Seismo

Missed opportunity to connect with European citizens? Europarties' communication on Facebook during the 2019 European election campaign

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Abstract

The digitization of political communication and major transformations in the European Union (EU) have altered the conditions for European election campaigns. Whereas national political parties remain highly visible political actors in the EU, Europarties attract relatively little attention from the media and citizens. Social media could provide Europarties with an opportunity to raise awareness among European citizens. In our study, we investigated the social media campaign strategies of Europarties by conducting a manual quantitative content analysis comparing their Facebook posts with the posts of national parties from 12 European countries, focusing on the communication elements used to inform and mobilize citizens, especially in relation to the lead candidates. Our results revealed that some Europarties employed the concept of European lead candidates by emphasizing their candidates in their Facebook posts. However, in their relative inactivity on Facebook compared with national parties, Europarties did not seem to counteract the oft-cited lack of a European public sphere.

Keywords
Europarties, election campaigning, European lead candidates, European public sphere, social media, Facebook, quantitative content analysis

1   Introduction

Spurred on by technological advances and societal changes, political communication is constantly evolving. Nowadays, political communication continues to transform as social media platforms such as Facebook have become central sources of information (Newman, 2021). Given social media's unprecedented opportunities for communication between political actors and voters, such platforms have become pivotal tools for political communication, especially for campaigning (Vaccari, 2017).

In Europe, the digitization of political communication has coincided with pro-found transformations in the European Union (EU). Since the 1951 Treaty of Paris, when six European countries laid the foundation for the European project, the number of member states had grown to 28 by 2013. However, owing to the euro crisis of 2008 and the debate on migration of 2015, the trend toward European integration has clearly decelerated. In fact, the EU has recently had to negotiate the withdrawal of certain member states, namely Greece in 2015 over debt mismanagement and the United Kingdom (UK) following the Brexit referendum in 2016. In parallel, the rise of Eurosceptic parties in many member states has led to discussions

about a worrying loss of confidence in the European project. Moreover, as reflected in the results of the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election, the incorporation of such parties into Europe's political chessboard has prompted fragmentation within the EP and eroded the hegemony of the major EP groups (Fenoll, Haßler, Magin, & Russmann, 2021).

In general, European citizens perceive the EU as a rather abstract institution with complex political processes that are difficult to understand and participate in (Auel & Tiemann, 2020). That detachment between EU politics and citizens is part of the debate about the EU's democratic deficit (Hix, 2005) and the lack of a European public sphere (Benert & Pfetsch, 2020). To overcome those deficits and legitimize the EU's political decisions, policymakers have discussed whether Europarties – that is, political parties at the European level such as the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) – can execute key democratic functions equivalent to national parties in member states and thereby establish a link between citizens and the EU's political system (Wolfs & Smulders, 2018). However, it remains uncertain to what extent Europarties are able to fulfill their legitimacy function (Day, 2014), as Europarties continue to be unknown to most European citizens (Auel & Tiemann, 2020).

To perform their important democratic role, Europarties have to increase their recognizability among European citizens, a challenge that places special demands on their communication. To reach citizens across Europe, they could use social media platforms as channels complementary to traditional media. In the 2019 EP election, campaigning via social media outclassed other more traditional forms of election campaigning such as posters and TV commercials (Novelli & Johansson, 2019). However, little is known about how Europarties use platforms such as Facebook, as most research on social media campaigning to date has focused on national parties.

In our study, we filled that gap by investigating the campaign communication strategies of Europarties on Facebook.

By comparing their strategies with the strategies of national parties from 12 European countries in the 2019 EP election campaign, we were able to elucidate the extent to which Europarties substitute, extend, and / or complement the campaign strategies of national parties. To that end, we first contextualized the role and importance of Europarties in relation to the EU's democratic deficit as well as the prerequisites of their campaign communication. Against that background, we developed the research questions and analyzed the parties' Facebook activity and content of their posts, with particular focus on the communication elements used to inform and mobilize citizens. We conclude this article with a discussion of our findings in the context of the EU's political multi-level system.

2 Europarties in the EU's political system

After decades of European integration marked by territorial enlargement and ever-closer cooperation, the influence of EU politics on the member states has increased significantly, while the growing Europeanization of member states has become more politicized and contested (Auel & Tiemann, 2020). In particular, the Eurosceptic and national populist parties that have gained power in Europe in recent years have cast doubt on European integration by seeking to assert national sovereignty against the EU's centralizing attempts (Csehi & Zgut, 2021). Most recently, Brexit exemplified the ultimate rejection of participation in joint European politics with the UK's complete withdrawal from the EU. In the course of the EU's development, the Europarties have evolved since its early days, and their political relevance and influence within the EU has been subject to research.

2.1 The EU's democratic deficit
The EU has often been criticized for its democratic deficit and lack of political debate (Hix, 2005). Based on a consensus of the political mainstream (Auel & Tie-

mann, 2020), EU politics has long refused to address salient fundamental ideological differences in public debates (Hix, 2008). Consequently, to overcome the EU's democratic deficit, political discussions in a transnational public sphere are demanded that address ideological and political conflicts and increase the transparency and legitimacy of political decisions at the European level (Auel & Tiemann, 2020). Whereas parliaments and media outlets are usually places for political discussions at the national level, the European level has no prominent transnational media outlets where political debates are reported from a European perspective and the EP has only limited influence relative to other EU's legislative bodies like the European Council.

To advance debate and democracy in the EU, Europarties (Table 1) were officially included in the EU Treaty in 1992 with the aim of creating a transnational party system at the European level (Wolfs & Smulders, 2018). As key democratic actors in the European integration process, Europarties are intended to "contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union" (Treaty on European Union, 1992, Art. 138a). This formal establishment

as European institutions was an important step in their development, which began with the founding of the first Europarties in the run-up to the first EP elections in 1979 by national parties of the same ideological affiliation. Although Europarties have since gained considerable relevance within the EU's institutional structure (Put, van Hecke, Cunningham, & Wolfs, 2016), their classification as political parties at the European level reflects a normative claim rather than their actual function in the EU's political system. In fact, Europarties lack important party characteristics (Wolfs & Smulders, 2018), including structuring the vote and mobilizing citizens to participate in political processes. These party functions require a high level of recognition of the parties among citizens, which, however, the Europarties currently do not have.

The limited recognition of Europarties in the European public relates to the fact that they confront other institutional and electoral conditions in approaching voters than national parties (van Hecke & Wolfs, 2018). Although national media outlets have Europeanized their broadcasted content to some extent (Peglis, 2015), because coverage of European issues – particularly political and economic crises – increase

Table 1: Overview of Europarties and parliamentary groups in the European Parliament (EP), 2019–2024

Europarty	EP group[a]	Seats[b]
Party of the European Left (PEL)	Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	41 (40)
European Green Party (EGP) European Free Alliance (EFA)	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	74 (67)
Party of European Socialists (PES)	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)	154 (147)
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Party European Democratic Party (EDP)	Renew Europe Group (Renew Europe)	108 (98)
European People's Party (EPP)	Group of the European People's Party (EPP Group)	182 (187)
European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR Party) European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group	62 (61)
Identity and Democracy Party (ID Party)	Identity and Democracy (ID) Group	73 (76)
	Non-attached (NI)	57 (29)
Total		751 (705)

Note: [a] Parties are ordered from left to right to reflect their left–right ideological stance (McElroy & Benoit, 2012). [b] Numbers in parentheses indicate numbers of seats after Brexit (February 1, 2020).

the visibility of EU politics in national media (Benert & Pfetsch, 2020), such Europeanization has not generally improved the visibility of Europarties in the media. On the contrary, the media focus has remained on executive EU actors and the political outcomes of intergovernmental discussions, not on transnational political debates between party ideologies at the European level (Auel & Tiemann, 2020; Peglis, 2015). In turn, due to their limited recognition among European voters, Europarties have not been able to establish meaningful connections between citizens and the EU's political system (Pittoors, 2018). Those connections exist at best indirectly via national parties (Put et al., 2016). Even during EP elections, direct contact with voters is mostly reserved for national parties. Thus, Europarties contribute to the EU's legitimization only to a limited extent in their role as political parties. However, that circumstance does not mean that they serve no meaningful function at all within the EU.

2.2 Political relevance of Europarties

Because Europarties are not conventional political parties (Külahci, 2010), academics have called them "transnational party federations" (e. g., Put et al., 2016, p. 12; van Hecke & Wolfs, 2018, p. 13) or "transnational Europarty networks" (e. g., Johansson, 2017, p. 299), both of which refer to their status as umbrella organizations (van Hecke & Wolfs, 2018) and network facilitators (Wolfs & Smulders, 2018) that enable cooperation between like-minded national parties in the EU (Külahci, 2010). However, some scholars have countered that characterizing the Europarties as mere networks underestimates their influence in fulfilling important functions in the multi-level system of European institutions (e. g., Clasen, 2020; Johansson, 2017). By facilitating collective agreements and structuring the legislative process in the complex EU system, they perform meaningful tasks that no national party can (Clasen, 2020; Johansson, 2017; Peglis, 2015).

Empirical studies have shown that Europarties impacted negotiation processes preceding EU Treaty reform decision-making (Johansson, 2017) and that some election pledges made by Europarties have been reflected in new legislative initiatives of the European Commission (Kostadinova & Giurcanu, 2020). In that light, Europarties indeed wield considerable political influence within the EU (Johansson & Raunio, 2019). However, the effectiveness of such influence depends on the cohesion of the Europarties and the capacity to mobilize their member parties (Johansson, 2017). Although Europarties are organized along ideological lines, they face the perennial challenge of integrating the divergent ambitions of the national party members (Clasen, 2020), which generally have little incentive to embrace a common position at the European level (Külahci, 2010) and instead typically seek to align the Europarty's position with domestic interests (Pittoors, 2018). For that reason, the internal cohesion of Europarties depends on the willingness of national parties to agree on common positions, which in turn depends on the political context of the national parties (Johansson, 2017).

Although Europarties provide a platform for the coordination and collective action of national parties, they lack the authority to ensure that national parties hold their common position in subsequent EU negotiations (Külahci, 2010). Furthermore, the policy activities of Europarties primarily occur informally before the official European Council meetings (Peglis, 2015). Thus, despite Europarties' decisive role in aggregation and coordination, their rather informal operation makes them even less visible to citizens, which only reinforces the EU's problem with legitimacy. Ultimately, national parties remain the key political actors in the EU (Hix, 2005), whereas Europarties take a backseat in the EU political system.

To remove and elevate Europarties from "the shadow of hierarchy" (van Hecke & Wolfs, 2018, p. 12), one option is to strengthen their roles both within the EU's institutional structure and in relation to the national parties. It is also necessary to increase their transparency and recognizability among citizens. By

making Europarties more prominent as representatives of alternative ideological preferences (Johansson, 2015), the political debate at the European level would gain an important transnational element. Along those same lines, the concept of *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates) was introduced at the European level in 2014 as an additional transnational component (Braun, Gross, & Rittberger, 2020) in order to "Europeanise" the EP elections (Auel & Tiemann, 2020, p. 10) and promote publicly visible debates on European issues (Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019). The lead candidates of Europarties have thus competed for the office of president of the European Commission, giving the citizens the opportunity to influence the appointment of the president with their vote (Tilindyte, 2019). For Europarties, nominating lead candidates was an important step toward strengthening their role within the EU (Clasen, 2020).

In the 2019 EP election, when Europarties contested with lead candidates for the second time, they attracted unaccustomed attention in national media, e. g., in TV debates broadcasted throughout Europe (Fotopoulos & Morganti, 2021). Nevertheless, the recognition of the candidates among European citizens remained low (Gattermann & de Vreese, 2020), and the concept of European lead candidates did not achieve the expected success (Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019). In the end, German politician Ursula von der Leyen, who did not run as a lead candidate, was nominated and confirmed as president of the European Commission (Clasen, 2020). Even so, during the election campaign, the concept of lead candidates offered Europarties an opportunity to generate attention via strategic personalization. For example, the PES focused on its candidate Frans Timmermans by turning their secretariat into a "Spitzenkandidat support team" (Clasen, 2020, p. 43).

Against that backdrop, the question arises about how Europarties currently engage in campaigning compared with national parties, with whom they have to share the electorate's attention while being bound in an organizational alliance. To compensate for their underrepresentation in the media, Europarties have an increased need, as well as an increased incentive, to inform voters about the party, its position on political issues, and its candidates. That dynamic places different demands on the election campaign communication of Europarties compared with national parties.

3 Election campaigning on social media: European versus national parties

Social media platforms such as Facebook offer Europarties the opportunity to spread their messages independently from national media outlets by bypassing their traditional gatekeepers to directly inform and mobilize voters (Larsson, 2016). Social media platforms also have the potential of transnational connectivity (Benert & Pfetsch, 2020) due to their accessibility for most EU citizens (Newman, 2021). Even if the emergence of a genuine European public sphere from social media can hardly be expected, European actors can indeed reach voters more directly via social media than via the detour of national media. Beyond that, Europarties can target journalists with online communication (Magin, Podschuweit, Haßler, & Russmann, 2017) and thus attract the interest of national media outlets in that way. However, the ways in which Europarties make use of social media's potential compared with national parties has yet to be explored. To provide initial insights, we analyzed the frequencies of Facebook posts published by Europarties and national parties during the 2019 EP election as well as users' reactions to those posts. Regarding the content of the posts, we focused on different elements used to inform and mobilize voters, given that the overall pattern of political parties' communication on social media is to first inform and subsequently mobilize voters while rarely interacting with them (Magin, Russmann, Fenoll, & Haßler, 2021).

3.1 Parties' activity on Facebook and users' reactions

For conceptualizing the activity of political parties on social media, two theoretical approaches have been developed, that are based on the party's size and resources: the equalization hypothesis and the normalization hypothesis. According to the equalization hypothesis, (minor) parties that are less represented in traditional mass media have more incentive to use social media (Kelm, 2020) in order to compensate for structural disadvantages (Magin et al., 2017). The normalization hypothesis, in contrast, suggests that larger parties with good resources in terms of budget and staff can use social media more professionally than minor parties (Kelm, 2020).

For national parties, the normalization hypothesis has been confirmed regarding websites (Gibson & McAllister, 2015), whereas empirical results regarding the use of social media differ. Some studies have suggested that larger parties are more interactive (Lilleker et al., 2011) and that their politicians are more likely to be on Facebook (Quinlan, Gummer, Roßmann, & Wolf, 2018). Other findings support the equalization hypothesis by showing that smaller parties are more active on social media (Bene, 2021; Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Larsson, 2016; Magin et al., 2017) and that their politicians are more likely to be on Facebook (Kelm, 2020).

In the context of EP elections, the normalization hypothesis can be applied to the established national parties, which might be more active on Facebook than Europarties due to their sophisticated campaigning routines developed in past national campaigns. By contrast, the equalization hypothesis relates to Europarties that might use social media more intensively than national parties in order to gain visibility and compensate for structural disadvantages and their underrepresentation in national media. Concerning user engagement, national parties are more likely to take advantage of communication on Facebook, as they presumably have larger target audiences than Europarties. Because Europarties are generally lesser known among citizens, they might have fewer followers on Facebook, and thus may generate fewer Likes and Shares for their posts. Based on the opposing hypotheses of normalization versus equalization, our first research question (RQ1) was: How many Facebook posts did Europarties publish during the 2019 EP election campaign, and how many Shares and Likes did their posts receive compared with national parties?

3.2 Information in parties' Facebook posts

The distribution of information via social media could be especially worthwhile for Europarties seeking to increase their visibility. In general, political parties can provide various informative elements in their social media posts. Among other things, they can provide information about current political issues or about political structures in general, or they can focus more on the party by providing information about its organizational structure, its campaign activities, its position on political issues, and / or its candidates (e. g., Rußmann, 2016).

Regarding information about political issues, research has shown that the communication of parties on social media is oriented toward issue ownership (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007) – that is, the idea that a party provides information about issues that voters associate with the party and where they believe the party has the most competence to find solutions (Petrocik, 1996). The application of the concept of issue ownership to parties' communication on social media has been confirmed in the context of the 2019 EP election (Haßler et al., 2020). In our analysis, we focused on party- and election-centered information rather than issue-related information. Because Europarties are not well-known compared with national parties, they might try to inform voters about their party and its representatives in order to give them a general idea of the party. Europarties may also be interested in informing voters about European political structures and the procedures of EP elections, which are more complex and less familiar

to voters than the procedures of national elections. Those assumptions suggest a high density of different informative elements in the Facebook posts of Europarties about their respective parties, their representatives, and the election itself.

Concerning the online campaigns of national parties, a second-order effect (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) has been proposed in the context of EP elections, such that national parties show less online activity and provide less information in EP elections than in national elections (Rußmann, 2016). In terms of content, national parties focus on domestic issues while providing limited information about EU institutions and representatives (Bieber & Schwöbel, 2011). Even so, national parties have considerable incentive to promote EP elections in their Facebook posts. In addition to being represented in a legislative body of the EU and being able to influence political decisions at the European level, the results of EP elections clearly indicate national parties' relative popularity among voters. Thus, if considering EP elections as test elections for upcoming national parliamentary elections, it is in the interest of national parties to inform voters about the upcoming EP election, their campaigns, and their candidates. The question remains open regarding which information strategies Europarties compared with national parties pursue in their social media campaigns and which informative elements they focus on. That gap informed our second research question (RQ2): How frequently did Europarties provide information about (a) their party, (b) their representatives, and (c) the election itself and politics in general compared with national parties?

3.3 Information about lead candidates

The lead candidates are supposed to democratize EP elections (Auel & Tiemann, 2020) and personalize the policies of Europarties (Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019). Although personalization is sometimes criticized for focusing on candidates, their personal characteristics, and their private lives, which can sideline the discussion of substantive political issues, it also offers

advantages by reducing complexity and helping voters to structure complex political issues (Maurer & Engelmann, 2014). For Europarties, personalization could serve to reduce the EU's democratic deficit by improving the EU's accessibility for citizens. In that vein, the participation of Europarties' lead candidates in TV debates and campaign events was an important attempt to attract the attention of citizens and national media. Whereas most Europarties nominated one or two lead candidates for the 2019 EP election, Identity and Democracy (ID) refrained from nominating a candidate and Renew Europe designated a "Team Europe" of seven people instead of a single lead candidate (Tilindyte, 2019). Those differences in nominating candidates suggests that not all Europarties have made equal use of the concept of lead candidates, which raises the question of how strongly individual Europarties promoted their lead candidates in their 2019 EP election campaigns.

At the same time, national parties can present their own national lead candidates for the EP, who in only very few cases coincide with the European candidates, as in the case of Manfred Weber for the CSU in Germany and Frans Timmermans for the Dutch PvdA. Therefore, a third research question (RQ3) was formulated regarding the extent to which Europarties and national parties personalize their EP election campaigns and focus on lead candidates: How frequently did Europarties refer to the lead candidates in their Facebook posts compared with national parties?

3.4 Appeals to mobilization in parties' Facebook posts

Particularly during election campaigns, a specific goal of partisan messages is to mobilize supporters and potential voters. The literature distinguishes types of mobilization related to different participatory actions (e. g., Magin et al., 2017), often classified into online and offline mobilization (Knoll, Matthes, & Heiss, 2020). A significant goal of election campaigns is to mobilize the party's own electorate to vote for the party. Furthermore, citizens can support a party by becoming a member,

donating to it, and / or sharing partisan messages in their social media network. While the call to vote often recurs in parties' Facebook posts, research has shown that campaign managers at the national level avoid other high-level forms of mobilization (e. g., encouraging party membership and donations) because "such appeals could scare the voters away" (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1712).

Considered to be second-order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), EP elections have relatively low voter turnout and are subject to national campaigns (Ehin & Talving, 2021). Because the national structuring of EP elections creates little incentive for transnational strategies, Europarties are relegated to the campaign background. That structural disadvantage is exacerbated by the fact that Europarties have less experience in campaigns; in 2019, they actively campaigned for only the third time after being officially approved to spend funds on campaign activities (Clasen, 2020). Europarties have a particular interest in securing high voter turnout as a means to strengthen the EP's legitimacy, but they cannot be directly elected in EP elections, as European citizens can only vote for national parties to enter the EP. During election campaigns, Europarties thus play a decidedly supporting role for their member parties (Maurer & Mittag, 2020). Although their names do not appear on the ballots in EP elections, Europarties can at least call voters to vote on behalf of their national member parties.

Regarding the campaign activities of national parties, empirical results indicate a second-order effect in terms of mobilization, with fewer mobilization appeals in online campaigns during EP elections than during national elections (Rußmann, 2016). Even taking that second-order effect into account, national parties still have considerable incentive to perform well in elections and therefore strive to effectively mobilize voters in EP elections. That dynamic raises our fourth research question (RQ4) about the mobilization strategies of Europarties and national parties: To what extent did Europarties call for online and offline mobilization in their Facebook posts compared with national parties?

4 Method

The data for our study were collected from a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts published by Europarties and national parties from 12 (then) EU countries – Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the UK – that represent approximately 82 % of the European population (Eurostat, 2019).[1] Our selection of countries is balanced in several ways – e. g., concerning their political and media systems, political influence at the European level, geographic positioning within Europe, and different citizens' attitudes toward the EU (European Commission, 2019). Moreover, in all 12 countries, Facebook is the most popular social media platform (Newman, 2021).

4.1 Sample and data collection
We examined the last 4 weeks before the 2019 EP election (April 28–May 26; UK: April 25–May 23; Ireland: April 26–May 24). Europarties and national parties were categorized according to their affiliation with EU parliamentary groups after the 2019 election, albeit omitting the group of the non-attached (NI) from subsequent comparisons given its lack of a corresponding Europarty. Altogether, we collected 14 601 Facebook posts published by Europarties and national parties represented in the new EP (2019–2024). For most of the countries and for all Europarties, full samples of the posts were coded. For Denmark (53 %), France (56 %), Poland (20 %), Sweden (50 %), and the UK (45 %), random samples were drawn for manual coding to account for coders' capacities in those countries, which yielded 11 116 coded posts (Europarties: 497 collected and 479 coded posts; national parties: 14 104 collected and 10 637 coded posts).

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1   The names of the national parties are listed in Table A in the supplementary material.

Facebook posts, including their URL and the posts' texts, were collected from the parties' Facebook pages every day during the investigation period using the tool Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). For the Italian Lega Nord party and the country samples of Denmark and Romania, which were added to the sample only after the 2019 EP election, posts were collected using the tool CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle, 2020). For each saved post, the numbers of Shares and Likes were collected a month after the election (June 24, 2019), because they could have changed over the course of the campaign. However, due to post deletions, those numbers were not available for all posts in our sample (European parties: 490 posts with numbers of Shares and Likes; national parties: 14 002 posts with numbers of Shares and Likes). All categories described in chapter 4.2 were coded for each post in its entirety, including text, pictures, and (the first minute of) videos. Some posts could not be coded because they had been deleted or written in a language foreign to the coder.

4.2 Measurement and reliability

Our unit of analysis was the Facebook post. Each primary category comprised several subcategories that were binary-coded to indicate whether they were included (1) or excluded (0) in the post. Each variable (i. e., subcategory) was considered independently from the other variables. Thus, all variables could be coded for each post – for instance, both "information about party policy" and "information about election campaigns" could be coded as present in the same post. The Facebook posts were coded by 29 coders, with one to five coders per country, intensively trained to code in their respective national context. To assure the capacity of the coders involved, we selected a random sample of 50 posts published by Europarties or EP groups to be coded for the international reliability test. We chose posts written in English that addressed the broader European public in order to ensure that no country-specific knowledge was necessary to understand the post's message. Holsti's *CR* values re-vealed a common understanding of the categories (all Holsti's *CR* ≥ .7).

Information: Informative elements aim to inform recipients (i. e., Facebook followers) about issues that the parties deem relevant. We distinguished the following subcategories: "general information about politics and the EP election" (Holsti's *CR* = .73), "information about parties" – including the subcategories "information on parties in general" (Holsti's *CR* = .92), "information about party policy" (Holsti's *CR* = .77), and "information about election campaigns" (Holsti's *CR* = .78) –, and "information about party representatives" – including the subcategories "information about parties' lead candidates" (Holsti's *CR* = .83), and "information about other representatives" (Holsti's *CR* = .86).

Mobilization: Calls for mobilization encourage Facebook users to actively support the party in different ways and ultimately aim at generating political participation. Such calls can aim at online as well as offline mobilization. Whereas online mobilization comprised the subcategories "call to share a post" (Holsti's *CR* = .98), "call to like, follow, and / or subscribe to a Facebook page or unlike, unfollow, and / or unsubscribe from it" (Holsti's *CR* = .97), "call to sign an online petition or participate in an online survey" (Holsti's *CR* = 1.00), "call to participate in an online supporter campaign" (Holsti's *CR* = .98), and other online mobilization (Holsti's *CR* = .79), offline mobilization included the subcategories "call to vote (for a specific party)" (Holsti's *CR* = .91), "call to participate in an offline survey" (Holsti's *CR* = 1.00), "call to canvass door-to-door" (Holsti's *CR* = 1.00), "call to participate in other offline campaign actions" (Holsti's *CR* = 1.00), "call to join a party" (Holsti's *CR* = 1.00), "call to watch a TV debate or other TV show" (Holsti's *CR* = .92), "call to donate for party" (Holsti's *CR* = 1.00), and other offline mobilization (Holsti's *CR* = .95).

5 Results

We analyzed (1) the parties' activity on Facebook and the users' reactions on the parties' posts; (2) the information provided in the posts about politics and the EP election in general, about the parties themselves, and about the parties' representatives, especially about the lead candidates; and (3) the mobilization appeals used in parties' Facebook posts.

5.1 Parties' activity and users' reactions (RQ1)

Regarding activity on Facebook (Table 2), the national parties were clearly far more active than Europarties during the 2019 EP election campaign. In fact, the average number of posts was in the double digits for all Europarties but in the triple digits for the national parties. Overall, the Europarties published an average of 50 posts per party, while the individual national parties published an average of 172. Beyond that, the data revealed large similarities in the activity of the parties. The most active parties were Europarties and national parties of EPP, Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D), and ID, whereas the least active were parties of Greens/EFA, Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), and European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). An obvious difference concerned ID, which was the third-most active party at the European level but the most active at the national level by a wide margin. That variation stems from the fact that Italy's Lega Nord, led by Matteo Salvini, belongs to ID and was hyperactive on Facebook during the 2019 EP election campaign, with an average of 112 posts per day.

The median numbers of Likes and Shares suggest that users were more active on the Facebook pages of the national parties than of Europarties. Moreover, Likes were generally a more common reaction than Shares (Table 2).

### 5.2 Information in parties' Facebook posts (RQ2)

The type of information most often contained in the Facebook posts that we analyzed was information about the parties themselves, including their policies and campaigns (Figure 1). The second-most important type was information about the parties' representatives (i.e., lead candidates and other representatives), whereas general information about politics and the EP election was the least important. That pattern was identical for all Europarties and national parties with two exceptions: Europarties belonging to Renew Europe addressed representatives more often than the parties themselves, and Europarties belonging to EPP addressed parties as often as representatives.

Table 2: Posts published by Europarties and national parties

	Europarties			National parties		
	Mean posts per party (n = 497)	Median Likes (n = 490)	Median Shares (n = 490)	Mean posts per party (n = 14 104)	Median Likes (n = 14 002)	Median Shares (n = 14 002)
GUE/NGL	27	25	10	106	244	77
Greens/EFA	48	106	28	116	143	36
S&D	83	18	5	163	203	47
Renew Europe	52	44	5	123	112	19
EPP	84	51	4	149	252	50
ECR	16	17.5	3	108	638	126
ID	72	124	33.5	777	163	15.5
Overall mean/median	50	49.5	8	172	190	34

Note: Groups are ordered from left to right to reflect their left–right ideological stance (McElroy & Benoit, 2012). Overall values for mean posts per party and median numbers of Likes and Shares were calculated based on all posts and all parties of both Europarties and national parties.

Figure 1:   Information about politics in general, parties, and representatives in the posts of Europarties and national parties
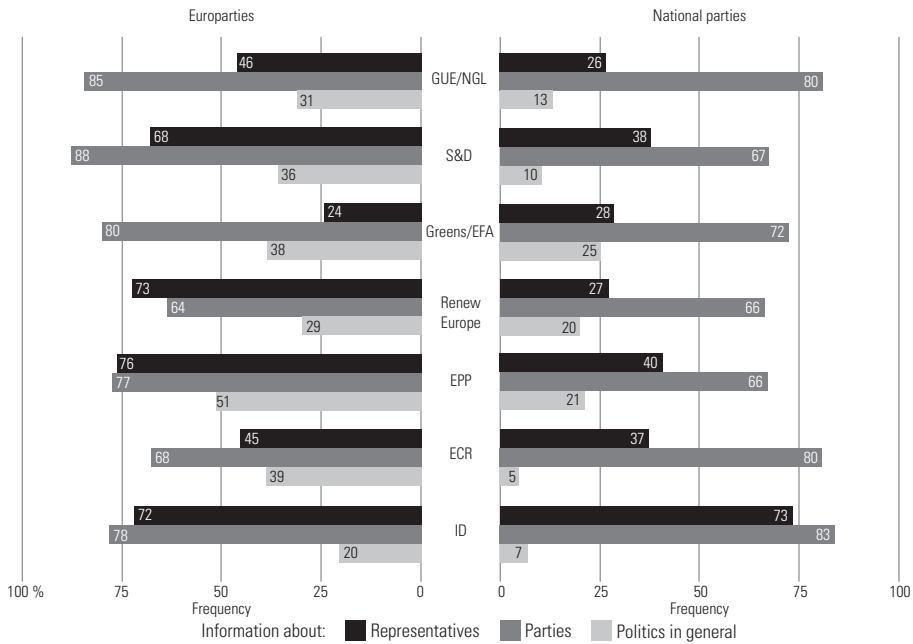
Note: Groups are ordered from left to right to reflect their left–right ideological stance (McElroy & Benoit, 2012). Europarties: $n=479$ coded posts. National parties: $n=10\,637$ coded posts; information about politics in general: $\chi^2(6)=444.07$, $p<.001$, $V=.2$; information about parties: $\chi^2(6)=338.94$, $p<.001$, $V=.18$; information about representatives: $\chi^2(6)=1{,}526.89$, $p<.001$, $V=.38$.

Concerning information about the parties themselves, results were mixed between the Europarties and national parties. In some cases, party-related information was presented more often by Europarties (i.e., GUE/NGL, S&D, Greens/EFA, and EPP); in other cases, it was more often by the national parties (i.e., ECR and ID) or equally as often (i.e., Renew Europe). Party representatives, however, were more frequently addressed by Europarties than by national parties in all cases except the Greens/EFA representatives were more often addressed by national parties, and ID representatives were addressed by Europarties and national parties equally as often. At the European level, the party's representatives were most important for EPP, Renew Europe, and ID. At the national level, however, representatives were by far most often addressed by parties belonging to ID. A commonality across all party groups was that Europarties addressed general information about politics and the EP election far more often than the national parties in the same groups.

5.3 Information about lead candidates (RQ3)

Our findings for RQ2 partly highlight the importance of party representatives in the Facebook posts analyzed. Figure 2, differentiating lead candidates from other representatives,[2] shows the predominance of lead candidates versus other party representatives across the political spectrum

2   The frequencies of representatives addressed in Figure 1 bundle those results by indicating whether party representatives are addressed as soon as either the lead candidates or other party representatives were coded as present (1). In Figure 2, both categories are presented separately. Because both categories were coded independently, the added frequencies in Figure 2 are higher than the bundled frequencies in Figure 1.

Figure 2: Information about lead candidates and party representatives in the posts of Europarties and national parties
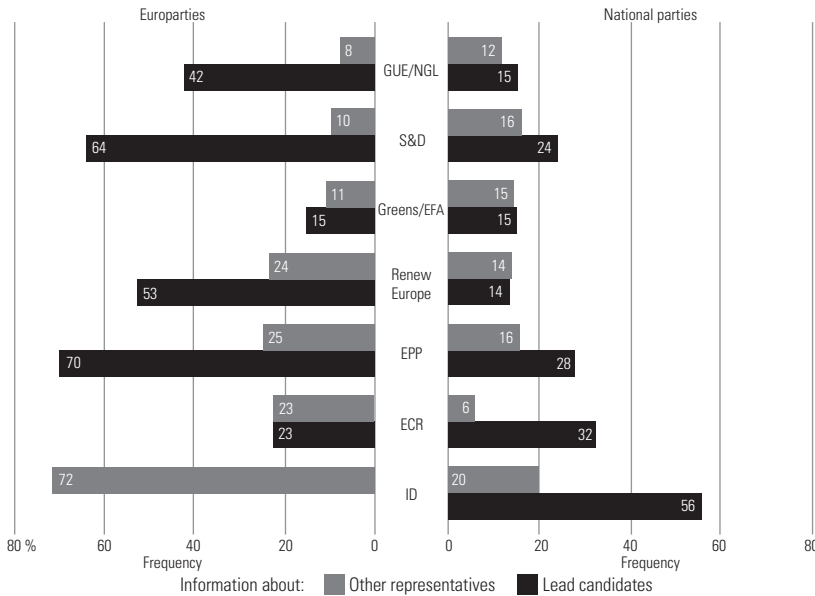
and both for Europarties and for national parties. As for the Europarties, the added visibility of lead candidates was even more pronounced. The lead candidates were most often addressed by the Europarties EPP and PES (S&D), likely because those two parties alone had candidates with (seemingly) realistic odds of becoming president of the European Commission – respectively, Manfred Weber (EPP) and Frans Timmermans (PES).

However, exceptions from that pattern of greater visibility for the lead candidates did emerge. In the case of Greens/EFA, no difference in visibility appeared between the lead candidates and other representatives at the national level, and only small differences appeared at the European level. That party group moreover exhibited the lowest focus of all party groups on individual politicians in its Facebook posts. National parties of Renew Europe and Europarties of ECR addressed both the lead candidates and other representatives equally as often. By contrast, the ID Eu-

roparty, which refrained from nominating a joint candidate for the 2019 EP election, did not publish any posts referring to lead candidates, whereas the national parties of ID demonstrated the greatest focus on (national) lead candidates. That party group unites many populist parties whose communication often focuses heavily on their (national) leaders.

5.4 Appeals to mobilization in parties' Facebook posts (RQ4)

Even though Facebook campaigns occur online, the appeals for mobilization published by the parties on their Facebook pages far more often addressed forms of offline than online mobilization (Figure 3). That finding applies to all party groups except the GUE/NGL and Renew Europe at the European level, which attests to the fact that Facebook is part of hybrid election campaigns that interweave different campaign channels (Magin et al., 2021). Whereas the frequency of calls for mobilization online hardly differed between

Europarties and national parties, calls for mobilization offline were far more frequent from all national parties except for the Greens/EFA and ECR. That strong focus on offline mobilization at the national level can be explained by the fact that the EP election campaigns as well as voting take place in the EU member states.

Examining the subcategories reveals that the most frequent appeals for offline mobilization were calls to vote, both in the case of Europarties (26 % of total posts) and national parties (34 %), as detailed in the supplementary material. The second-most frequent appeal for mobilization offline were calls to watch TV debates between the lead candidates (Europarties: 5 % of total posts; national parties: 7 %). The Europarties that most often called for voting and watching TV debates were the EPP and the Europarties of Renew Europe, while the Europarties of GUE/NGL and ID did not publish any such appeals. However, the national parties organized in ID

published calls to watch the TV debates in 15 % of their posts and thus more frequently than all other party groups.

6   Discussion and conclusion

In our study, we sought to gain insight into the extent to which Europarties used Facebook as a tool for direct communication to inform and mobilize voters and to gain visibility in political communication on social media during the 2019 EP election. We compared the Facebook communication practices of Europarties and national parties from 12 (then) EU countries in the last 4 weeks before the 2019 EP election. Our results indicated that Europarties and national parties used Facebook to varying degrees and with differently focused content, all of which has important implications.

First, national parties posted far more frequently and received more Likes and Shares than Europarties. Thus, nation-

Figure 3:   Elements of online and offline mobilization in the posts of Europarties and national parties
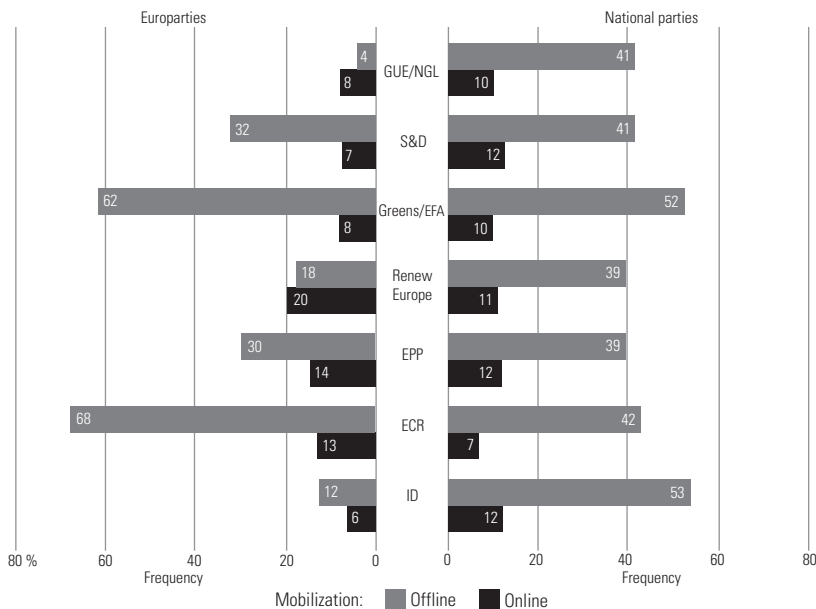
Note: Groups are ordered from left to right to reflect their left–right ideological stance (McElroy & Benoit, 2012). Europarties: *n* = 479 coded posts. National parties: *n* = 10 637 coded posts; mobilization online: $\chi^2(6) = 18.07$, *p* < .01, *V* = .04; mobilization offline: $\chi^2(6) = 176.21$, *p* < .001, *V* = .13.

al parties seem to have drawn on online campaign routines developed in past campaigns and translated them to the EP electoral context. Users' reactions indicated that the national parties were better able to attract attention and spark interest with their Facebook posts than Europarties. This highlights the fact that in EP elections, national parties remain to be the primary focus of voters' attention (Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019). Even though Europarties have fewer followers than national parties and these followers appear to be less active, Europarties could theoretically invest effort to support the online campaigns of the national parties (Clasen, 2020) and, e.g., provide national parties with Facebook posts to share on their pages. In this way, Europarties could increase visibility for their party families and act as transnational communication hubs that provide shareable content for the national parties' online campaigns. However, that potential of social media remained untapped in the 2019 EP election campaign, as the Europarties' campaign activities on Facebook were low.

Second, in terms of post content, nearly all Europarties and national parties focused on information about the parties themselves, including their policies and election campaigns, and second-most often provided information about their representatives, with Europarties informing about their representatives more frequently than their national counterparts in most cases. In addition, Europarties addressed general information about politics and the EP election considerably more often than the national parties. Those trends support the idea that while parties at both levels shaped the images of themselves and their candidates to reach out to voters during the EP election campaign, Europarties more often did so with European-focused information. On the one hand, that finding supports the second-order election hypothesis (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), as national parties seemed to indeed concentrate on their national image, rather than EU politics or the EP election. On the other hand, it underscores the potentially important role of Europarties as transnational orga-

nizations focusing on the European level, when they use their Facebook posts to provide more information about European politics and their representatives than the national parties.

Third, our study additionally revealed that both Europarties and national parties made references to lead candidates more frequently than to other party representatives. However, not all Europarties fully seized the opportunity to apply a Europeanized personalization strategy by intensively presenting their candidates. In particular, the EPP and PES referred to their respective lead candidates Manfred Weber and Frans Timmermans because those had the best chances of being elected as the European Commission's president. The Europarties of Renew Europe also mentioned their candidate team relatively often in their posts and thus relied on a personalization strategy, even though their candidates had little chance of winning the position of Commission president. The Europarty PEL, associated with the GUE/NGL group, pursued a similar strategy by presenting their lead candidate comparatively often. By contrast, the Greens and ECR rarely mentioned their candidates in their posts and thus hardly integrated the concept of lead candidates into their campaign. ID excluded the concept from their campaign at the European level as they did not nominate a lead candidate, but they showed the largest focus on national lead candidates, which can be explained by the fact that populists often tend to concentrate on strong leaders in their communication.

While personalization is an established strategy for national parties, it also seemed to benefit Europarties, as their lead candidates were clearly able to attract attention during the TV debates. In that vein, our study indicates that personalization played a crucial role in the social media communication strategy in the EP election campaign of several Europarties, which adds to the literature on the visibility and potential recognition of lead candidates (Gattermann & de Vreese, 2020). At the same time, Europarties were not able to use the lead candidates to expand the

EP's influence within the EU's power structure, because none of them ultimately became president of the European Commission.

Last, most Europarties and national parties aimed to mobilize voters primarily by making appeals for offline rather than online action. Those appeals were mostly calls to vote and calls to watch TV debates between the lead candidates. That result showcases how Europarties as well as national parties seek to invoke participation at the European level on their Facebook pages. Whereas the national parties of all EP groups used offline mobilization calls to a similar extent and noticeably more often than online mobilization calls, respective trends for the Europarties of the various EP groups were more heterogeneous. Perhaps most noticeably, not all Europarties performed the function of mobilizing citizens to the same extent as national parties, which again captures the detachment of Europarties from EU citizens and suggests that proximity to citizens and established organizational mechanisms for campaigning are pivotal in EP campaigns on social media. Although the low level of calls to vote in most Europarties' posts may derive from the fact that they cannot be directly elected, they also made no effort to issue general calls to vote in the EP election.

Several limitations of our study warrant consideration. First, our analysis was limited to a comparison of descriptors at the EP group level. Although useful for revealing initial overarching structures and trends in the campaigns of the Europarties versus national parties, the results can paint a skewed picture if individual parties in the various groups are highly active or engaging and thus might hide effects behind internal variance within the party groups. Second, the small number of posts to calculate the intercoder reliability represent a methodological limitation of our study that was due to the available capacity of the coders involved. Some of the information categories coded for the data have relatively low reliability values. Information about politics in general and subcategories of information about parties

have values only slightly above .7 for the liberal Holsti coefficient. This constraint of the measuring instrument should be taken into account when interpreting the results in terms of the different types of information used by the parties. Third, considering the ideological backgrounds and organizational structures of the individual Europarties (Put et al., 2016) as explanatory elements for differences in their communication on Facebook could reveal detailed insights into the communication abilities and strategies of the different Europarties. Further research should take those structural differences into account, as the Europarties with different ideological affiliations can offer voters alternative policy approaches to choose from, which is essential for democratic systems (Persson, 2019). Finally, we did not consider any differences in national settings between the 12 countries under investigation. Including those differences in the analysis could reveal further important results for comparison.

Our study complements the literature on Europarties by providing new empirical insights into their electoral campaigning on Facebook relative to national parties. In that sense, it can improve assessments of the potential of current campaign communication on Facebook for European integration and the Europeanization of national public spheres (Benert & Pfetsch, 2020). On the one hand, Europarties use Facebook to provide information about European politics, their political position, and their lead candidates and other representatives. This enables them to fulfill their important role of raising awareness about European issues and overcoming their underrepresentation in media. In our sample, several Europarties highlighted their lead candidates, who can generally help to reduce the EU's democratic deficit and make EU political processes more accessible to citizens. On the other hand, Europarties posted far less and received lower levels of Likes and Shares than the national parties, and their (offline) mobilization was less widespread. Those trends largely correspond with the second-order hypothesis of a generally lower inter-

est of voters in the European level (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) and add to the difficulties of providing voters with information to understand and participate in complex political processes at the European level.

As reflected in their relatively low level of activity on Facebook, Europarties seem to have missed the opportunity to use the social media platform in their election campaigns as a means to compensate for their relative lack of presence in national media. That outcome indicates that Europarties cannot exploit the dynamics of social media in the same ways as other political actors – for example, populist parties and social movements. However, even if Europarties had a higher level of activity on Facebook, it is uncertain whether their increased effort in social media communication would be noticed by citizens or whether the provision of sharable content would be acknowledged by the national parties.

In any case, Europarties continue to evolve and to strive for more influence within the EU (Clasen, 2020). To that end, a major obstacle for Europarties' election campaigns is that they cannot be directly elected, even though vote seeking is one of the important party functions (Wolfs & Smulders, 2018). As such, Europarties have less incentive to call for votes, and, to many voters, it remains unclear why they should be interested in Europarties when the candidates of national parties are the ones running for election. To improve that situation, one proposal suggests introducing transnational candidate lists for which Europarties can campaign (Auel & Tiemann, 2020); however, those lists have not yet been implemented. On the one hand, introducing such lists could increase the visibility of Europarties, but on the other hand, the EP elections would become even more complex as a result. An alternative idea is to more strongly communicate the connection between national parties and their European federations – for instance, by referring to Europarties in national campaigns and naming them on the ballot next to the corresponding national parties. Even if Europarties cannot be directly elected, that approach would make

campaigning on behalf of their national member parties during EP elections more worthwhile for Europarties. In turn, such activity would impact their online campaign activities, and social media could be used by Europarties to coordinate a common, overarching European campaign, provided that the national parties are willing to engage in such a transnational event. As a result, attention on Europarties would increase by making voters aware of the connections between the national parties whose candidates they can vote for and Europarties that are active at the European level and may increase the accountability of European politics in the future.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

https://www.hope.uzh.ch/scoms/article/view/j.scoms.2022.01.3053

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