


# Campaigning for European and National Elections. A Cross-Country Comparison between Germany, Hungary, and Romania

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**Abstract:** National elections – or “first-order elections” (FOEs) – are regularly the focus of research studying election campaigns, whereas supranational elections are often handled as “second-order elections” (SOEs). Social media tend to normalize existing power relationship and equalizing political competition during election. This paper analyzes political campaigns on Facebook during the European Parliament (EP) elections 2019 and the national elections held between 2020 and 2022 in Germany, Hungary, and Romania. From a cross-country perspective, the research investigates the volume of campaign content conducted on Facebook during the EP and the national elections. Results of a manual content analysis of ( $N=5934$ ) posts of 20 political parties that gained seats in the EP and national parliaments suggest that Facebook contributes to equalizing political communication. However, the prevalent topics of the campaigns vary considerably across countries. Our research contributes to the discussion on normalization and equalization theses and addresses FOEs and SOEs from a comparative perspective.

**Keywords:** content analysis; cross-country analysis; EP elections; Facebook; national elections

## INTRODUCTION

Political communication is often investigated during election campaigns (Blumler & McQuail, 2001). Nevertheless, the focus often remains on national elections, meaning local and transnational election campaigns are rarely examined (Strömbäck et al., 2011). Furthermore, research focusing on cross-national comparisons or looking at multiple elections in the same country is somewhat limited (e.g., Plasser & Plasser, 2002; Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008; Haßler et al., 2021; Tønnesen et al., 2023). However, European Parliamentary (EP) election campaigns provide an outstanding opportunity for cross-national comparisons with their hybrid – European and national – nature (Strömbäck et al., 2011). Hence, the present study aims to contribute to political communication research with a comparative perspective on the 2019 EP election campaigns and the subsequent national elections.

Previous literature has intensively focused on political communication on Twitter – now: X – (e.g., Larsson, 2015; Nulty et al., 2016; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2018). However, Facebook plays a more significant role in the media diets in most European countries (Newman et al., 2022) and represents the prevalent communication platform for European political parties (Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Magin et al., 2017). Moreover, after taking their first steps on Facebook during the 2014 EP election campaign (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021), by 2019 political parties from the EU member states intensively used the platform for campaign purposes (Haßler et al., 2021a).

Elections for the EP are seen as „second-order” elections (SOEs) with less attention from the voters, political actors, and the media, compared to the “first-order” (FOEs) national elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984; Van Der Eijk & Franklin, 2004). Therefore, in our research, we examine the meso-level and the level of political parties and consider the volume of Facebook communication during the national and 2019 EP election campaigns.

Considering Facebook’s prevalence in SOEs, investigating the volume of party communication on the platform can contribute to the normalization and equalization literature: whether online campaigning normalizes existing power relationships in politics (Lilleker et al., 2011) or whether the new technology equalizes political competition (Gueorguieva, 2008).

Furthermore, our research aims to investigate the dynamic of topics during the EP and the following national elections, considering 2019 and 2022 elections coincided with disrupting events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

To answer our research questions, we applied manual content analysis on the posts of German, Hungarian, and Romanian political parties that gained seats in the EP and national parliaments. The selection of the country sample is based

on several criteria. First, each country joined the EU at important phases: Germany was a founding member in 1993, Hungary joined during the 2004 large ten country enlargement, and Romania in the two country enlargement in 2007). Second, previous research stressed the differences in political cultures between countries that conduct election campaigning, and in Central and Eastern Europe where party systems show volatility reflected by reorganizing, fusions, and the arrival of newcomers (Andrews & Bairett, 2014). Third, becoming an EU member state was a crucial goal in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s for most of the new EU member states, such as Hungary and Romania, who engaged in reforms to consolidate young democracies. However, in some Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary, scholars point out that populist communication targeting the EU (Csehi & Zgut, 2020) and democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022) do occur. Fourth, as Tønnesen et al. (2023) highlight, there are significant differences concerning prevalent topics during national election campaigns in the Western European countries and the new EU member states.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **FIRST-ORDER-ELECTIONS VERSUS SECOND-ORDER-ELECTION, AND THE NORMALIZATION OR EQUALIZATION THESES**

Political communication research (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Van Der Eijk & Franklin, 2004) often emphasizes that national elections are treated as FOEs, while European, local, and regional elections – are considered SOEs. During SOEs, the stakes are lower, the voters are less interested than in the case of FOEs, and the lower electoral turnout reflects the SOE perspective (Reif, 1984). However, since the EP elections have a hybrid character, addressing both national and European issues, „research on political communication during election campaigns for the European Parliament is particularly interesting and important” (Strömbäck et al., 2011, p. 5).

Previous studies on political communication during EP elections have mainly focused on the role of traditional media, which generally pays less attention to SOE than FOE campaigns (Wilke & Leidecker, 2013). News coverage of EU-related topics is less visible (de Vreese, 2003), given that media coverage focuses more on domestic issues (de Vreese et al., 2006; Weber, 2007). Furthermore, political actors tend to be more professional in their communication during national elections, as a previous study concerning Germany showed (Tenscher, 2013). The lower commitment of parties to EP elections and „low-key campaigns” with a smaller staff, lower budgets, and fewer time resources reflect the SOE perspective (Holtz-Bacha, 2005). However, research stresses that EP elections

have become more relevant in the past decade, and parties need to take them more seriously (Somer-Topcu & Zar, 2014; Branea & Boicu, 2017).

In the last decade, the relevance of social media platforms for political campaigning has increased (Bimber, 2014). While in U.S.-based social media political communication, X (former Twitter) is the most popular platform, for most European countries, Facebook is prevalent (Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Magin et al., 2017), which is valid for both FOEs and SOEs. Nevertheless, X and Facebook have become integral parts of EP campaigns (Nulty et al., 2016; Haßler et al., 2021a), which might open up new opportunities for SOE campaign communication. Social media not only provide political actors with various resources to reach their voters directly (Bossetta, 2018), but compared to the resource-intensive traditional media channels, social media, especially Facebook, can be a good fit for the low-key EP campaigns of the parties (Russmann et al., 2021). The literature on social media-based EP election campaigns showed that both Twitter and Facebook are used for communication, showing signs of the normalization thesis (Ramos-Serrano et al., 2018; Koc-Michalska et al., 2021). However, Facebook provides an open network structure with sophisticated matching, targeting, analytics, and a relatively cheap platform – without advertising activities – for direct communication, which can also contribute to equalization. Accordingly, political actors can use this platform for strategic purposes (Kreiss et al., 2020) during SOEs.

The literature shows mixed results on the role of the internet in normalization and equalization: the first wave of studies – mainly focused on Web 1.0 – supported the idea that the new technology normalizes the existing inequalities (e.g., Gibson and McAllister, 2015), while works focusing on social media describe the presence of both normalization (Klinger, 2013), and equalization (Larsson, 2016). In the most recent study on the topic in the context of SOEs, Bene (2023) suggests that “larger parties dominate Facebook in terms of visibility, but social media are still able to level the playing field and decrease smaller parties’ structural disadvantages” (p.1710).

While our study does not directly test the normalization and equalization theses, it can contribute to the literature with its cross-country focus on the Facebook communication of parties during FOEs and SOEs. For that, we first looked at the overall volume of the election campaigns and asked:

- *RQ1.* Are there differences in the volume of Facebook communication between the parties in the investigated countries between the national and EP election campaigns?

Second, we focus on the content-related differences at the post level. Considering the investigated topics of political communication research on EP campaigns, the focus often remains on the presence or absence of EU-related issues (e.g.,

Jalali & Silva, 2011; Senninger & Wagner, 2015). Although in FOEs, EU-related topics can become a central topic of the campaign (e.g., Kriesi, 2007; Adam & Maier, 2011), the literature points out that during SOEs, political parties addressed less European issues (de Vreese, 2009; Hoeglenger, 2016). In the case of EP elections, issues are often framed from a national perspective (Pérez & Lodge, 2010; Bolin et al., 2019). Voters have no choice but to decide who represents them in the EP based on electoral discussions on domestic issues. Some of the campaign topics are the focus of political actors during more than one election campaign, while other topics are not appealing to political actors, and the relevancy of issues changes over time (Spoon & Klüver, 2014; Eugster et al., 2021). However, Maier et al. (2021) examine the 2019 EP Election Expert Survey and focused on all 28 EU member states' 191 parties. The study contradicted the SOE perspective based on the observation of an equal balance of EU, national, and regional focus.

Previous studies on EP elections showed that prevalent issues and topics differed across member states (Haßler et al., 2021a). Tønnesen et al. (2023) point out that in the context of prevalent campaign topics, there are significant differences between Western European countries such as Germany and Hungary in the campaigns for national elections. Moreover, our sample included Hungary with strong Eurosceptic communication in the EP, and national elections (e.g., Csehi and Zgut, 2020) might focus on different topics in the FOEs and SOEs. Therefore, we ask:

- *RQ2.* What differences are between the national and EP election campaigns regarding the prevalent topics in the Facebook communication of the parties in the investigated countries?

Finally, differences between the types of actors also seem relevant. As a significant factor, differences between government and opposition parties are highlighted. The reason for this is multi-layered. In general, in the case of government parties, voters focus on their recent performance, while opposition parties are evaluated more on their campaign communication (Somer-Topcu & Zar, 2014). Furthermore, in EP elections, government parties receive fewer votes than in the previous FOEs (Hix & Marsh, 2007). The literature demonstrates that challenger parties position themselves strategically on EU issues as political entrepreneurs (Van De Wardt et al., 2014). Also, incumbency status influences social media usage: the online presence of incumbent candidates seems more intense (Lorenzo Rodríguez & Garmendia Madariaga, 2016). The social media accounts of governmental parties usually have more followers and publish fewer attack tweets than challengers (Evans et al., 2014). Nevertheless, Maier et al. (2021) suggest surprising similarities exist between government and opposition parties emphasizing EU issues. To better understand the differences, we formulate our third research question as follows:

- RQ3. What differences can be identified between the national and EP election campaigns in the Facebook communication of opposition and government parties in the investigated countries?

## THE ELECTIONS' CONTEXT AND OUTCOMES

The 2019 EP election took place between May 23 rd and 26th. During the previous mandate of the EP, the migration crisis in 2015, the vote for Brexit in 2016, and Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential elections in the same year were the major international events. Moreover, the issue of climate change started to become more relevant while populist parties were also on an upward trajectory in several European countries (Bolin et al., 2019). These events were reflected in the campaigns for the EP election in some of the EU-member states (Haßler et al., 2021a).

In Germany, the 2019 European elections were deemed to have been the least second-order EP elections in history (Partheymüller et al., 2020), as they marked quite a few significant developments that shaped the political landscape of the country, as well as reflected broader trends across the EU. Germany has 99 seats in the EP. One of the most surprising outcomes was the performance of the Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), which came second at the ballot box, capitalizing on approximately 20.5% of the total votes. Their result not only had the most significant impact on the size of the Green group in the EP (Pearson & Rüdig, 2000) but also indicated a growing concern about environmental issues, especially about climate change, showcasing a heightened prioritization of sustainability and environmental policies among the electorate. In contrast to the 'green surge,' traditional German political powerhouses faced a decline in support: although the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) finished first with 28.9%, they lost five seats as compared to previous EU election results, while the Social Democratic Party (SPD) gathered only 15.8%, losing a staggering 11 seats. The rise of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) was another noteworthy aspect of the 2019 EU elections. The AfD became the fourth largest party sent to Brussels by the German electorate – which thus highlighted the existence of a significant segment of the population willing to support a more nationalist and anti-European discourse. The AfD's campaign heavily relied on personal attacks against domestic and European political leaders and post-truth narratives related to the EU (Conrad, 2022). Overall, the results of the 2019 EU elections also revealed a continued fragmentation of the political landscape in Germany, which was also visible in the 2021 national elections.

However, the latter presented a surprising shift in the political landscape, with the SPD, with 25.7% of the votes, emerging as the largest party. For the first

time since 1998, the CDU was just the runner-up with 24.1%, along with the Christian Social Union (CSU). The Greens with 14.8% of the vote secured their position, and with 10.3% of the votes, the AfD also consolidated its position. Academic research suggests the 2021 national elections, with a turnout of 76.6%, consolidated Germany's six-party system but reshuffled the country's political landscape and left the electorate deeply divided on significant issues (Dostal, 2021). After the September 26th, 2021, national elections, the federal government included the Green Party, SPD, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the latter gaining 11.5% of the votes.

Hungary joined the EU in 2004. Hungary had nine parties running in the 2019 EP election, from which parties five succeeded in gaining 21 seats in the 2019–2024 European Parliament: Fidesz-KDNP with 13 seats, Democratic Coalition (DK) with 4, Momentum Movement (MM) with 2, Hungarian Socialist Party-Dialouge (MSZP-Dialogue) with 1, and Jobbik also with 1 seat. From these parties, Fidesz-KDNP is the ruling party coalition led by Viktor Orbán, who is one of the main characters of European populism (Moffitt, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The Hungarian political system can be best described as a „Plebiscitary Leader Democracy” (Körösényi et al., 2020), where competitive, free elections legitimize the charismatic authority, but the resources, media access, and electoral rules are strongly unbalanced (Batory, 2014). Accordingly, the government's Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant 2019 EP campaign's main slogans were „Hungary comes first for us in Brussels as well,” „Let us stop Brussels,” and „Do not let Soros have the last laugh” (Róka, 2019). That being said, the main goal of Fidesz was to campaign against the European elite in general (Bene et al., 2021). The opposition “had diverse programs. They all defined themselves as opposed to Fidesz and campaigned mainly against it, emphasizing their pro-EU position in contrast to Fidesz's Eurosceptic stance” (Bene et al., 2021, p. 124).

The 2022 national elections were held on April 3 rd, with a turnout of 69.59%. Hungarians elected 199 members of Hungary's National Assembly: 106 in single-member constituencies by first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting and 93 in a single nationwide constituency by proportional representation via a partially compensatory system. However, proportionality does not mean that seats are allocated in an utterly proportional manner: the surplus votes of successful candidates and those of the losers in the FPTP constituencies are added to the party list vote totals. The electoral threshold is 5% in general, 10% for coalitions of two parties, and 15% for coalitions of three or more parties. The running parties were Fidesz, United for Hungary – which was a six-party opposition coalition with Jobbik, Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Politics Can be Different (LMP), Democratic Coalition (D.K.), Momentum Movement (MM), Everybody's Hungary Movement (MMM), and Párbeszéd (Dialogue), Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP), and Our Homeland (MH). From these parties, the MKKP did

not get any seats in the Parliament, and neither did MMM. Fidesz got 135 seats, the coalition parties without the MMM got 57 seats, and the MH got 6 seats. As for the other important contextual factors, it is worth noting that just four weeks before the elections, Russia invaded Ukraine. Due to this disruptive event, the issues and topics of the campaign were broadened into the direction of war (Scheppele, 2022).

The 2019 EP elections represented Romania's fourth political experience since joining the EU in 2007. The election outcome for the 33 seats that Romania has in the EP produced quite a few surprises. First, the turnout (51%) was the highest compared to all other elections for the EP held in the country. Moreover, even if only for a while, it reconfigured the power dynamics within the domestic political arena, with the National Liberal Party (PNL) securing victory, marking the first instance in the country's post-communist history when the Social Democrat Party (PSD) ranked second in a political competition of this type.

The results proved to be nothing but a moving picture since one and a half years later, in December 2020, the parliamentary elections would significantly alter the political landscape: PSD (28.9% of the votes) would regain much of its political force and win the elections, while PNL (25%) would rank second. The 2020 national election had the lowest turnout (33.24%) in the country's recent history. However, the main surprise of the national election held on December 6th, 2020, was the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), a populist anti-EU party that unexpectedly secured over 9% of the vote. Most pollsters and analysts noticed this 'stealth party' success (Stoica et al., 2021). A significant reason for AUR's success was its extreme position during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the outbreak, they heavily criticized the government's response, called for a loosening of lockdown measures, and aggressively campaigned against face mask rules, downplaying the severity of the virus.

## METHOD

We applied manual quantitative content analysis to the Facebook posts ( $N = 5934$ ) of the political parties that gained seats in the national Parliaments in Germany (DE), Hungary (HU), and Romania (RO) after the elections that took place in 2020-2022, as well as in the EP after the 2019 election. We investigated the EP and national election campaigns in an established Western European democracy, Germany, and two Central Eastern European Countries with less democratic experience: Hungary and Romania. Moreover, the EU membership history among those three countries is different. While Germany was a founding member, Hungary joined in 2004 during the most significant enlargement, and Romania in 2007. Besides, the country sample included countries with differences

in the vote percentages of the Eurosceptic parties represented in the government and the opposition. Hence, after the 2021 national election in Germany, *Alternative für Deutschland* built the second-largest opposition group in the national Parliament, in Hungary; after the 2022 election, Fidesz, with more than half of the votes, remained the main governmental party, and after the 2020 elections, in Romania AUR became an opposition party in the national Parliament.

**Table 1. Published posts during the national and EP elections in Germany, Hungary, and Romania**

Country	Party	EP election	National election
Germany	Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	110	160
	Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU)	79	270
	Christlich Soziale Union (CSU)	133	225
	Die Linke	54	55
	Freiheitliche Partei Deutschland (FDP)	124	117
	Die Grünen	95	80
	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland (SPD)	70	122
Hungary	Demokratikus Koalíció (DK)	211	64
	Magyar Szocialista Part (MSZP)	234	145
	Momentum Mozgalom (MM)	121	123
	Jobbik	171	122
	Fidesz	210	278
	Párbeszéd Magyarországért (PM)		164
	A Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP)		93
Romania	Lehet Más a Politika (LMP)		118
	Partidul Social Democrat (PSD)	35	182
	Partidul National Liberal (PNL)	342	392
	Uniunea Salvați Romania (USR)	155	305
	Alianța pentru Uniunea Romanilor (AUR)		93
	Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (UDMR)	263	219
	Pro Romania	101	
Total	Partidul Mișcarea Populara (PMP)	99	
		2607	3327

We analyzed 3327 posts (DE—1029; HU—1107; RO—1191) from the national and 2607 posts from the EP elections (DE—665; HU—947; RO—995). The analyzed posts were published on the official Facebook pages of the parties ( $N=20$ ) four weeks before the elections. Hence, we collected data, including Facebook posts during the national election campaigns (DE—2021; HU—2022; RO—2020) and the 2019 EP elections. CrowdTangle was applied to extract the

links to the posts considered analysis units. Table 1 shows the number of posts per party for EP and national elections.

The research focus was on the campaigns' topics, so we coded (for the absence 0, for the presence 1) topics (e.g., economy and finance, health, policy for families and children, labor and social issues, criminality, political radicalism/religious fanaticism, corruption, domestic policy, immigration and integration, transport and infrastructure policy, environmental policy, energy policy, cultural policy, defense, war and military conflicts between countries, foreign policy, international relations, media policy and digitalization, agriculture, development, gender policy, and LGBTQ+ policy). The categories applied in the present research were developed according to Haßler et al., (2021b) for EP and national elections. However, in the EP election, environmental and energy policy were coded together, while in the national elections, environmental policy and energy policy represented two different categories.

Coding was performed separately for the EP and national elections. Coders from each country participated in similar training sessions to share a common understanding of the meaning of each category. Reliability tests were performed separately for the EP and national elections. For the reliability test, 100 posts in English from the 2019 EP campaign were coded by all coders. The reliability test (Holsti's C 0.7) was robust for the EP election coding (Haßler et al., 2021b). Inter-coder reliability was performed for each country based on approximately 10% of the sample for the national elections. Like other research (Tonnesen et al., 2023), we calculated Brennan and Prediger's kappa for our interrater reliability test, which provided high reliability. In our case, values were higher than 0.8 for each category representing one of the abovementioned topics.

## FINDINGS

Our first research question focuses on the volume of Facebook communication. Overall, we observed that the number of posts published during the national election campaign was 28% higher than those published during the 2019 EP election campaigns. However, as we observed in Table 1, some Hungarian and Romanian parties did not gain seats in both national and EP elections. When we considered for the analysis only parties represented in the EP and national Parliament after the election, our total number of posts for the EP elections was 2404, while the total number of posts for the national election was 3163. The results were similar: Political parties published 24 % more posts during the national elections than during the 2019 EP election.

Moreover, if we look at each country's overall posts, during the national election campaign, the number of posts increased by 55% in Germany, in Hungary

by 17%, and in Romania by 20%. Looking only at the parties that gained seats in both elections, we observed no differences for Hungary and an increase of 38% for Romania.

As for our second research question, during the 2019 EP election campaign, only two topics were present among the prevalent topics in all three countries: 1) economy and finance and 2) labor and social issues. The first topic was also prevalent in all three countries in the national elections. In Germany, the topic primarily discussed in the EP was environmental and energy policy, and in the national election, it was economy and finance—in Romania, economy and finance ranked first as campaign topics. In the case of Hungary, migration was a prevalent topic in the 2019 elections, and there were military conflicts between countries during the national election. While the prevalence of migration as a top issue originated from the FIDESZ anti-migration rhetoric targeting the EU, the focus on war during the national election is related to the fact that the election took part shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine. Health was also a relevant topic in Romania, where the national election took place in December 2020, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2 shows prevalent topics in each country's EP and national elections.

**Table 2. Prevalence of the topics in the 2019 European Parliament and national elections in Germany (2021), Hungary (2022), and Romania (2020).**

EP election		
Germany	Hungary	Romania
Environmental and energy policy (18.9%)	Labor and social issues (16%)	Economy and finance (13%)
Labor and social issues (17%)	Migration (15.5%)	Labor and social issues (8%)
Economy and finance (14%)	Economy and finance (3%)	Domestic policy (4%)
Domestic policy (8%)	Environmental and energy policy (2%)	Transportation and infrastructure (3%)
Infrastructure policy (7%)	European policy in general (2%)	European policy in general (3%)
National elections		
Germany	Hungary	Romania
Economy and finance (22.9%)	War and military conflicts between countries (18.8%)	Economy and finance (31.8%)
Labor and social issues (19.7%)	Economy and finance (10%)	Health (26.3%)
Environmental policy (17.6%)	Foreign policy (8.2%)	Corruption (18.2%)
Foreign policy (6.4%)	Energy policy (5.5%)	Developmental policy (12.5%)
Domestic policy (5.5%)	Corruption (3.3%)	Education policy (9.5%)

Turning to our third research question, except for Hungary, where FIDESZ was a governing party, the composition of the governments changed in 2019 compared to the time before national elections in Germany and Romania. Therefore, the party status changed in the two elections. However, when we look only at parties that gained seats in both elections, the number of opposition parties ( $n=10$ ) and that of the governmental parties ( $n=6$ ). Hence, our findings must be interpreted as aligned with this observation. The results showed an increase of 4% in the posts published by opposition parties in all countries in the national elections compared to the 2019 EP elections. As for governmental parties, the increase in Facebook posts is even higher at 59%. The results showed that overall, there is a tendency toward significance that opposition parties posted more during elections than governmental parties ( $t(30) = .71, p = .09$ ).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, our comparative analysis of the 2019 EP election, alongside the national elections in Germany, Hungary, and Romania, offered valuable insights into the dynamics of what the literature called SOEs. Compared to the EP election campaign, the communication volume on Facebook during the national election campaigns is higher. Hence, the perspective of the EP as SOE stands, at least in the context of posting activity of parties on Facebook. However, there are country differences. While we observed an increase in the overall number of posts in Germany and Romania, communication volume on Facebook did not suffer significant modifications in Hungary.

The present investigation of the two types of campaigns proved that Facebook is a relevant platform for both types of elections. By focusing on the EP, and national elections from a cross-country comparison, the present research expanded previous knowledge generated by single-country studies (e.g., Bene, 2023). Thus, regarding the volume of campaign communication, Hungary is an example of where campaigning for EP and national elections were addressed in a similar number of posts. However, it was noted that many posts in both campaigns in Hungary originated from the Facebook page of the governmental party Fidesz.

We observed that some topics are consistent during the EP and national elections, while others reflect circumstances of a challenging international context. The topic of environmental and energy policy was discussed in Germany during the EP and national elections. Hence, environmental and energy policy were pivotal topics for the German elections during the COVID-19 pandemic and before the war in Ukraine, highlighting the consistent approach of political parties in the EP and national elections. In contrast, in Hungary, the topic of migration was prevalent in the 2019 EP elections, while war and conflicts

with other countries dominated the 2022 national election that took place four weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Economy and finance, as well as labor and social issues, were addressed to different degrees during both campaign types across the analyzed countries. Furthermore, our research highlighted the asymmetries across all the election campaigns by examining opposition and governmental parties. Our findings aligned with previous research (Van De Wardt et al., 2014), showing that opposition parties posted significantly more content during both elections.

While our study did not precisely aim to examine the relationship between differences in posting activity, campaign communication volume, addressed topics, and their effects on electoral outcomes, some general observations can be made. Although a higher volume of social media posts by political parties can increase visibility and engagement, its direct influence on electoral outcomes is shaped by various factors, including political and temporal contexts. It should be noted that the EP elections occurred in 2019 across all analyzed countries, while national elections took place at various times: in Romania in 2020, Germany in 2021, and Hungary in 2022. Hence, the elections in Romania were held amidst the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in one of the lowest voter turn-out in recent history. The right-wing extremist party AUR, for the first time elected in the EP in 2019, also gained seats in the Romanian parliament. The same trend towards environmentally friendly parties observed in the case of Germany in 2019 continued in the national elections in 2021 with the high percentages gained by the Green Party. Russia invaded Ukraine four weeks before the Hungarian national elections. The topic was instrumentalized by FIDESZ and resulted in a high number of votes.

Further, our study looked at the normalization and equalization theses by analyzing Facebook communication across three countries and two election types. The results provided empirical evidence on how these manifest in diverse contexts. Our findings show that in Germany and Romania, the volume of Facebook communication increased during the FOEs, which might be a sign of normalization, while the Hungarian data, without significant volume changes, showed equalization.

Our research comes with limitations. We focused only on campaigning on Facebook. In the last few years, social media usage in the analyzed countries further developed, so during 2019 and 2022, election campaigns were also conducted on other platforms such as Instagram or TikTok. Moreover, we focused on the official Facebook pages of the political parties and did not include those of frontrunners and relevant political representatives of the party. Therefore, future research should focus on a cross-platform approach and encompass other relevant political communicators, such as frontrunners, to capture the complexity of election campaigns. Furthermore, through the perspective of the SOE, of the

normalization and equalization theses, national and EP election comparisons also consider additional elements such as budgets, human resources, and traditional media. Future research comparing election campaigns on Facebook for EP with national elections must examine the dynamics of engagement metrics.

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