEGEE Election Observation Mission, although having been a part of it.

2. Methodology

The relevance of social media and online monitoring for election observation has rapidly increased in the last years. Online activities are an essential space for political debates and campaign activities that can no longer be left out of election observation missions. Practitioners, institutions and civil society organisations have turned their attention to this new field to fill the existing methodological gap. This pilot project aims to contribute towards developing a methodology that can be easily adapted and for different organisations and contexts.

The methodology for online observation was inspired by the traditional election observation methodology. When developing this project, we considered the need to create a baseline that could be implemented systematically in different countries. It has been our goal to consider both theoretical aspects of social media observation and practical limitations that electoral missions have in the field. As a result, this method has been oriented to field observation missions rather than post-election research.

The methodology tests a practical approach for observing social media across several countries with an aim to help institutions and civil society organisations to implement social media monitoring within field missions.

2.1 Focus on the practical approach

Two main approaches were identified to analyse social media. Firstly, an investigative approach assesses the role of social media in a post-elections environment. The main goals, among other things, are to evaluate how the spread of fake news and the use of bots and trolls affects the political process. These objectives are however, difficult to be analysed in field missions during the campaign period. The second approach is the practical approach. Its aim is to integrate social media monitoring within the electoral observation missions. To systematically integrate social media monitoring in field missions, the present methodology considers the limited resources available to long term observers and core team members in the few weeks preceding E-day. This pilot project focuses on the second approach.

One of the main challenges of online observation is that online activities generate an enormous amount of content daily, whereas traditional media, such as newspapers, publish daily a smaller number of articles. In addition, the variety of online platforms available for communicating and campaigning makes it difficult to have standardized methodological tool. To overcome this challenge, institutions and civil society can resort to computation and AI tools[1]. The automatization of monitoring can reduce the need for human resources, while ensuring a wide monitoring coverage. However, the use of software and computational tools can affect the credibility of observation missions if public opinion and the authorities will believe that the observation cannot guarantee its impartiality and objectivity.

2.2 Determining what to observe

Many online activities and social media can be observed. In this project, we decided to focus on Facebook for two reasons. First, Facebook is the most used social media platform in Europe[2] and its public pages allow for anonymous observation (which is not possible with Facebook private profiles)[3]. For this reason, it is possible to collect information without asking any "friendship". Second, Facebook's extensive network across Europe allowed to find candidates and parties in all countries[4]. Following a strict code of conduct of impartiality and non-interaction, observers were thus capable to observe without interfering in the process of campaigning. We recognize that other online channels such as blogs, websites and other social media are important and cannot be simply excluded. A further development of our approach will have to test the observation of other online channels[5].

About 16,000 candidates and 1,000 party lists were registered in 28 EU member countries for the 2019 European Parliament Elections. Due to the limited resources available to this pilot project, the observation have been limited to the 18 countries where observers have been deployed for the official AEGEE Election Observation mission[6]. Since AEGEE Election Observation is an organisation that focuses on youth participation in elections, it has been decided to select only candidates aged between 18 and 35. The country lists have been divided into two groups: **the online activities of young candidates were observed in 10 countries, while the focus of the remaining 8 countries was on political parties**[7]. The rationale behind splitting the observation into different groups

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[1] The use of computational and artificial intelligence (AI) tools creates additional ethical and public trust challenges. To what extent is it possible to rely on these tools for the assessment of any content? Will the implementation of these tools affect the public credibility of an election observation?

[2] In the observed countries Facebook usage (2018 figures) among the population is between 41% and 71% according to Statista https://www.statista.com/statistics/295660/active-social-media-penetration-in-european-countries/

[3] Among other social media: Twitter allows anonymous observation and Instagram has only a limited access to profiles without being a "follower".

[4] In Russian speaking countries "VKontakte" is more frequent than Facebook. "Instagram" has also been reported to be increasingly used in political campaigns. "Twitter" reaches out to a different target group. In addition, personal blogs and messaging apps (WhatsApp and Telegram) remain important channels that need observation.

[5] See also section 6 with recommendations.

[6] The countries are the following: Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Ireland, France and Spain.

[7] Countries where candidates have been observed: Netherlands, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Estonia, Denmark and Ireland. Countries with observation of political parties: Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Finland, France and Spain.

(young candidates vs. political parties) is due to the novelty of this project. The aim was to observe whether there are differences in the observation of candidates and political parties.

2.3 Selecting the Facebook public pages

To select the profiles of young candidates, two criteria have been applied: Public Facebook profiles with at least 100 likes. This threshold has been considered as the minimum number of likes for a page to be considered active. In countries where the number of young candidates fulfilling these conditions was lower than 10 pages, all candidates have been included in the final list. The selection of political parties did follow the same criteria with one minor difference: the threshold for political parties likes was set at 500. In total 83 young candidates in 10 countries and 35 political parties in 8 countries have been selected for observation[8].

Each team of observers was asked to observe posts during the three weeks of campaigning before the Election Day. The reports were due on a weekly basis[9]. For each week only posts published in the reporting period have been considered.

2.4 The observation form

Observation findings were collected and organised through online forms. Candidates and political parties were considered as single units of observation (similar to traditional observation of Election Day when one form for each polling station is required). Both forms (for candidates and political parties) have been created with the same structure of questions to allow for a comparative analysis of the results. To facilitate the collection of results Google forms has been used[10]. It is important to stress that only publicly available information on the Facebook pages has been observed.

The form had **28 questions divided into 7 sections**. The questions were formulated in order to allow for an assessment of various aspects of the campaign. Questions about the intensity of online activity have been included such as type of information shared, main topics discussed, presence of discriminatory language in the content and/or comments, types of links shared, and publication of official and unofficial complaints.

Observation of online activities should follow the same guidelines that apply to more traditional election observation. A code of conduct was developed with the aim of instructing the observers about the rules of strict impartiality and objectivity. They were asked to avoid following any pages, posting comments, likes or sharing contents.

2.5 Estimating the time needed for observation

In the first phase of testing the form, the estimation of the necessary time to complete the observation of one page was assessed between 20 and 30 minutes. Each team had an estimated weekly workload of about 4 hours. However, after the first round of feedbacks from the observers, it has been realised that the workload was underestimated. On average observers needed about 45

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[8] The sample of candidates observed represents less than 1% of the total number of registered candidates of all ages. The sample of parties represents 3.5% of all registered lists. We don't consider our sample a representative sample for all member countries of the European Union.
[9] Week 1 (6th - 12th May), week 2 (13th – 19th May) and week 3 (20th May until one day before EDay).
[10] https://www.google.com/intl/en-GB/forms/about/

minutes to observe and fill the form. One of the major problems for a correct estimation of time lied in the amount of data shared in the pages. In fact, some candidates' profiles had only a few posts and comments, while other pages and especially those of political parties, had a larger amount of content than expected. In some cases, some posts had several thousand of comments. In this case observers have been asked to focus only on the most relevant comments. As a result, the weekly workload for each team was assessed between 5 and 6 hours.

3. Observation results

3.1 Overview

A total of 246 candidate forms have been collected, of which 38% of forms were for female candidates and 62% for male candidates. For political parties, 102 forms have been validated and analysed[11]. **The overall assessment of the tone of the campaigns, including posts, content shared and comments was assessed as positive or very positive in 87% of candidate profiles and 73% of political parties' pages**. Most of the pages have been active or very active in online campaigning.

3.2 Content observed

Among candidates, the pages had between 117 and 95,000 likes. On average the young candidates' pages had 4,000 likes and political party pages 109,000 likes. The political party with the highest number of likes had about 1,252,000 likes, while the one with fewer likes had only 925. The pages of observed political parties have a much larger base of supporters.

In 70% of cases, candidates published less than 10 posts per week. Although having Facebook public pages available during the campaign, about 8% of candidates did not publish anything during at least one week of the campaign period. The trend for parties was different, with 60% of pages publishing more than 20 posts on a weekly basis.

Shares of candidate posts were mostly below 20 shares per post (82%), and among parties almost one-fifth of pages had more than 200 shares per post. Candidates had on average fewer comments than political parties[12].

Candidates and political parties used their Facebook public profiles to convey political programs and messages (candidates: 89% of cases and political parties 96%). Candidates used their Facebook public profiles to share private life information in 22% of cases. Most of the parties (84%) shared content that was not directly related to the EU elections. This content was about local, regional, national political issues or other non politically relevant issues[13].

A further question included in the forms allowed to determine the frequency of attacks and support to other candidates and political parties. The overall assessment showed that support was occurring more often than critical statements[14].

Additionally, the question concerning campaign financing aimed to evaluate the use of Facebook for raising donations. Observers found that this fundraising method was barely used[15].

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[11] In this project, most of the observers spent between 30 to 60 minutes for the observation of one Facebook page, including the filling of the online form.
[12] 35% of parties and 7% of candidates had on average more than 50 comments per post.
[13] For example during the first week of observation, a post about the celebration of mother's day (12th May) was observed in the majority of party and candidate pages.
[14] Among candidates it was observed: 33% of support to other parties and candidates and 18% of attacks in at least one post. Among political parties it was observed 82% of supporting posts and 54% of critical statements (attacks).
[15] Only 2% of candidates and 6% of political parties used Facebook to ask for donations.

3.3 Issues discussed

The observation form included a section about the political issues discussed by candidates and political parties in their Facebook pages[16]. There has been a convergence in the discussions about the most relevant issues such as climate change, corruption, immigration, and worsening macroeconomic conditions. **The observation also noted the political polarization and sentiment between those who believe that the European Union is necessary to solve these problems, and those fiercely advocating for leaving the EU. Several mentions of "exit" movements have been observed (among them: Dexit, Frexit, Polexit, and Nexit).**

Attitude towards the European Union

The observation methodology included a specific question about the attitude of candidates and political parties towards the European Union, where an assessment was possible[17]. Among candidates, the overall assessment was positive or very positive in 52% of cases, negative or very negative in 17% of cases and 29% not assessed. Political parties on the other hand showed a more critical attitude towards the European Union. Among them, 51% showed a positive or very positive attitude and 34% a negative or very negative attitude. Young candidates appeared to be less inclined to attack the EU.

Candidates

The most discussed issues (at least once during the campaign) were **climate change (25%), immigration (22%), working conditions (16%) and gender equality (10%)**. The spread of fake news (4%), youth unemployment (7%), rights of national minorities (6%), global terrorism (4%), and pensions (7%) were among the least discussed topics[18].

Political parties

Political parties discussed more frequently **immigration (45%), corruption (44%), climate change (42%), and working conditions (34%)**. Youth unemployment has been discussed more frequently by parties (21%) than candidates. Among other issues, about one-fifth of parties attacked the European federalist system, although not being always against the European Union itself. The spread of fake news was mentioned in 15% of cases[19].

3.4 The tone of campaigning online

Comments have been observed in almost all posts. The number of comments depended on both the issue and the size of the page. Pages with a higher number of likes had a greater number of persons commenting on the posts. Some posts had over 3,000 comments. Given the limited

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[16] The list of issues included: rights of national minorities, gender equality, youth unemployment, immigration, climate change and the environment, corruption (national or international), spread of fake news, global terrorism, pensions, working conditions, persons with disabilities, other.

[17] The question asked was: "What was the attitude of the candidate/party towards the European Union?". The possible answer went from 1 (very positive) to 4 (very negative). If the candidate/party didn't discuss issues related to the European Union or the political attitude towards EU institutions could not be clearly assessed, the answer was "not assessed".

[18] Other issues included country-specific issues, housing, healthcare, education and infrastructure.

[19] Other issues included gender equality (20%), global terrorism (8%), rights of national minorities (21%), pensions (23%) and persons with disabilities (6%).

resources and time constraints, an analysis of all comments not possible within the context of this mission[20].

Candidates

The tone of the comments among users was mostly positive on candidate pages. About 80% of pages had a positive or very positive reaction amongst users. However, the remaining 20% had an overall negative and aggressive tone. Moreover, 19% of the pages had users using discriminatory language and/or insults towards the candidate or other users[21].

Parties

Since political parties have on average a higher number of likes, they also attract a greater number of comments/posts. About 30% of political parties' pages had a negative tone in the discussion amongst users. Almost half of the pages also had some discriminatory comments. In 15% of the cases, insults and/or incitement of violence was present. Comments about immigration and leaving the European Union often showed a use of inflammatory language.

3.5 Use of Facebook for campaigning

Campaigning on Facebook has been generally assessed as active or very active in two-thirds of the candidates' pages and in 85% of political parties[22]. It is interesting to note that in a few occurrences, some candidates and parties did not publish anything during at least one week of the observed period. **Posts about campaign events such as videos and pictures of rallies, announcement of campaign events, share of Facebook events and links to external websites (party and candidate websites, media) have been observed in more than half of the pages**. Candidates used fewer live streaming (less than 20%), whereas one political party in two used live streaming at least once. Sharing pictures of campaign meetings was the most common practice for sharing information about rallies and campaign events.

Complaints

Twenty posts contained complaints about harassment by police forces, possible violations of electoral procedures, fears of election frauds, and lack of freedom of opinion. Among the most relevant complaints, observers noticed one case of a candidate sharing a video where she complained about being attacked and insulted during a rally by members of an opposing political party. In other instances, political parties reported fears of electoral fraud calling their voters for support. Some parties reported attempts from governing parties to exclude them from the electoral list. Finally, one candidate informed their followers about threatening emails that she received.

3.6 Media

The two most shared types of links were mainstream media (34%) and other Facebook pages (44%). Non mainstream media (such as local news websites or alternative sources of information) were

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[20] In cases where a huge number of comments needed to be observed, only the most relevant were analysed (as shown automatically by Facebook).

[21] Discriminatory language based on gender, age, sexual orientation, race or religion.

[22] Among candidates 35% of pages were assessed as scarcely active and 65% as active or very active. Among parties 15% were scarcely active and 85% active or very active.

also frequent (29%). Sharing of political party websites (24%) and candidate campaign websites (15%) was less common. Political parties shared link to mainstream media more frequently (76%), which often published TV and radio debates or interviews with candidates. Links to party website were recurrent (65%) as well as non mainstream media (45%). Sharing of other Facebook pages (often from party's candidates and other party pages) happened in 54% of the pages observed. Links to international media or blogs were rarely shared.

Pictures and video are frequent types of media shared on Facebook. However, a number of candidates and parties used links to Youtube channels were videos and interviews were published on a regular basis[23]. Finally, the lack of independent media and the lack of freedom of opinion[24] were rarely mentioned as being a problem.

3.7 Summary of the results
The overall assessment of the campaign in the observed Facebook pages was mostly positive or very positive. However, the comments made by users showed often a more negative and aggressive tone. The use of discriminatory language has been observed in half of the pages of political parties and about one-fifth of the candidate pages. This result raises the question of whether a stricter moderation of political debates online is needed. Working conditions, corruption, climate change, and immigration were the most frequently issues discussed across all countries. The general attitude towards the European Union was positive in most of pages. The observers reported that Facebook was used frequently for sharing campaigning activities. Finally, the findings did not show significant differences in the way candidates and political parties use Facebook for political campaigns, nor significant variations in the activity from the first and the last week of campaigning.

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[23] It is interesting to note that one political party created its own professional news channel that resembles news programs of mainstream public and private TV broadcasters.
[24] These two last questions were asked separately in the forms. However, only in about 5% of the cases it was reported as being an issue for a candidate or a party (mentioned at least once during the campaign).

4. Challenges that need to be addressed

This pilot project had the goal to test a methodology for observing social media activities in the context of an Election Observation Mission. These insights can be helpful to institutions and civil society organisations that work in the field of promoting democracy and observing elections. Here are presented the main challenges and our recommendations for future missions.

Main challenges

- **Resource-intensive**: online activities during a campaign produce a large volume of content mainly in the form of videos, pictures, text, and articles. Political parties and candidates have some form of online activity. Going through all this content requires extensive human resources for observation and analysis. The use of computational tools could help to fasten the analysis process. For example, they can allow downloading publicly available data to facilitate the process. They can also be used to categorise large data sets into particular groups (like positive or negative comments). However, this process raises two additional questions: first, to what extent is it possible to rely on these tools for the assessment of the content? Second, will the implementation of these tools affect the public credibility of an election observation?

- **Variety of channels**: another important challenge concerns adapting the methodological tools for the different type of online activities. Among the available platforms for campaigning there are websites, blogs, newsletters, social media (e.g. Facebook, VK, Twitter, and Instagram) and messaging apps (e.g. Whatsapp, Telegram).

- **Lack of regulation**: traditional campaign activities are regulated by the electoral law in the country (for example for TV, radio, newspapers, campaign events and billboards). However, the regulation of online activities is still in its early phase and need to be further developed.

- **Lack of transparency**: One major obstacle for the observation of online activities is the accessibility of data. Private profiles for example cannot be observed without asking a "friendship". Paid ads on Facebook and Instagram cannot be easily tracked. The algorithms determining how posts are shown to users are not public information. A better transparency could improve the quality of the online observation.

5. Recommendations for observing online activities in EOMs

- Previous assessment of which social networks are more popular among candidates and political parties. It is necessary to adapt the methodology and choose what to observe.
- Focus on long-term observation of online platforms and social networks.
- Depending on the scale of the mission and the political circumstances, one Core Team analyst might be sufficient. In other cases, we recommend having an analyst dedicated to online monitoring.
- Integrate online observation within the long-term observer work, including a training on the methods to conduct the online observation.
- Long-term observers could fill weekly online observation forms prepared by the Core Team.
- The development of a secure data-transfer platform for sending the forms is necessary.
- Extension of the observation to other main actors in the electoral process, such as electoral management bodies, authorities and media.

6. Conclusion: What comes next?

This project was a first attempt to integrate social media monitoring within the context of an election observation. It provided useful findings about the difficulties and advantages of observing online activities.

However, the implementation of an established methodology still requires further tests:

- Testing in countries other than EU member states
- Testing the observation during a mission in only one country
- Observing all or other samples of political parties and candidates
- Adapting the questions to different types of observation
- Observing social media networks of other actors (e.g. electoral management bodies)
- Testing the methodology on other social networks (e.g. Instagram, Twitter)
- Testing the observation for a period longer than 3 weeks
- Observing online activities during E-Day and the post-election period
- Evaluating the best options to train observers about social media monitoring (in our case all observers were young and had previous knowledge on how to use Facebook)

Some urgent questions need to be addressed such as better defining the objectives of social media observation, assessing how it would be possible to integrate this type of observation in EOMs and how and when the strengthening of regulatory frameworks is required.

A systematic online observation could help all core team members in EOMs to gather additional information in their respective fields of competence. We hope that the findings of this project can offer useful insights to experts and practitioners engaged in the field of social media monitoring.