

Campaigning as a Spitzenkandidat: Are lead candidates aligned with their party's manifesto?

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## Resumo

Atualmente, o *Twitter* é uma das ferramentas *online* de eleição entre os atores políticos para fazerem campanha e estabelecerem uma ligação com os seus eleitorados, e o mesmo acontece com os *Spitzenkandidaten*. O processo de *Spitzenkandidat*, inicialmente implementado em 2014, tem sido um tema amplamente investigado. No entanto, com a personalização das campanhas a representar um dos principais fatores impulsionadores, é surpreendente ver a escassez de literatura sobre o assunto e, em particular, literatura relacionada com os principais candidatos na esfera do *Twitter*. Este estudo vem colmatar a lacuna na literatura académica ao responder à pergunta: *Até que ponto os Spitzenkandidaten de 2019 representaram os programas do seu partido através dos seus tweets ou desenvolveram campanhas individualizadas?*. Os resultados revelam que os *Spitzenkandidaten* de 2019 não se centram na personalização como ferramenta principal no seu comportamento no *Twitter*. Além disso, o estudo demonstra de que forma fatores como a idade do candidato, a sua orientação partidária e se os candidatos fazem mais *tweets* ou *retweets*, têm influência no resultado.

**Palavras-chave:** *Spitzenkandidaten*; campanha no *Twitter*; individualização de campanhas; programas eleitorais.

## **Abstract**

Nowadays, political actors use Twitter as one of the main online tools to campaign and connect to their constituencies, and so do Spitzenkandidaten. The Spitzenkandidat process, which was initially implemented in 2014, is a widely researched topic. However, with campaign personalization, being one of its main drivers, it is surprising to see the lack of literature on the subject specifically connected to the lead candidates in the Twitter sphere. This study is filling the gap in the academic literature by answering the question: *To what extent the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten represented their party's manifestos via their tweets or develop individualized campaigns?*. The results reveal that the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten do not focus on personalization as a main tool in their Twitter behavior. Furthermore, the study shows how factors like the age of the candidate, their party orientation and whether candidates tweet or retweet more, is influencing the outcome.

Keywords: Spitzenkandidaten; Twitter campaigning; campaign individualization; election manifestos

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## Introduction

Elections and electoral campaigns are an important feature of the modern democratic political system (Shively, 2003). In fact, the academic literature differentiates several types of campaigns, two of which are online and offline campaigns. With the emergence of the technologies and the Internet, online campaigns became more and more common (Farrell, 2012). It should be clear that both offline and online campaigns are not exclusive, but rather they complement each other (Trent and Friedenber, 2008). However, scholars have different opinions regarding the effect of the Internet on political campaigns (e.g. Sproull and Kiesler, 1991; Bimber, 2000; Dahlgren, 2005).

Social media became one of the main tools when talking about online campaigning. Among the many, Twitter is considered to be the one used most by politicians (Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet, & Benoit, 2016; Coesemans & De Cock, 2017; Ceron & Curini, 2018). In Europe, however it spread slower than, for instance, in the USA (Rodriguez & Madariaga, 2016). When looking into the European elections, we do see that Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) use Twitter as well. Moreover, some works focus on the personal traits of MEPs and how this influences the way they tweet (Daniel & Obholzer, 2020).

As of 2014, a new process was introduced on the European scene – the Spitzenkandidat<sup>1</sup> process. Such process requires for each European party group to put forward a lead candidate who would compete for the role of the European Commission president. (Cinelli, Cresci, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Tesconi, 2020). In fact, this makes 2019 only the second time when the process was part of the European elections. In 2014 the elected European Commission President – Jean-Claude Juncker - was indeed the Spitzenkandidat of the party which won the most votes – EPP (Group of the European People’s Party) (Braun & Popa, 2018). This, however was influenced by a number of factors and not simply because he was the Spitzenkandidat of EPP (Synnott, 2018).

The same scenario, however, did not repeat in 2019. After each party have proposed a candidate or a team of candidates to be the Spitzenkandidat, as advised by the Commission recommendations (European Commission, 2018), the MEPs did not reach an agreement on the first date of elections and thus the process continued resulting in the first female Commission President being elected. She, however, was not part of the Spitzenkandidaten list. Ursula von

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<sup>1</sup> Lead candidate



der Leyen's election as EC president challenged the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, as she had not been standing in the elections initially (Gattermann & Marquart, 2020).

The available literature connected with the Spitzenkandidaten, examines how the process originated and what it brought to Europe and the European institutions (Fotopoulos, 2019; Deckarm, 2017; Christiansen, 2016). There are several studies connected to Twitter; the European party manifestos and the Spitzenkandidat process as a whole (e.g. Braun & Popa, 2018; Daniel & Obholzer, 2020), focusing on whether MEPs tweeted about their Spitzenkandidaten and whether the Manifestos addressed the new process.

Before continuing to the aim of this study, it is crucial to point out that campaign personalization is one of the main reasons why the Spitzenkandidat process has been implemented (Hobolt, 2014). The phenomena is defined as the process by which the focus shifts onto individual politicians and their personal qualities at the expense of political parties (Gattermann & Marquart, 2020) or the political issues (Brettschneider, 2008). Individualization on the other hand is the process when candidates build their own campaign organizations, and the "candidates themselves more than their parties are the focus of the campaign communication." (Karlsen & Skogerbø; 2013, p.2).

Given the above, the goal of this study is to look from the Spitzenkandidaten point of view and answer the question: *To what extent the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten represented their party's manifestos via their tweets or develop individualized campaigns?*. As such research have not been done so far for the 2019 European elections, it is believed that it will contribute to the existing literature. I also explore the factors that could be influencing the result, among which are the age of the candidates; whether they tweet or retweet more; their party ideology and previous experience as a Spitzenkandidat. Furthermore, I examined the amount of posts dedicated per topic for each candidate – are they silent for a certain issue, and does that depend on their party stances?

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. The first chapter is dedicated to the development of the electoral campaigns, their evolution connected with the technological advancement and the studies that have focused on that. Moreover, it is addressed more specifically how Twitter is integrated in the campaigns, what does academic literature say about campaign personalization and individualization; how campaigns for the European elections are held and lastly it is examined the available literature around the Spitzenkandidat process. The second chapter provides details on the research design. In the third section the results of the content analysis are presented as an overview and per candidate, followed by a discussion and

suggestions for future research. There is an Appendix that presents more in-depth information regarding the data and the results of the study.

## Chapter I – Election Campaigns, Twitter and Spitzenkandidaten

### Election Campaigns

Electoral campaigns are at the core of every democratic system. They give voters the rights to challenge and question the candidates in order to be able to make a decision - to ignore the campaign, to vote or to even work for the candidate/party (Trent & Friedenber, 2008). They allow the voters to determine who will lead them.

When defining a campaign, the crucial thing is that all campaigns are not equal. For instance, a campaign can be looked at from two conceptually distinct, but empirically linked, ways. One focuses on institutional or quasi-institutional conditions, while the second considers campaigns as periods of uncommon intensity in the political order, which can either broaden the period of the campaign or narrow it (Brady & Johnston, 2006).

Studies have found that campaigns can have different goals and effects. Schmitt-Beck & Farrell (2002) discuss in their book several aims of campaigns, one of which is that campaigns have the purpose of providing information. Furthermore, campaigns are often primary source from which the media takes needed information about political activities and public policies. Although they may not be of prime importance for the decision of the electorate, they can for sure influence it. Moreover, campaigns aim to mobilize support among the masses and persuade citizens of politicians or party's causes. Norris (2000) comments that depending on the historical period, campaigns were initially aiming to mobilize the electorate but later, with the appearance of the television and influenced by other factors (such as voter dealignment and voting being more influenced by short-term factors), the aim shifted to winning new voters, together with mobilizing the old. In fact, an important point made by her is that political campaigns and their communication did not switch from one type to another but rather built over and the newer ways are complementing the older.

The goal of a campaign can actually differ from the effect it has in the end. Together with the most known effect of mobilizing voters or converting them, there is also the effect of familiarizing the electorate about lesser known candidates (Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002). This is especially relevant for personalized campaigns.

It is important to examine as well what activities are included in the electoral campaigns. They can be looked at from many different angles. For instance, Howell (1982) divides them into the following five categories: Research, Personal Contact, Mass mobilization, Elite mobilization and Advertising. Some studies focus on the effects of the personal contact methods (Crotty, 1971; Eldersveld, 1956; Blydenburgh, 1971) while others, on the impact of

media advertising (Atkin and Heald, 1976; Mendelsohn and O'Keefe, 1976; Kaid, 1976; Hofstetter and Buss, 1980).

The study by Usman, Munawar, & Amjad (2013) adds to the study of Howell (1982) by explaining what are the determinants of an effective electoral campaign. It describes in details exactly what activities and the combinations of them make a campaign successful. Among them are the personal influence of a candidate in a constituency, their past performance as a politician, and the position of their political party in national politics. A number of techniques and strategies used in devising electoral campaigns include rallies, enchanting slogans, and corner meetings, canvassing, involving opinion leaders, and door to door campaigns to convince voters personally. Moreover, advertisements by electronic and print media, distribution of party manifestos, voter cards, posters, handbills, pamphlets and party symbols (Usman, Munawar, & Amjad, 2013).

In addition, the campaign activities, but more specifically the communication within them can be, divided into direct and indirect (Sharlamanov & Jovanoski, 2014). Sharlamanov & Jovanoski (2014), explain that when using direct communication, which is also called interpersonal communication, the organizers of the electoral campaign communicate with the voters directly (without mediators). The second type of communication in the electoral campaigns is indirect communication where the organizers of the electoral campaigns use the media (the traditional or the new media) for communication with the voters. Ultimately both types of communication have good and bad sides. To illustrate, some of the ways of communication which the above study focus on are Press Conferences, Debates, Computer-Mediated Communication like blogs in the electoral campaigns or using electronic mail.

Yet, a study from 2011 argues that events must be at the core of the electoral campaigns. The authors conclude that the campaign related events are one of the tactics that allows for a pin-point targeting of the electorate and a better control on the receivers of the message (Ionut, Mihai, & Andrei, 2011).

Throughout history the form of the campaigns took many turns and changes. With the appearance of the press and newspapers, through the radio and the television and reaching now to the Internet, all channels have their specifics and contributions for campaign development. While Trent & Friedenberg (2008) examine the change of the campaigns mainly through the angle of the technology advancement, Norris (2000) classified it in the following three stages: pre-modern, modern and post-modern period. They are connected not only with technological development (the appearance of the television and the Internet), but also with the broader social and political context.

Both Norris (2000) and Schmitt-Beck & Farrell (2002) talk how throughout time some campaigns shifted from issue-based to more personalised, image-based, where a political figure is in the center of the campaign.

## **Online Election Campaigns**

Online electoral campaigns started to be differentiated from offline electoral campaigns only in the late XX and beginning of the XXI century in the USA. In fact, Trent & Friedenber (2008) comment that the use of the Internet in the electoral campaigns in the USA began popular in the early 2000s - websites and blogs of politicians emerged and from then onwards online campaigns only developed further.

The advantage of the Internet is reflected in increased opportunities for interaction among political parties and citizens (Kaid, 2002). It helps in building and maintaining an electoral connection, since it allows for politicians to conveniently contact voters (Obholzer & Daniel, 2016). Farrell (2012, p.47) even states that “it will be impossible to study, e.g., the politics of fundraising, election advertising, political action, public diplomacy, or social movements without paying close attention to the Internet.”

In the literature, there are different opinions regarding the effect of the Internet on political campaigns. On the one hand we have some very early studies which conclude that the Internet unites the people and this transmits as well in the offline world (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991). On the other hand, we have the approach that states the opposite: the Internet only makes people less active offline as they are too busy focusing only on the online engagement (Bimber, 2000). A third group of studies brings balance by stating that the Internet does not affect the engagement happening offline (e.g. Dahlgren, 2005). Given the above, it should be clear, that both offline and online campaigns are not exclusive, but rather they compliment each other.

Furthermore, there are debates regarding the equalizing versus normalizing theses. The supporters of the equalizing thesis (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Bimber and Davis, 2003; Boulianne, 2009, Gibson et al., 2005) are suggesting that the Internet can provide easily access to political information and influence and opportunities to organize political activities and thus make it more equal for those disadvantaged by the current system, turning the Internet into a driver of political participation and a democratizing force (Gainous, Wagner, & Segal, 2018). Contrarily, some scholars claim that there is no significant change in the basic power balance within political systems (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Hindman 2008; Ward et al., 2003) and that

inequalities in access to information and communication technologies are mainly linked to a first stage of penetration of the technology—the normal path—but gradually decreasing in the later stages when the technology is adopted widely across society because it becomes cheaper, easier, and more effective. This is also known as the normalization thesis.

The extant literature debates if offline and online campaigns deliver the same messages to the same audiences or not. For instance, some authors claim that the online content follows a different approach when compared to the traditional campaigning. On the contrary, others support the opposite thesis, arguing that there is no difference between how political parties use online or traditional media (Schweitzer, 2008). The debate is still open (Gibson & McAlliste, 2015), although several studies suggest that the Web 1.0<sup>2</sup> distributed the same information online that was available offline (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2010; Ku, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003). While with Web 2.0<sup>3</sup> and the emergence of social media, things might have changed as users can easily generate their own content through social media and politicians can potentially personalize and target their messages while differing them from but aligning with the party's official campaign (Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2013). In their research, however, Gainous, Wagner and Segal (2018) find that digital campaigns can and do stand on its own.

Online campaigning can include a wide range of activities: from candidate websites and blogs (Trent & Friedenber, 2008), through all social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) to using electronic mail in electoral campaigns (Sharlamanov & Jovanoski, 2014). Moreover, when it comes to social media, we need to note that it contributes in several different ways to election campaigns. Besides used to address political topics important to the mass audience, it can also be improving name recognition, promoting issue positions and demonstrating beneficial personality traits (Kobayashi & Ichifuji, 2015). Different social media channels, however, can be used in different ways. A study from 2018 found that “politicians primarily use Facebook for campaign-related purposes like the promotion of their activities, while preferring Twitter to comment on contemporary political events.” (Stier, Bleier, Lietz, & Strohmaier, 2018, p.3)

In fact, it has been widely recognized that social media are important tools in modern political campaigning (Bene, 2017). For instance, a study across 12 European countries shows that Facebook, together with face-to-face communication and TV appearance is viewed as the most important tool in political campaigning (Štětka, Lilleker, Tenscher, & Jalali, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Web 1.0 refers to static websites, blogs etc. with the purpose to mainly inform the public

<sup>3</sup> Web 2.0 is bringing interactivity. It includes features that allow the regular user to get involved and communicate with the publisher

Facebook, however, is not popular because of the type of followers one can get, as opposed to Twitter. Given the above, when posting in Facebook, a political figure is usually ‘preaching to the converted’ (Norris, 2003), meaning that the people who are seeing their posts have already chosen to follow them and most probably vote for them. However, through their followers’ reactions, politicians’ messages can reach many voters (Bene, 2017). Looked from this side, politicians are not preaching to the converted but are rather “preaching through the converted” (Vissers, 2009). The question that Bene (2017) researched is what type of political content triggers reactions from a politician’s followers on Facebook. He discovered that citizens are highly reactive to negative emotion-filled, text-using, personal, and activity-demanding posts. In fact, posts that went viral were especially consisting of memes, videos, negative contents and mobilizing posts, and posts containing a call for sharing.

With the appearance of the Internet and the technological development, emerged as well possibilities for manipulation. On the one hand we can see the so-called “bot activism”. To illustrate, the process includes computer programs that create millions of fake accounts in online social networks in order to widely spread certain ideas and opinions to a bigger audience through different sorts of online activities (e.g., through liking and (re-)tweeting) (Benigni, Joseph, & Carley, 2018; Carley, 2018). On the other hand and more recently, another transition towards data driven campaigns developed which includes microtargeting (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018; Bennett, 2016; Persily, 2017). Microtargeting allows to direct a certain advertising campaign towards a specific segment and above all to identify potentially persuadable voters. Hoferer, Böttcher, Herrmann, & Gersbach (2020) researched the topic further and found a link between the technological precision, campaign budgets, activist fractions and the campaign outcome.

## **Twitter**

When we look at the different social media platforms, there is no doubt that Twitter<sup>4</sup> is the one used the most by politicians (Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet, & Benoit, 2016; Coesemans & De Cock, 2017; Ceron & Curini, 2018).

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<sup>4</sup> Twitter allows its users to post (tweet) messages up to 280 characters (this was changed in 2017 for non-asian languages as the previous limit was half the current one – 140). It also allows them to re-tweet

The platform became popular shortly after it was created in 2006, but it took some time for politicians to start using it. As a matter of fact, it is considered that the Obama US presidential campaign in 2008 put the start of the “political career” of Twitter (Bimber, 2014).

Scholars agree that politicians owning a website or Twitter account for campaigning from the USA are way more numerous than their European counterparts (Rodriguez & Madariaga, 2016). This is often because the spread of the Internet and the tendency of users to go online to obtain political information have always been much lower in Europe than in the United States (Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Surowiec, & Baranowski, 2014), where most of these technologies were created and used for the first time. Nevertheless, Twitter has slowly been entering the lives of European politicians, but this has not happened evenly (Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet, & Benoit, 2016). For instance, several studies examine how Twitter spread in Europe and support the idea of a north-south distribution where politicians from northern countries adopt the platform quicker and to a bigger extent than their colleagues from southern countries (Vergeer, Hermans, & Cunha, 2012). In addition, Nulty et al. (2016) suggest that there is not only South-North division but rather a SouthEast – North cleavage.

Politicians use Twitter to share news related to them or to self-reference themselves (Coeseemans & De Cock, 2017). Furthermore, they use the platform to connect with other politicians publicly and to create a dialogue with citizens. Coeseemans & De Cock (2017, p. 37) go even further by saying that “Twitter is not only a tool for professional political communication but also a tool for personal branding”. In addition, Larsson (2015) points out that Twitter can be used as a tool for permanent campaigning by politicians, meaning the use of Twitter as a campaigning tool out of the electoral campaign time frame. Several early studies, however, claim that Twitter is mainly used for self-promotion, information distribution and party mobilization rather than for interacting and listening to the people (Sæbø, 2011; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). Interesting, but not surprising is the finding that, in some countries, politicians use Twitter to communicate more with other politicians and journalists rather than with the “regular” people (Verweij, 2012; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & Van't-Haar, 2013). Furthermore, it is shown that in some cases, the culture of the person tweeting, and their country origin also affects the amount of posts and the general usage of the platform (Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2016).

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(share a post), share different media from other platforms or users and mention users. The hashtag function is also used very actively.



Contrarily, a Norwegian and an Australian study, however, argue that politicians do use Twitter as an interactive tool (Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). This either shows us that tendencies are changing or that these are isolated cases depending on the politicians and the specific countries. To answer this, further and broader research is needed as almost all literature is focused on single country and one-time elections.

A study from 2017 based on the Spanish election examines the role that politicians fulfill on Twitter and concludes that one of the main factors that drive what politicians post about on Twitter is the individual or collective dimension of the actor, together with the history of the party and the position it occupies on the government-opposition dynamics (López-Meri, Marcos-García, & Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Moreover, there are several studies that examine how politicians are using specifically the functions of the platform. For instance, Scherpereel, Jerry and Schmelzinger (2016) discover that for the moment MEPs prefer to retweet a post with their answer rather than answer by mentioning the original user.

As already mentioned, the platform is used in traditional political campaigning, but it is also used for non-traditional political activism – the freshest example being, fighting racism and uniting the community worldwide with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Furthermore, the influence of Twitter is felt beyond its network since Twitter's popularity caught the attention of mainstream media which now report regularly on politicians' Twitter messages (Scherpereel, Jerry, & Schmelzinger, 2016). It seems that the direction switched or rather now it is a two-way: In earlier years users were the one reposting media reports, articles, etc., however, currently we are able to see that mainstream media uses the content on Twitter for their news coverages. When talking about the media, it is worth mentioning an interesting study from 2020, which contributes to the known literature by examining the spread of fake news in Twitter with regards to the 2019 European Parliament elections. The authors discover that “disinformation outlets were almost completely ignored by other actors, thus having a limited influence on the information flow” (Cinelli, Cresci, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Tesconi, 2020, p.10). The authors conclude that the measurements that Twitter is taking to fight fake news are giving a result and thus keeping the integrity of the Twittersphere.

### **Personalized and individualized campaigns**

Digital media is among the factors that can contribute for a campaign to be more personalized, due to the increased interaction between citizens and candidates (Gibson, 2015).

Campaign personalization is defined as the process by which the focus shifts onto individual politicians and their personal qualities at the expense of political parties (Gattermann & Marquart, 2020) or the political issues (Brettschneider, 2008). Eventhough, personalization was one of the goals for the Spitzenkandidat process to be implemented, it is not always looked with a positive eye. Thus, the personalization of election campaigns receives criticism as some see it as mere beauty contests, which results in practically “packaging” candidates for the media, which as a bottom line leads to depolitization (Franklin, 2004).

Personalization as a phenomenon have been studied mainly in three areas: media coverage, election campaigns and voting behaviour (Kriesi, 2011). In fact, Rahat and Sheafer (2007) explain the types of political personalization: institutional, media and behavioral, as follows: institutional personalization is expressed in the democratization of candidate selection methods; personalization in the media is expressed in an increase in the focus of media coverage on individual politicians and a decrease in focusing on political parties; and personalization in the behavior of politicians is expressed in an increase in the share of legislation that is initiated through private member bills (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007). Furthermore, a research from 2013 presents an additional point of view, classifying the process of personalization as centralized or decentralized, where centralized personalization implies that power flows upwards from the group to a single leader and decentralized personalization means that power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders. The authors comment that both, although being more or less opposite processes, do not necessarily come at the expense of the other and can exist simultaneously (Balmas, Rahat, Sheafer and Shenhav, 2013).

On the other hand, there are as well studies focused on campaign individualization, which is defined by Karlsen and Skogerbø (2013) as the process where the candidates themselves are the focus of the campaign communication more than their parties. In their research, they differentiate individualization from localization, explaining that localized campaigns can be actually party-centered. Furthermore, a study from the same year, additionally explains what individualization is by clarifying that it can be “a desire or a need to pursue a separate individual campaign in terms of means and/or message for instance given the lackluster or limited central party campaign.” (Chiru & Popescu , 2013, p.3). The authors define three inter-related levels of individualization: belief/role definition, campaign message and campaign means. As a result, their research shows that local candidates engage to a larger extent in independent campaigning, have more personalized campaign roles and seem to spend more personal resources than the rest (Chiru & Popescu , 2013). Moreover, the chance to win a direct

mandate provides a further incentive to candidates to campaign in individualized ways (Zittel and Gschwend, 2008). It was as well proven that both the legal framework regulating the electoral contests and display and the electoral systems impact the level of campaign individualization. Withing these factors, are the incentives that candidates gain, district magnitude, ballot structure, the mobilization of financial resources and the access to the mass media (Lisi and Santana-Pereira, 2019).

When it comes to social media and personalization, McGregor (2018), argues that personalization itself does not lead directly to increased support for the candidate, although respondents rated candidates with personalized Twitter feeds higher in feelings of social presence and parasocial interaction, which generally shows positive effects of personalizing for candidates. This effect, however, is not the same for male and female candidates. Self personalization appears to “work” better for male candidates (McGregor, 2018). Another study contributes to the topic by researching how online personalization is used in the 2009 EP elections. Findings show that there are three general dimensions of personalization: ‘professional’, ‘home and family’ and ‘personal preferences’, with the first two being used more than the last one. Results conclude that there are cross-cultural differences regarding online personalized political campaigning as countries from Central Europe inform their citizens more about their professional and personal circumstances, and Mediterranean countries use personalization strategies the least. Furthermore, West European countries use links to social networks more frequently than countries in other regions (Hermans & Vergeer, 2012). Whether media personalization was achieved regarding the 2014 Spitzenkandidaten, was researched by Schulze (2016). She did her research for Germany, France and UK and found that the Spitzenkandidaten were not very visible in either the German, French, or British newspaper coverage, resulting in no mobilising effect and thus not reflecting the high expectations the European Parliament attributed to the nomination of the Spitzenkandidaten (Schulze, 2016).

A 2019 study, further contributes to the topic of professionalization of European Parliament election campaigns by examining campaign posters. The authors researched posters from Italy and the Netherlands over the course of eight elections. Their findings, however, are mixed. The trend that they confirmed in both countries is the personalization of the visual elements of EP posters, i.e. the frequency and prominence of candidates’ images (Gattermann and Vliegthart, 2019).

Typically, there are different opinions, as some scholars argue whether a greater turnout was achieved or not as result of campaign personalization. On the one hand looking at

the percentage of voters, we see that the turnout did not increase, but on the other hand it did not decrease – which is why some studies consider this as relatively successful when talking about European Elections turnout (Schmitt, Hobolt, & Popa, 2015).

## **EP Campaigns**

In European elections, and in elections overall, campaign activity is a key precondition for generating news. While voters have treated these elections as second-order elections, so have many political parties, by not investing a lot in their campaigns (Bicchi, Blondel, & Svensson, 2003). In fact, De Vreese (2009) found interesting points in regard to European Parliament campaigning. He confirmed that campaigning in second-order types of elections is less extensive than in first-order elections. The same issue, but specifically regarding funding has been examined by Petithomme (2012). He has proven that mainstream parties have restricted or even limited the resources for EU election campaigns, a trend that is in oppose to the ever-increasing expenditure linked to national elections. The same, however, does not apply for minor parties.

Additional points regarding the nature of European elections are that the degree of campaign professionalization varies cross-nationally and that in second-order elections, political campaigns in consensual contexts are longer and more active than campaigns in polarized political contexts, since when the elites are in consensus it takes more effort in the campaign in order to make it relevant and to present a political choice to the electorate (De Vreese, 2009). As the above findings point out, less funding has been set apart for EU campaigning; this, together with the emerging technologies, made politicians across Europe start developing their campaigns by bringing features of the Web 2.0. On European level, however, this happened slower than on national level (Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet, & Benoit, 2016).

Contributing to the limited body of work focused on the everyday online practices of politicians, and especially regarding MEPs, a study from 2015 provides useful insights into the day-to-day use of Twitter. It concludes that the dissimilarity between different party groups proved to be nonsignificant when talking about the amount of tweets published. Furthermore, the author argues that the country origin of the politicians is not as significant as other studies suggest (Larsson, 2015).

For instance, Daniel and Obholzer (2020) decided to repeat their study from 2016 regarding the European elections in 2014 and test their hypothesis in the 2019 election context.

They discovered that to a great extent, the 2019 results replicate those from the 2014 elections and argue that MEPs representing larger constituencies were more active on Twitter. Also similar to the previous study, MEPs from more social media-prone countries were tweeting more prior to the campaign (Daniel & Obholzer, 2020). Furthermore, in their research Nulty et al. (2016) disclose other personal traits that influence who tweets and how much. The work reveals that candidates who were sitting MEPs in 2014 were about four times more likely to have a Twitter account, and six times more likely if they had also been incumbent in 2009. Another individual characteristic that the authors examined is the pro/anti-EU and the left-right orientation: it is more likely for pro-EU politicians in the center of the left-right spectrum to tweet more than the rest. Also, that male candidates are about 20% more likely to have Twitter accounts (Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet, & Benoit, 2016). The study of Scherpereel, Jerry and Schmelzinger (2016) however discovers that the female MEPs who decide to establish Twitter accounts generally do this before their male colleagues. Once they are on Twitter, however, there is no evidence that women and men behave differently. Despite Twitter being so popular, almost one quarter (23.8 per cent) of 2014–2019 MEPs had decided not to establish a Twitter account as of 2017. The remaining part of MEPs who have established accounts use Twitter in very different ways (Scherpereel, Jerry, & Schmelzinger, 2016).

Moreover, some studies suggest that the age of the voters can determine if a politician is using Twitter more or not. Legislators representing young groups might use Twitter more than legislators from demographically old districts (Peterson, 2012). Furthermore, another age is also said to be influencing whether a MEP is using Twitter or not – the one of the MEP itself. As younger Members of the European Parliament are considered to be «digital natives», it comes more naturally to them to use such platforms as they practically grew up with them (Scherpereel, Jerry, & Schmelzinger, 2016). Interestingly, Coesemans & De Cock, (2017) further contribute to the available literature by examining how MEPs and politicians in general are adapting their language and way of communication in order to fit in the 140-characters limit (which now is 280) of Twitter.

### **Spitzenkandidaten and the EP election campaigns**

In 2014 the Spitzenkandidat process was implemented within the EP elections. This process, which originated from the Lisbon treaty, article 7, allowed the European Parliament to seize the opportunity of each party putting forward an official candidate for the European Commission presidency (Hobolt, 2014). According to the European legislation, every 5 years all EU country

members have to hold elections to choose their members at the European Parliament (Cinelli, Cresci, Galeazzi, Quattrociochi, & Tesconi, 2020). With this, each time a new European Commission President is elected. The importance of the European Commission, and electing its president, comes from the fact that it is the only institution with the power to suggest new laws in the EU (European Union, 2020).

Most available academic literature connected to the Spitzenkandidaten examines how the process originated and what it brought to Europe and the European institutions (Fotopoulos, 2019; Deckarm, 2017; Christiansen, 2016). For instance, Hobolt (2014) presents a thorough timeline of how the Lisbon Treaty was accepted and especially the new process for election of a European Commission president. She confirms that the desire of bringing more transparency by creating a clearer democratic mandate for the European Commission and having a greater turnout in the European Elections were factors in favor of the implementation of this process.

In fact, a reason for the introduction of the Spitzenkandidat process was the personalization of the campaigns and with that mobilising the European electorate (Schulze, 2016). Besides personalization, there are other factors that enable citizens to formulate or not a preference for the Spitzenkandidaten: news exposure, general EU political information, and campaign-specific information about the Spitzenkandidaten. Furthermore, only the most knowledgeable citizens are able to use party connections in their evaluations of the Spitzenkandidaten, meaning that “those citizens who are politically aware were able to align their preferences for each Spitzenkandidat with their national party preferences as well as with their ideological orientation.” (Gattermann, de Vreese, & van der Brug, 2016, p.47). General knowledge of the Spitzenkandidaten, however, have been low, which could be explained by the low efforts in campaigns of national parties (Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019) and cross-country variation in media coverage about the candidates as Schulze (2016) suggested.

In 2019, a study focused on whether EP parties emphasize on the Spitzenkandidaten on Facebook during the 2014 European election campaign. It concluded that there are systematic variations in parties’ emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten. Some parties put the candidates in the spotlight, while others ignored them (Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019). A subsequent study further contributes to the topic by examining the proportions of the party manifestos dedicated to the Spitzenkandidaten. Their research results in finding that parties devote on average around 0.12% of the manifesto’s space to the Spitzenkandidaten topic. The research has been done on national parties together with the European group parties (Braun & Popa, 2018). Furthermore, Daniel and Obholzer (2020) examine to what extent MEPs mention

their lead-candidates via tweets. They found that MEPs may use mentions of their party lead candidate(s) in order to differentiate themselves from their competitors, rather than as a party-focused campaign device. Additionally, they found a national orientation to the mentions of the Spitzenkandidat: MEPs from countries that had a lead candidate from their own delegation were much more likely to mention them.

## **Chapter II – Research Design**

### **Goals**

Since 2014, European parties put forward a lead candidate, also known as a Spitzenkandidat, which runs for the position of the European Commission President. In 2019, six European parties had lead candidates. Besides a Spitzenkandidat, each European party group presents a document, also known as a manifesto, which focuses on the party plans for the future mandate. The manifestos usually include several main topics that the party group wants to focus on, for the future years. They serve as an action-plan and help the electorate decide for who to vote.

One of the reasons why the Spitzenkandidat process emerged is through personalization to increase voter turnout (Schulze, 2016). Campaign personalization is a broadly studied subject (Schmitt, Hobolt, & Popa, 2015; Gattermann & Vliegenthart, 2019; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), however there are no studies on personalization or individualization of the Spitzenkandidaten campaigning. There is a clear gap in the available literature as there have not been researches on campaigns from the Spitzenkandidaten point of view and how they behave in Twitter. Do they individualize their online campaigns or they rather follow and speak on the topics established in the party's manifesto?

The aim of this study was to fill that gap and find out to what extent the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten represented their party's manifestos via their tweets. Additional research was done within the current one on the topics that the Spitzenkandidaten talk the most and least about and on some factors that could be influencing the results, such as candidate's age, party ideological orientation and whether they tweet or retweet more.

### **Method and Data**

The method used for this research was a content analysis of the Twitter posts in order to find out the percentage of the tweets that represent the topics within each party manifesto.

Initially I gathered all available data from Twitter for the 14 Spitzenkandidaten using an online tool called Twitonomy<sup>5</sup>. This tool allows for a user to access and gather data on all Twitter posts that they are interested in. The next step was filtering those posts so that the dataset included only posts for the researched period. The researched period was the date when a candidate was selected until 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, which is when the first elections happened and none of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.twitonomy.com/>.



those candidates was elected for the role of European Commission president. Each Spitzenkandidat was elected as such on a different date from October 2018 until January 2019, depending on when each party group had their internal elections. I chose this period as the day each candidate have been selected is the day when they started campaigning and addressing the process of becoming a European Commission president. A further step was to translate those posts in English so it would be easier to codify them. For the translation of the posts I used an add-on of Google spreadsheets, called “Translate My Sheet”, which allows you to translate selected range of cells in the spreadsheet.

The fourth step was to decide which candidate would be analyzed for each party with more than one Spitzenkandidat. When deciding which Spitzenkandidaten to be included in the research, the following method was used. First, it was decided that the tweets of only one candidate per party would be analyzed, as this would give equal opportunity for each party in terms of data. A second variable that have been taken into account was whether a candidate have been part of at least one of the three main debates between the Spitzenkandidaten. This gives better visibility for those lead candidates and shows a position of leadership vis-a-vis the other lead candidates from the same party. Another point that helped for the decision was whether a candidate had previous experience as Spitzenkandidat. This is especially relevant for the Greens and ALDE as both Ska Keller and Guy Verhostadt were Spitzenkandidaten in 2014. After all the above was taken into consideration, the following lead candidates were chosen to be analyzed. In the table below can be seen all the mentioned variables. In green I identify the lead candidates whose tweets were analyzed for this research.

Party	Name	Present at a debate – Number of debates (previous experience)
EPP	Manfred Weber	Yes - 2
PES	Frans Timmermans	Yes - 3
ECR	Jan Zahradil	Yes - 2
EGP	Ska Keller	Yes – 2 (previous experience as Spitzenkandidat)
	Bas Eickhout	Yes - 1
PEL	Nico Cue	Yes - 1
	Violeta Tomic	Yes - 1
ALDE	Nicola Beer	No
	Emma Bonino	No
	Violeta Bulc	No
	Katalin Cseh	No
	Luis Garicano	No
	Guy Verhostadt	Yes – 2 (previous experience as Spitzenkandidat)
	Margrethe Vestager	Yes - 1

Table II-1 - Spitzenkandidaten selection

The second most important data needed for this study were the 2019 EP election party manifestos. All of them were available online on the websites of each party<sup>6</sup>.

Once all the data was collected, the remaining work was divided into two parts. One was to read the manifestos and establish concrete topics by which the Twitter posts should be grouped. The second was, actually dividing the posts into the established categories. To do this, I used the deductive content analysis technique, also known as concept driven approach. This type of approach can also be called *a priori* coding (Stemler, 2001) or template coding (King, 1998), but in its essence it refers to the same way of coding: creating categories before classifying the data. For my research this is the better approach as my goal is to see to what extent the data from the Twitter posts matches the data from the manifesto.

<sup>6</sup> EPP - <https://www.epp.eu/papers/epp-manifesto/>

PES - <https://www.pes.eu/en/manifesto2019/>

ALDE - <https://www.aldeparty.eu/political-programme-and-european-elections-manifestos>

ECR - <http://zahradil.cz/publikace/>

The Greens - <https://europeangreens.eu/manifesto>

PEL - <https://www.european-left.org/campaigns/two-candidates-from-the-people-for-the-people/>

For the establishment of the categories, I grouped and simplified the already existing sections of each manifesto. This allowed me to create the labels according to which to classify my data. The next step was to define the meaning behind those categories. I read the manifestos few times and summed up the topics in tables, available in Appendix A.

The data that I ended up with was 3814 posts from the 6 chosen candidates. I coded the tweets using the software program MAXQDA for each candidate. Besides the established segments from the manifesto, I considered another category, immediately associated with the main goal of this research: posts not connected to the manifesto. This segment was further divided into posts connected or not to the European elections and the Spitzenkandidat process. A simplified scheme is available below.

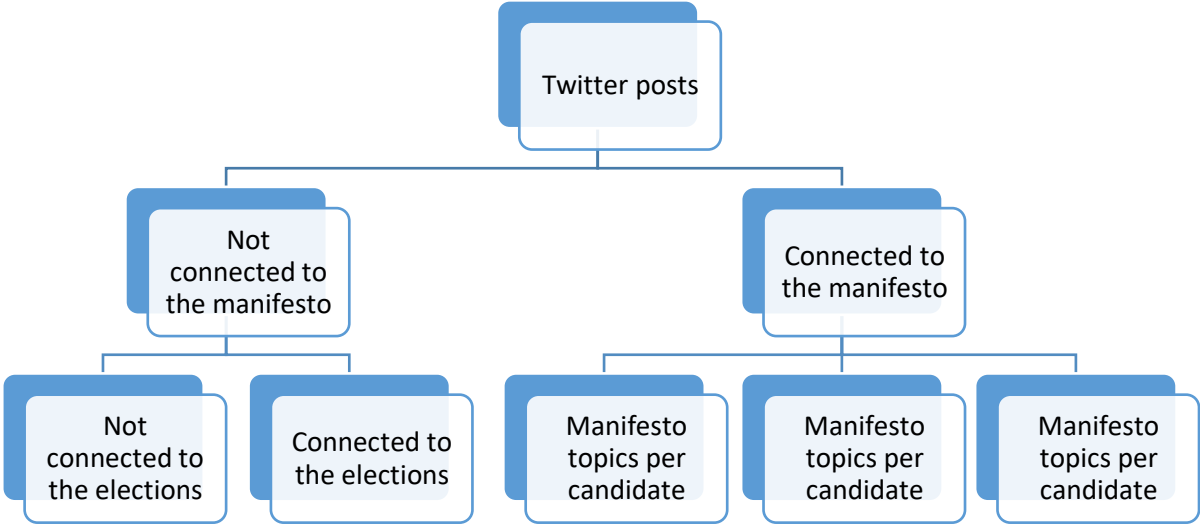


Figure II-1 Coding Scheme of Twitter posts

**Manifestos and main topics**

Below are presented the main topics each European Party that put forward a Spitzenkandidat included in their manifestos for the 2019 European elections. The topic names were simplified and grouped in tables. All these topics were taken into account and were a main directive when codifying the Twitter posts of the Spitzenkandidaten. Broader and very specific explanations of the topics are located in Appendix A. Additionally, there is further information on when and how each manifesto was adopted. This is closely connected to the researched timeframe and gives a better overview of the process.

The European People Party's manifesto was adopted during EPP Political Assembly on the 20th of March 2019 (EPP, 2019). It consists of six parts from which two serve as introduction and conclusion. The rest of the parts consist of EPP's proposition of their agenda for the future years of leading Europe. A summary of them is presented in the table II-2 and served as a main guidance when codifying the tweets of EPP Spitzenkandidat Manfred Weber.

In turn, the manifesto of the Party of European Socialists (PES) was adopted during the Madrid Congress of the party, which happened in the period 22-23 February. On the same occasion, the party elected Frans Timmermans as their lead candidate (PES, 2019).

The Spitzenkandidat representing The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) party, Jan Zahradil, put forward his own manifesto. It consists of seven main points, a summary of which is presented in the below table and used as the main points when content analyzing his tweets.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) created their manifesto during their Madrid Congress on 11th of November 2018. It consists of 12 pages.

The European Green Party had their congress between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2018 in Berlin. There they adopted their party manifesto. The manifesto focuses on 4 main topics. Each of them has further clarifications. A simplified version is presented in table II-2

Last but not the least, the European Left Party (PEL) confirmed their election platform at the meeting of the Executive Board of the Party on 26-27<sup>th</sup> of January 2019 in Brussels (PEL, 2019). The PEL manifesto consists of seven main areas that the party wants to work on. Their summary is included in the table below.

EPP		
Combatting illegal immigration, fighting terrorism and organized crime	Protecting European citizens and families; defending the European social model	Fighting climate change and standing for Europe's responsibility in the world and capability to act.
Boosting economy and living standard including through innovation.	Preserving cultural richness and diversity; democracy and European values; improving integration policies	New opportunities for young people; embracing Artificial Intelligence and robotics; empowering farmers.
Introducing fair tax and reducing red tape. <sup>7</sup>		
PES		
Equality, fairness and solidarity	Environment and sustainability; responsibility for the world	Democracy and Rights, including and especially for women and youth
ECR		
Review of institutions and flexibility	Empowering National Parliaments and winning back trust	EU as Global Leader in free trade; multi-currency EU
Security for citizens		
ALDE		
Europe ready for the future	Investment and economy	Defense and democracy
(Digital) innovation and opportunities for all, especially through Small and medium Enterprises		
EGP		
Clean and safe planet	Fair economy	Union of solidarity
Respectful and diverse Europe	EU reform: Defense and institutions	
PEL		
New model of economic development	Social development	Environment and ecology
Empowering the people	Rights and liberties	Fair trade with the world
Peace and defense		

Table II-2 - European parties manifestos' main topics

<sup>7</sup> **“Red-tape:** excessive bureaucracy or adherence to official rules and formalities; regulations or conformity to formal rules or standards which are claimed to be excessive, rigid or redundant and usually claimed to hinder or prevent action or decision-making.

## Chapter III Findings: Analysis and discussion

The 2019 European elections happened simultaneously with some big events in Europe and around the world. Brexit, the student climate protests, the Mediterranean migration crisis, several terroristic attacks are some of the events which marked the end of 2018 and the first semester of 2019<sup>8</sup>. These events for sure have influenced the posts of all the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten. Some of those topics were included as part of several party manifestos.

Even though the manifestos in 2014 only mentioned the Spitzenkandidaten topic on average around 0.12% (Braun & Popa, 2018), the opposite research, whether Spitzenkandidaten mention topics from their party's manifestos, does not share the same low percentage. The Spitzenkandidaten in 2019 talked three times more regarding the topics from their party's manifesto. On average, the Twitter posts of the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten connected to their party's manifesto are 34.4%, where the representative with the highest percentage (Ska Keller) has 42.8% and the one with the lowest figure (Jan Zahradil) 21.5%. Figure III-1 is showing the exact percentage per candidate. When looking at these results, out of the context, it can be concluded that the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten have a rather balanced to high level of campaign personalization as the posts not connected to their party manifesto are at least half to up to two thirds of their posts.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-32810887>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/29/hundreds-of-thousands-of-students-join-global-climate-strikes>  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44466388>  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48008073>

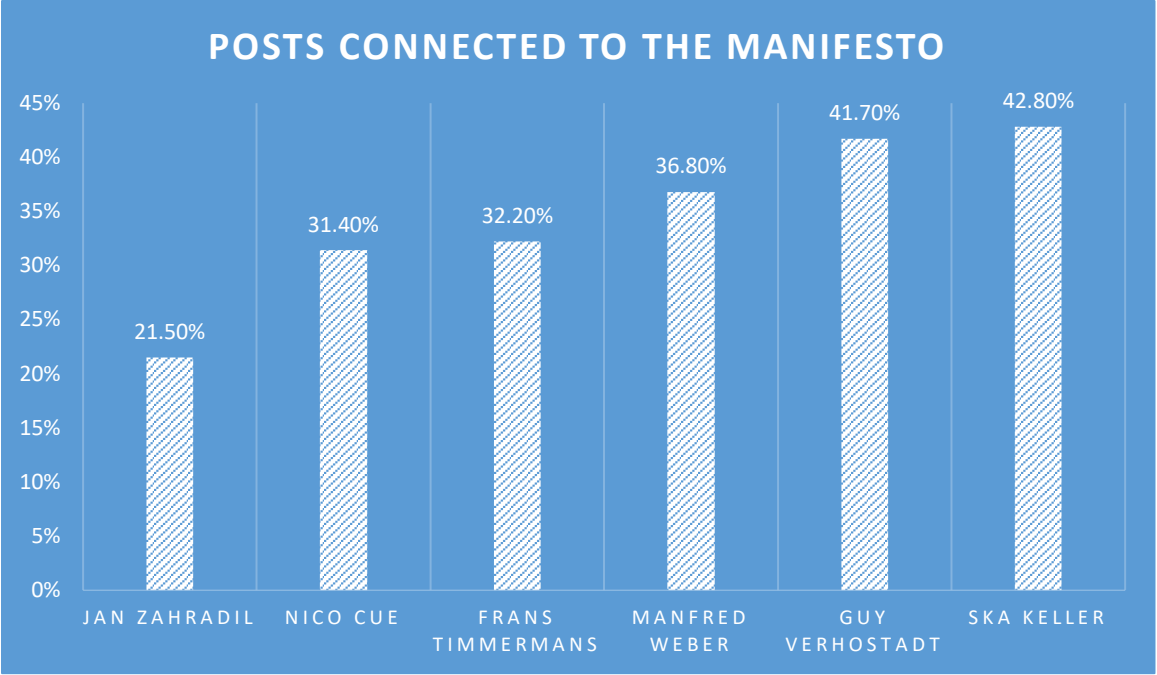


Figure III-1 Posts connected to the manifesto

However, when we look at the posts not connected to the party manifesto, we see that a lot of them are connected to the elections and the Spitzenkandidat process as a whole. On average, 61.1% of the posts not connected to the manifesto are regarding the European elections and the process of selecting the 2019 Commission President. The data varies from 49.7% up until 87%. These posts are usually the ones informing when and where will be the candidate’s next meeting and travelling connected with their offline campaign.

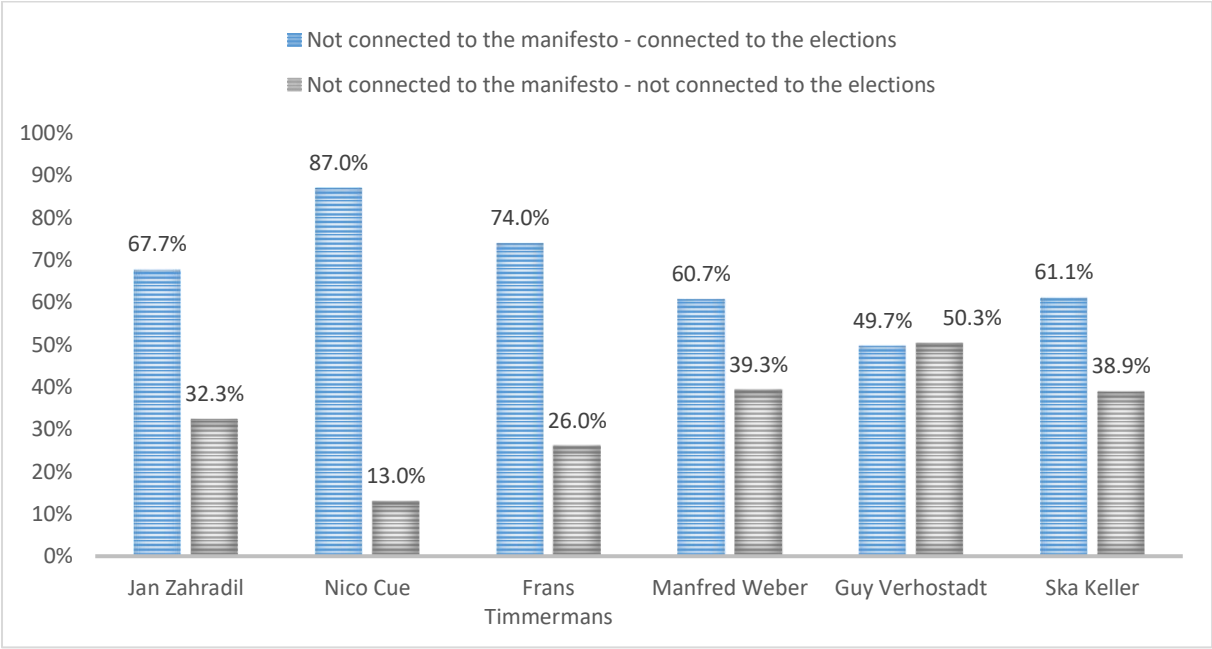


Figure III-2 Overview of posts not connected to the manifesto

The average number of posts not connected to the manifesto neither to the elections is 21.4%. These posts were posts of greetings for official holidays, expressing condolences or other that were not connected in any way to the elections.

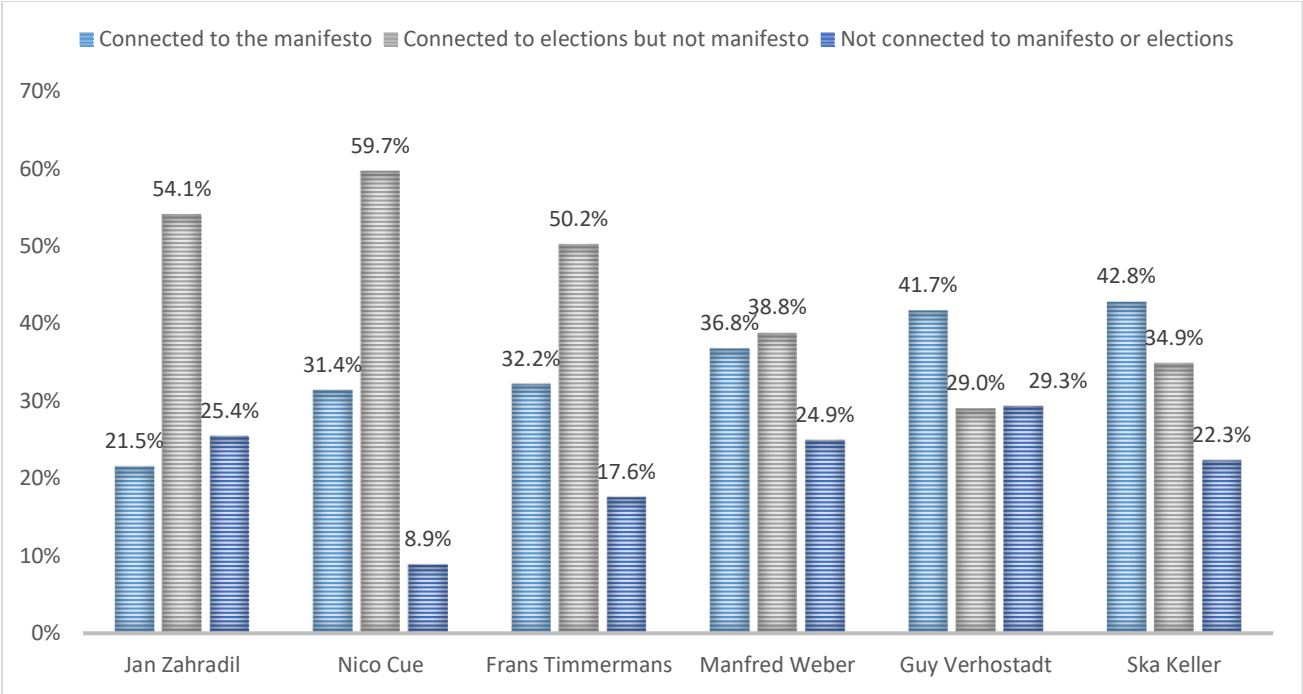


Figure III-3 Overview of all posts per candidate

The above data is presented in a way showing the percentage of the overall posts. It gives a clear picture of the biggest group of posts per candidate. The first column represents the posts connected to the manifesto of the candidate’s party, the second shows the proportion of posts connected to the Spitzenkandidat process and the elections but unrelated to the manifesto topics, and the last one represents posts neither connected to the manifesto, nor to the elections and the lead candidate process. Analyzing the above data, we can see that there is not a common trend for all the candidates regarding the amount of posts in the three groups. However, it is worth addressing the fact that for almost all the candidates the group of posts not connected to the manifesto, nor to the elections is the smallest one. Only Guy Verhostadt is excluded from the above group but as it can be seen on Figure III-3, the difference is only 0.3%. It was already mentioned that most of the posts not connected to the manifesto, but connected to the elections are posts promoting events, conferences, travel plans for the candidate’s campaign. Given the above and having a clearer picture now, it can be concluded that the 2019 lead candidates are aligned to a great extent to their parties and do not use personalization as a main tool in their Twitter behavior.



Nevertheless, there are different factors that could be contributing to the above outcome. The first one that was tested was whether the type of posts (tweet or retweet) has any correlation to the amount of posts connected to the manifesto. This can be influencing the amount of campaign individualization in two ways. First, it is possible if more of the posts are tweets, this to be a sign of individualized campaign as lead candidates choose exactly what to post, however they can as well choose to post content related to topics included in the manifesto. On the other hand, if there are more retweets, we can be looking at a campaign that is less individualized, because the Spitzenkandidaten could be retweeting mainly posts from their party group and thus those posts are more likely connected to the manifesto. This, however, should be further researched. The findings in this research were reached by each post, regardless connected or not to the manifesto, being put either in the group of the native posts (tweets) or in the group of the retweets.

The data presented in the below table was used.

Spitzenkandidat	% of posts connected to the manifesto	% of native posts (tweets)
Frans Timmermans	32,2%	35,9%
Nico Cue	31,4%	38,1%
Ska Keller	42,8%	53%
Manfred Weber	36,8%	63,8%
Jan Zahradil	21,5%	81,6%
Guy Verhostadt	41,7%	89,7%

*Table III-1 - Correlation between type of posts and % of posts connected to the manifesto*

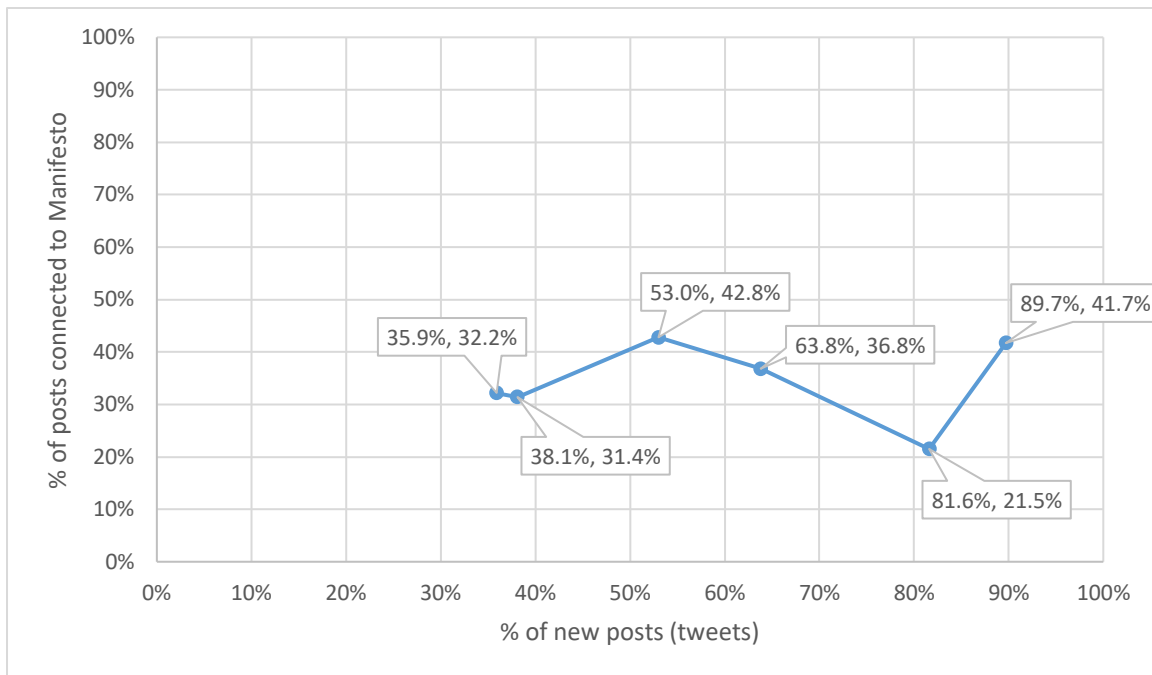


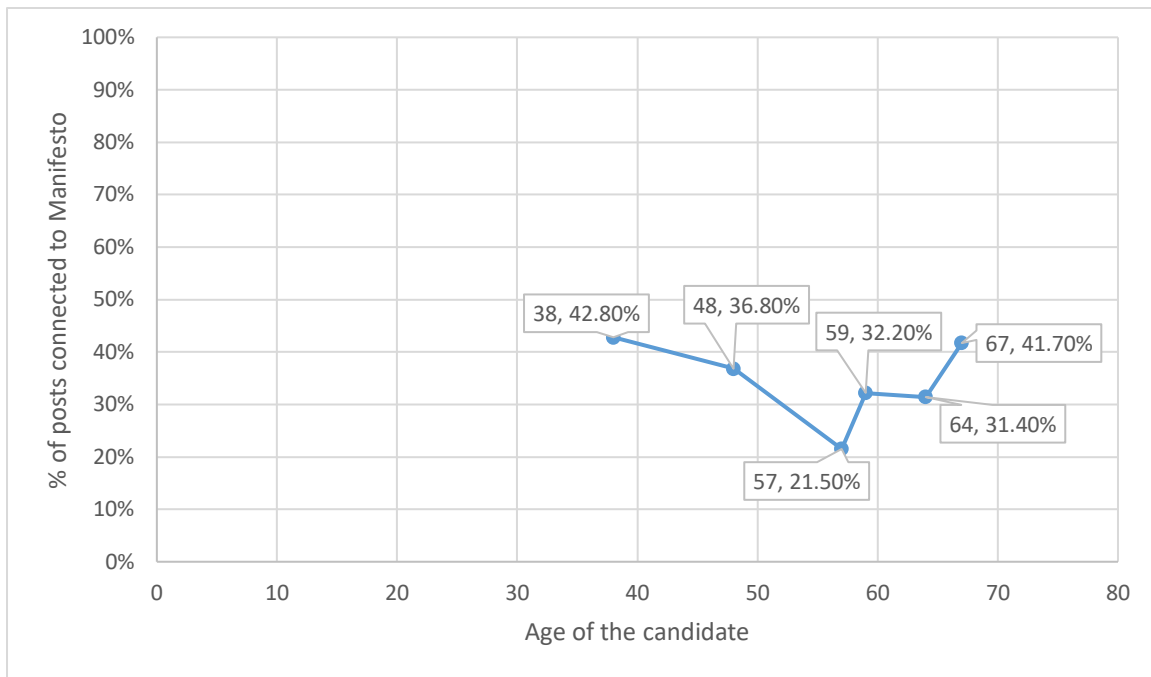
Figure III-4 Correlation between type of posts and % of posts connected to the manifesto

We see that there is no correlation between the two variables. It is possible for some of the candidates, the type of posts to influence their results, however I fail to see a trend in that. Further and more indebt research is needed in order to find how and if the type of posts influence each candidate separately, as well as from who were candidates retweeting most.

Another factor that I tested was whether the age of the Spitzenkandidat influenced the amount of posts connected to their party manifesto. Two trends could be observed: either the younger the candidate is, the more their posts will be connected to their party manifesto as they are “new” and still very passionate about the party they represent, or the opposite – the most experienced Spitzenkandidaten will post the most about topics related to their party manifesto as they are already used to and knowledgeable about the topics their party represent.

Spitzenkandidat	% of posts connected to the manifesto	Age of the candidate
Frans Timmermans	32,2%	59
Nico Cue	31,4%	64
Ska Keller	42,8%	38
Manfred Weber	36,8%	48
Jan Zahradil	21,5%	57
Guy Verhostadt	41,7%	67

Table III-2 - Correlation between age and % of posts connected to the manifesto



*Figure III-5 - Correlation between age and % of posts connected to the manifesto*

Results show us that the youngest candidate, Ska Keller and the oldest one, Guy Verhostadt have the most posts connected to their party manifesto. Reasons can be the above mentioned or different ones, for which further research is needed. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that both Ska Keller and Guy Verhostadt were Spitzenkandidaten in 2014 European elections (as seen in table II-1). This is an additional point, not connected to the age, that could be further explaining why both candidates have most posts connected to their party manifesto – they have previous experience.

Lastly, I checked if the left-right ideological orientation of the party and the Spitzenkandidat is connected to the percentage of the posts connected to the manifesto. The results show us that the Spitzenkandidaten of PEL and ECR as the furthest left and right parties have the least amount of posts connected to their manifestos. This, however, is not a steady trend and does not mean that the closer a party is to the center, the more posts its lead candidate has connected to the party manifesto (see Figure III-6).

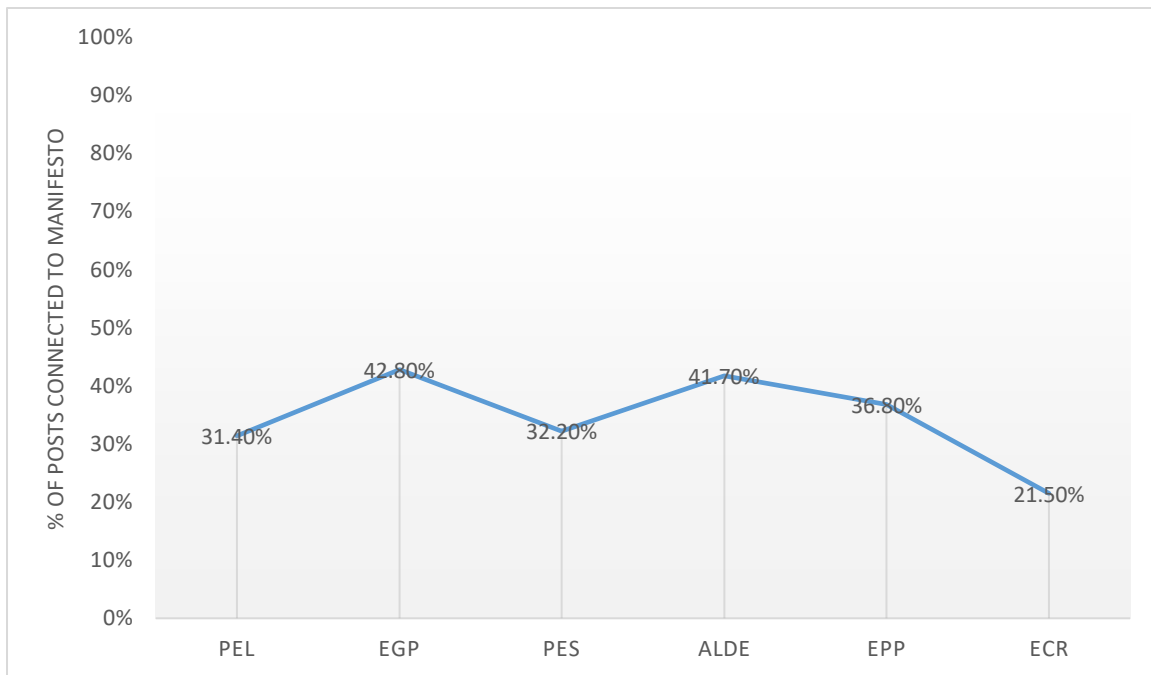


Figure III-6 - Correlation between left-right orientation and % of posts connected to the manifesto

### Analysis per candidate

When it comes to the posts connected to each candidate's manifesto, we do not happen to see a common trend as well. In some cases, the posts are more or less evenly distributed between the categories and in others, we see one or two that are with much more posts than the rest. It is important to mention that the candidates have posts for each of the topics from their manifesto.

Furthermore, there is not a single topic that has been talked the most or the least by all candidates. Below the topics for each lead candidate are presented and analyzed.

### *Manfred Weber*

The posts of Manfred Weber connected to EPP manifesto were divided into seven categories. The most common manifesto topic was *Protecting European citizens and families, defending the European social model*. This category represents 31.3% of all posts connected to the manifesto. Some of the topics included in this category are Brexit; common European army and NATO; family wellbeing and equal pay. The other topics share from 15.8% to 2.9% of the

posts.

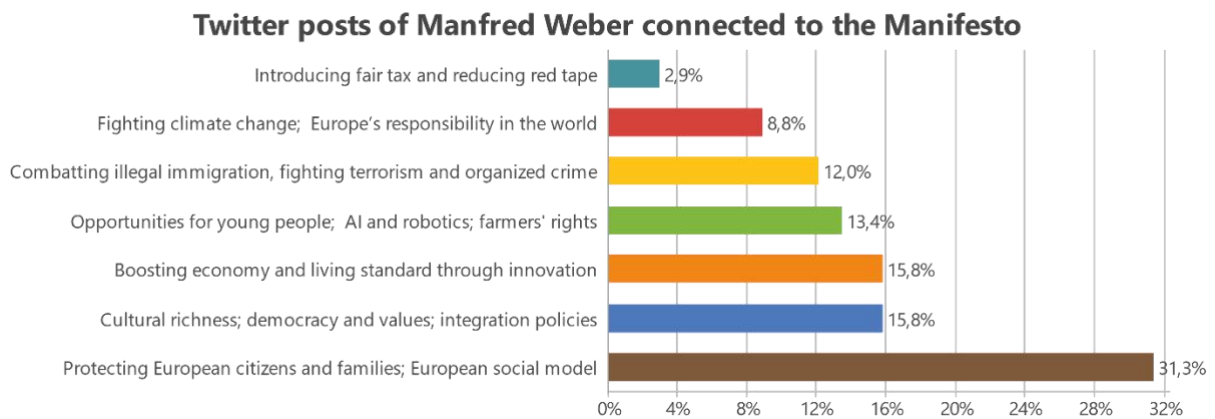


Figure III-7 Twitter posts of Manfred Weber connected to the manifesto

### **Frans Timmermans**

Frans Timmermans' posts were divided in three categories and are the ones that are most equally distributed between them. The categories are *Equality, fairness, and solidarity; Environment and sustainability; responsibility for the world; Democracy and Rights, including and especially for women and youth*. The category with highest amount of posts is *Environment and sustainability; responsibility for the world* with 36.6%. It includes topics like the Sustainable Development Goals; fair common asylum and migration policy; Affordable Housing and Clean Public Transport in Europe; and agriculture.

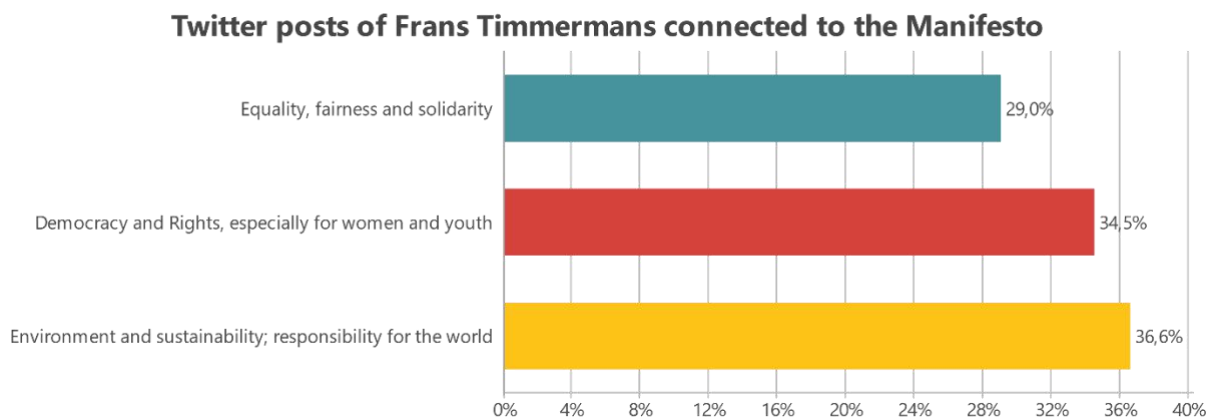


Figure III-8 Twitter posts of Frans Timmermans connected to the manifesto

### **Jan Zahradil**

One category stood out more than the other three in terms of amount of posts: with 35.4%, the category *EU as Global Leader in free trade; multi-currency EU* was the one about which Jan

Zahradil posted the most. Some of the topics included in this category are: *Trade Agreements; legal free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital; European diversity and tax competition as one of the sources of European prosperity; multi-currency EU*. The category with the least posts, *Empowering national parliaments and winning back trust*, only had 8.1%.

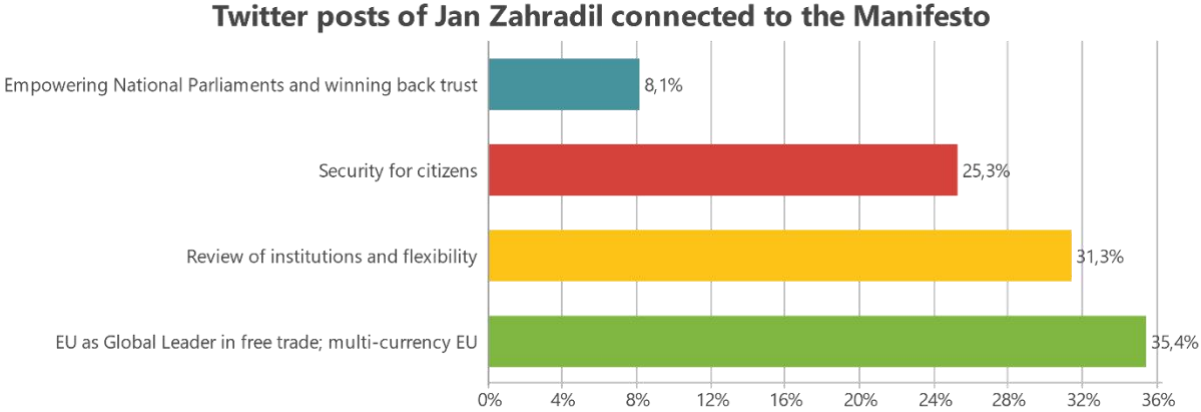


Figure III-9 Twitter posts of Jan Zahradil connected to the manifesto

**Ska Keller**

The Greens’ manifesto was divided into five categories. There were two that shared the most posts with 43.8% and 46.3%, respectively: *Clean and safe planet* and *Respectful and diverse Europe*. Some of the topics included in them are cross-border trains; European flight tax, Non-recyclable plastics; Sustainable agriculture and farming; gender equality; equal rights for LGBTIQ; and institutional control over EU funds.

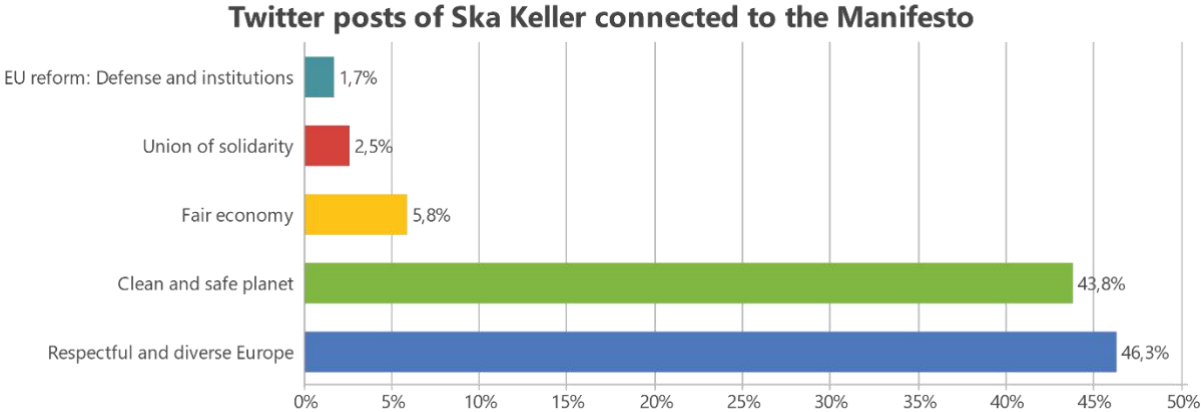
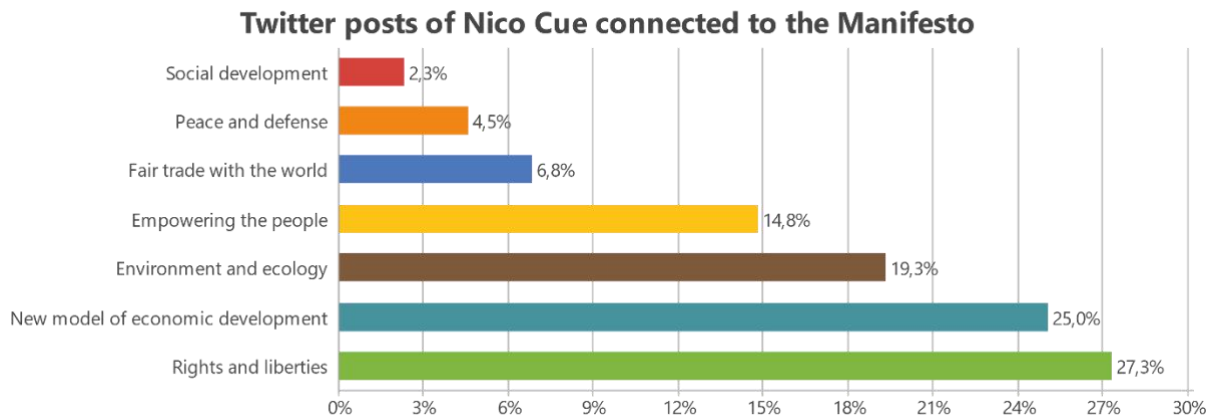


Figure III-10 Twitter posts of Ska Keller connected to the manifesto

### ***Nico Cue***

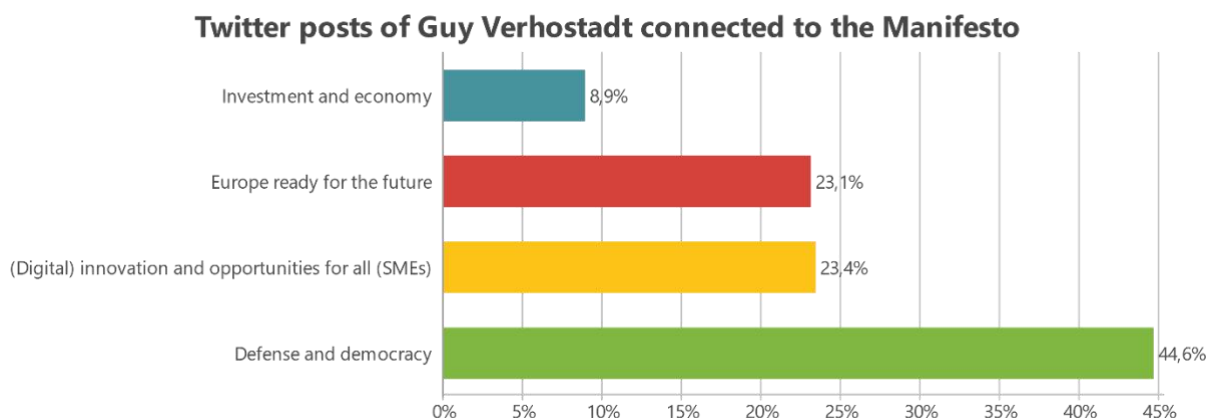
There were two categories from the seven that Nico Cue posted most about. *Rights and liberties* with 27.3% and *New model of economic development* with 25%. The categories included some of the following topics: fighting precariousness and unemployment, Posts that talk about better work/life balance; taxes - financial transaction tax; against tax evasion; Tax heavens; LGBTQI rights; migrants' and refugees' rights; speed up asylum processes.



*Figure III-11 Twitter posts of Nico Cue connected to the manifesto*

### ***Guy Verhostadt***

Among the four categories in which Guy Verhostadt's posts were sorted, there is one with the highest percentage. *Defense and democracy* includes 44.6% of all posts connected to the party manifesto. The topics that this category includes are Brexit; securing external borders and fighting terrorism; more transparency in the European Council and the Council of the EU.



*Figure III-12 Twitter posts of Guy Verhostadt connected to the manifesto*

We can notice that some candidates did talk about similar topics the most. Guy Verhostadt and Manfred Weber both posted the most about defense and protecting the citizens. This can be associated with the rather central position of the two parties. In comparison, both Nico Cue and Ska Keller posted mostly about the rights and the respect towards European citizens. Being left-wing parties, these are not surprising results. As expected, Ska Keller have tweeted a lot regarding *Clean and Safe planet*, making this the second most talked about topic of hers. Another lead candidate who dedicated the biggest amounts of posts for environmental topic was Frans Timmermans, although he talked rather equally for all the topics from his manifesto (see Figure III-7). The representative of ECR – Jan Zahradil posted the most about *EU as a global leader in free trade; multi-currency EU*. Important note is that these categories do not fully overlap – all specific topics can be found in Appendix A.



## Conclusion

The aim of this research was to answer the question: *To what extent the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten represented their party's manifestos via their tweets or develop individualized campaigns?* and fill a gap in the existing literature.

In order to provide an answer to this research question, I looked into Twitter, the social media used the most by politicians (Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet, & Benoit, 2016; Coesemans & De Cock, 2017; Ceron & Curini, 2018) and extracted data for the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten.

In this research, six candidates' tweets were examined and grouped in individual categories, after all being translated in English. Each candidate represented one of the European group party that put forward a Spitzenkandidat in 2019. The researched period was from the moment a Spitzenkandidat was nominated as a lead candidate for their party until the moment of the first EC president elections that happened in the beginning of July.

The categories were formed after carefully reading and analyzing each party group manifesto. Some manifestos had similar or the same topics included in them but with a different preposition for a solution. All topics were grouped in categories in order the process to be clearer. After coding the data, which included almost 4000 posts, it is possible to say that the 2019 candidates for the European Commission President post, devoted on average of a little more than 1/3 of their posts to topics related to their party manifesto. After carefully analyzing the data, it can be concluded that the 2019 lead candidates are aligned to a great extent to their parties and do not use personalization as a main tool in their Twitter behavior. So far there have not been such research, although since its beginning the Spitzenkandidat process caught the attention of a lot of scholars.

Furthermore, there is not a single topic that have been talked the most or the least by each candidate, although some events that were happening in Europe and the world influenced the amount of posts per topic. One such example was Brexit.

Moreover, the candidates talked for each category of their manifesto, without ignoring any. It was shown as well that there is no correlation between the above results and the type of posts the candidates had. Whether a candidate had more tweets or retweets did not create a trend for the overall results. Other correlations that were examined in this study were the age of the candidates, their left-right political orientation and their previous experience as a Spitzenkandidat. Results show us that the youngest candidate, Ska Keller and the oldest one, Guy Verhostadt have the most posts connected to their party manifesto. A suggestion for this

can be that the younger the candidate is, the more their posts will be connected to their party manifesto as they are “new” and still very passionate about the party they represent, or the opposite – the most experienced Spitzenkandidaten will post the most about topics related to their party manifesto as they are already used to and knowledgeable about the topics their party represents, however further research is needed for this to be assessed. Furthermore, the same two candidates were Spitzekandidaten in 2014 European elections, which can further explain why they have the most posts connected to their party manifesto – due to previous experience.

Regarding the left-right orientation of the party that they Spitzenkandidaten are representing, we see that the lead candidates from PEL and ECR as the furthest left and right parties have the least amount of posts connected to their manifestos. This, however, is not a steady trend and does not mean that the closer a party is to the center, the more posts its lead candidate has connected to the party manifesto.

This research presents, a few limitations. When coding the data, it was noted that even though different candidates talked about the same topic, in one case this was coded as part of their manifesto and in the other as not. The reason was simply because the topic was part or not of the manifesto points of the candidate. In that sense if all candidates’ posts were distributed using the same categories, the results would have been different. But this was not to purpose of the current research.

Additional point that needs attention is the fact that a lot of posts were referring to interviews, meetings, articles. It is possible that the referred content included information regarding topics connected to the manifestos but as the research was focused on the tweets itself, this was not taken into account.

As a limitation it can be observed the fact that replies to other posts from the Spitzenkandidaten were not evaluated. This can be included in a future research as for the current one it seemed irrelevant.

The suggestion is that there is not a single factor influencing the results of this research. As shown already the age, the political orientation of the lead candidates and their previous experience as a Spitzenkandidat, indeed influence the number of tweets connected to the manifesto. A further research can enrich the literature by examining other factors and how much each factor contributes to the outcome.

It is acknowledged that the multifactor dependency requires more research but the fact that the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten post on average of 34.4% regarding the topics of their party manifesto, gives a good starting point.

To sum up, the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten dedicated on average of 34.4% of their tweets to topics connected with their party manifesto, making them informed and engaged to the issues their party groups want to tackle in the next five years. Furthermore, their posts show only little personalization, making their Twitter communication aligned with their party's manifesto.

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## Appendix A

### EPP

Combating illegal immigration, fighting terrorism and organized crime
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>All posts that talk about equipping the external borders of Europe; boosting African border controls and local opportunities; European list of safe countries.</i></li><li>• <i>All posts that talk about European security databases; boosting checks in the internal European borders; external and internal intelligence services and overall terrorism protection.</i></li></ul>
Protecting European citizens and families; defending the European social model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>All posts that talk about Cyber Security; Drones (in the context of security); joined European army forces; NATO</i></li><li>• <i>All posts that talk about equal pay, family wellbeing; European Fund for Transition; improved trade defence and systematic foreign investment screening</i></li><li>• <i>All posts that talk about increasing social standard to boost families; preventing brain-drain; Family Law at local level; supporting the elderly; foster a greater degree of common purpose.</i></li><li>• <i>Posts that talk about Qualified Majority Voting for foreign policies; Brexit</i></li></ul>
Fighting climate change and standing for Europe's responsibility in the world and capability to act.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>All posts that talk about incentivising emission reduction; e-mobility; Energy Union (gas, electricity without borders)</i></li><li>• <i>All posts that talk about improving life in Africa and External Investment Plan</i></li><li>• <i>All posts that talk about cooperation with Western Balkans; partnership with Turkey but not its membership in the EU</i></li></ul>
Preserving cultural richness and diversity; democracy and European values; improving integration policies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Posts that talk about preserving European cultural diversity.</i></li><li>• <i>All posts that talk about fighting fake news; antisemitism and overall European/Christian values</i></li><li>• <i>Posts about integration policies; asylum policies; Asylum and Migration Fund for returns.</i></li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about empowering the European Parliament to initiate legislation; overall parliament involvement in law-making; keeping and implementing the Spitzenkandidat process.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Boosting economy and living standard including through innovation.</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about European Single Market and more market opportunities; International cooperation especially with AU, USA, NZ; SMEs and entrepreneurship; Consumer rights; Economic sustainability; Banking Stability</i></li> <li>• <i>All posts that talk about better connecting regions through rails, roads, fast internet; bringing telemedicine to rural communities; smart' cities and villages; improving citizens' digital literacy and digital competences</i></li> <li>• <i>All posts that talk about innovation with citizens in its center.</i></li> </ul>
<b>New opportunities for young people; embracing AI and robotics; empowering farmers.</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>All posts that talk about modernizing the Common Agricultural Policy; digitalizing administrative procedures; defending high standards of food.</i></li> <li>• <i>All posts that talk about Erasmus and DiscoverEU Interrail</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about AI and robotics and investment in them; European University Institute 4.0; Life-long learning programs</i></li> </ul>
<b>Introducing fair tax and reducing red tape.</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about Digital Fair Tax; fighting tax evasion and eliminating tax havens</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about cutting bureaucracy for SMEs; cutting outdated rules and regulations; modernise legislation</i></li> </ul>

Table A0-1 - EPP manifesto topics and explanations

## **PES**

<b>Equality, fairness and solidarity</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>All posts that talk about fighting unemployment; right to quality healthcare, education and decent pensions; fair labour mobility; strong European Labour Authority</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about Investment plan for industries, so they benefit from the green transition, the digital revolution and the growth of artificial intelligence; reform in EU Budget; Fair taxation</i></li> </ul>
<b>Environment and sustainability; responsibility for the world</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about Sustainable Development Pact; SDGs; Paris agreement; Taxing CO2; Plan for Affordable Housing and Clean Public Transport in Europe; reform of the EU's agricultural policy; quality food.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about reform of the United Nations; strengthen partnerships with developing countries; NATO; fair common asylum and migration policy; protection of those in need of asylum; European Investment Plan for Africa</i></li> </ul>
Democracy and Rights, including and especially for women and youth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about protecting rights of all minorities; Make 9<sup>th</sup> of May public holiday; defend the rule of law and human rights; prevent any misuse of EU or public funds; Free and independent media; Strengthening police and judicial cooperation to fight against cross-border organised crime and terrorism.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about EU Gender Equality Strategy; full sexual and reproductive rights; same work-life balance for men and women; equal pay; removing legal and societal obstacles for LGBTIQ people to live freely, equally and with respect.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about European Child Guarantee; extend the Youth Guarantee; Erasmus+; European Culture Cheques.</i></li> </ul>

Table A0-2 - PES manifesto topics and explanations

## **ECR**

Review of institutions and flexibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about revision of EU agencies, laws, treaties; EEAS and cost-benefit of EU agencies and their funding</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about form of cooperation wherein Member States create practical partnerships and are free to select the level of integration that suits them best, without being forced into a single pathway shared by the whole Union; flexibility in deciding</i></li> </ul>
Security for citizens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about not forcing member states with penalties in order for them to accept migrants; effective, multi-faceted approach to migration that respects the sovereignty of Member States and citizens in different countries.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about FRONTEX; the EU providing its border states with means to arrange for sufficient national capacities to guard their frontiers; a different structure of the EU budget that will reflect actual demands; Complementary and better</i></li> </ul>

<p><i>coordinated efforts in defense and military procurement among Member States is needed</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about securing the diversity of supplies, reducing the EU’s dependency on Russia.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>EU as Global Leader in free trade; multi-currency EU</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about the EU as a trading block, not a social security scheme; signing 10 Free Trade Agreements with Asia, Africa and Latin America by 2024; proper completion of the Single Market</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about; equal access to opportunities offered by the common market; legal free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital; European diversity and tax competition as one of the sources of European prosperity</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about the decision to adopt the euro being made by the Member States themselves; rules that incentivize a continual pursuit of market stability.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Empowering National Parliaments and winning back trust</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about Red-card procedure and Return ticket procedure<sup>9</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about listening to the voters and acting on what they propose</i></li> </ul>

Table A0-3 - ECR manifesto topics and explanations

## **ALDE**

<p><b>Europe ready for the future</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about benefiting from globalization; free and fair trade against protectionism; digital Europe; simplify bureaucracy; migration and asylum; against racism; safe countries in the Middle East and Africa; The European Border and Coast Guard; integration of migrants</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>(Digital) innovation and opportunities for all, especially through SMEs</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about education, Erasmus; Investments in research and innovation; gender equality in the working place; climate change; EU ETS; SDGs; carbon neutral economy; smart mobility; Trans-European Networks, in particular for railroads</i></li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> **“Red-card procedure”**

A third of national parliaments would be authorized to stop the legislative process at the EU level and they would be able to do so within a period twice as long as today (16 weeks). If these conditions are met, the EC shall withdraw the draft.

**“Return ticket procedure”**

By activating a review clause, a third or more national parliaments will be able to propose removal of any piece of EU legislation and the EU institutions shall act upon the proposal.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about easier access to finance, simpler rules for investment funds for Small and Medium Enterprises; trade agreements.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about Digital Single Market; free online access; data and intellectual protection; law frameworks for AI, block chain; digitalize public services; cyber security</i></li> </ul>
Defense and democracy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about military defense; defense cooperation; securing external borders and fighting terrorism; sustainable development; Brexit; Western Balkans; UN; WTO; international cooperation; Crimea.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about more open, legitimate, and democratic European Union, giving more power to the EP; more transparency in the European Council and the Council of the EU.</i></li> </ul>
Investment and economy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about managing European funds; reconstruction of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU); reform of the European Stability Mechanism; reforming the Common Agricultural Policy.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about the rule of Law; defending entrepreneurship and businesses; economic innovation; fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens</i></li> </ul>

Table A-4 - ALDE manifesto topics and explanations

## **EGP**

Clean and safe planet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about limiting the temperature increase; European climate law; netzero emissions economy; international climate funding; carbon-floor price in the emissions trading system; establishing an international environmental court; environmental justice</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about zero-emission vehicles; cross-border trains; European flight tax, European VAT on tickets; cycling and walking as way of transportation; Biofuels, transition to 100% renewable energy; cutting fossil fuels</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk expanding protected areas; deforestation and soils; marine protected areas</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about circular economy; preventing food waste; Non-recyclable plastics; exporting waste; longer-lasting products with longer warranties.</i></li> </ul>

- *Posts that talk about reforming Europe’s common agricultural policy; Sustainable agriculture and farming; banning harmful pesticides; plant-based diets; sustainable fishing; ban on fur farming, transporting live animals long distances and animal testing*

#### Fair economy

- *Posts that talk about circular zeroemission economy; cooperatives, crowdfunding and social entrepreneurship; reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and SDGs.*
- *Posts that talk about open and fair-trade policies; implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; stronger financial regulation; encouraging responsible social investments; sizeable Green New Deal to finance Member states*
- *Posts that talk about making products and processes more energy- and resource-efficient; EU authority for digital sector supervision; supporting female entrepreneurs, family businesses and migrants; Universities – Small and Medium enterprises cooperation.*
- *Posts that talk about ecological tax reform: taxing more resource use and pollution - and taxing less jobs”;improving anti-money-laundering rules and strengthening European investigation powers; close tax havens, fight evasion and tax avoidance; financial transaction tax; functional way to tax digital services and manage cryptocurrencies.*
- *Posts that talk about the euro-zone; euro-zone committee; Stability and Growth Pact and Sustainability and Prosperity Pact; reforming the European Stability Mechanism (ESM; The European Central Bank*

#### Union of solidarity

- *Posts that talk about reducing poverty and tackling inequalities; adequate minimum income; essential social rights; public housing*
- *Posts that talk about universal health coverage, reduce health inequalities and ensure access to medicines; preventing mental and physical health problems; Drug policy*
- *Posts that talk about Labour rights and trade unions; cross-border movement of workers; unemployment insurance for the euro-zone; psychosocial health risks and paid sick leaves*



- *Posts that talk about reducing education inequality; Life-long learning and career changes; increase independent research and innovation; Erasmus+; cultural diversity and artistic freedom; access to culture*
- *Posts that talk about ban on discriminatory youth wages and proper pay for internships; The European Youth Guarantee; The European Solidarity Corps; flexible retiring and opportunities for the elderly; inclusion of people living in remote places; inclusion of people with disabilities.*

#### Respectful and diverse Europe

- *Posts that talk about free speech and an independent media; defending net neutrality; data protection; Algorithms, setting the age of voting and candidacy at 16 years in the European elections*
- *Posts that talk about gender equality; strong laws on equal pay for equal work; parental leave; high-quality childcare; Gender quotas; sexual and reproductive healthcare; the Istanbul Convention*
- *Posts that talk about discrimination; equal rights for LGBTIQ; same-sex couples; right to determine gender identity and expression*
- *Posts that talk about Charter of Fundamental Rights; European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR); institutional control over EU funds to prevent corruption; common standards and common rules for labour mobility and migration; asylum procedures; resettlement and humanitarian visas for refugees in third countries; providing opportunities for newly arrived people*

#### EU reform: Defense and institutions

- *Posts that talk about defend the UN against attacks and advocate for reforms; increase funding for international development and humanitarian action; international neighbors of the EU.*
- *Posts that talk about peaceful solutions to armed conflicts; civilian conflict-prevention, mediation, reconciliation and peacekeeping; against redirecting European funds towards military purposes; banning nuclear weapons and robots programmed to kill; common security and defence policy; prevent and combat terrorism*
- *Posts that talk about transparency in European institutions; simplifying The European Citizens' Initiative procedures; to be made possible for citizens to propose*

*reforming the EU treaties; the European Parliament having the power to initiate legislation; Union-wide referendum for treaty changes; Committee of the Regions*

Table A0-5 - EGP manifesto topics and explanations

**PEL**

New model of economic development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about reducing working hours without loss of income; fighting precariousness and unemployment, especially amongst young people and women; securing adequate salaries and universal access to pensions</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about better work/life balance; expansion of public employment policies</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about tax - financial transaction tax; against tax evasion; Tax heavens; country by country reporting</i></li> </ul>
Social development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about changing the mission of the European Central Bank (ECB) and implementing public investment program in socially important areas; distribution of the EU budget and public, democratic ownership of banks.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about rejecting this European integration model based on a division between a centre and a different, poorer periphery; about fighting against free trade agreements</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about European conference on public debt and public debt in general</i></li> </ul>
Environment and ecology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about localizing and converting industrial production in Europe, developing short production and consumption circuits to minimise the use of resources; developing true renewable energies and energy savings, improvement of public transport.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about sustainable agriculture; against marine pollution and protect oil, mining and gas reserves.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about equal right of access to natural resources, cultural resources (including information and digital platforms) education and social protection; preventing the privatisation of natural resources and public goods; energy poverty.</i></li> </ul>
Empowering the people

- *Posts that talk about fighting against corruption through independent control; promoting citizens' involvement in EU decision-making*
- *Posts that talk about introduction of a social protocol in the EU Treaties; A social protocol needs to clarify that fundamental social rights override economic freedoms, aiming to eradicate social dumping in the EU internal market.*
- *Posts that talk about digital democracy, Internet neutrality and freedom of speech; protecting whistle-blowers and journalists*

#### Rights and liberties

- *Posts that talk about Compliance with the sense of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*
- *Posts that talk about access to healthcare and health protection; care for disabled persons and promotion of independent life; rights of elderly people and guarantee pensions for everyone*
- *Posts that talk about decriminalisation of abortion and free access to it in all member states; free choice of motherhood and the promotion of sexual and reproductive health; Sex education and contraception included in all European programs relating to education and health.*
- *Posts that talk about free and secular education; removing tests in schools; introducing assessments; protection of the rights of children; access to culture and art for all residents, without exclusion; separation between state and religion and working for a secularisation of public policies.*
- *Posts that talk about LGBTQI rights; introducing legal gender recognition, civil marriage and child adoption rights for LGBTQI couples.*
- *Posts that talk about migrants' and refugees' rights; building links with sending countries; Speed up asylum processes; resettlement and family reunification programs; condemn unilateral violations by member states which refuse to apply such programs.*
- *Posts that talk about the right to impartial and true information; Developing communication rights*

#### Fair trade with the world

- *Posts that talk about rescinding International trade agreements which threaten agriculture, industry, audio-visual broadcasting, workers' rights, the environment, and culture.*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about suspension of EU Association Agreements with Israel and Morocco and several countries of Latin America, and the Caribbean</i></li> </ul>
Peace and defense
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about ending cooperation with NATO; new comprehensive peace and security system in dialogue with Russia.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about integration-oriented refugee and migration policy; stop of EU production and exports of war weapons.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about ensuring nuclear disarmament and the dismantling of the anti-missile shield; Divesting from weapons and devoting such funds to education for peace.</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about opposing military treaties and their consequences; reject EU militarisation (PESCO and FRONTEX); refusing the Union of Defence</i></li> <li>• <i>Posts that talk about withdrawal of Turkish occupying forces from Cyprus; Turkish relations if Turkey is respecting human rights; Syria and the Middle East</i></li> </ul>

Table A0-6 - PEL manifesto topics and explanations