POPULISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE: SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING SPENDING IN THE 2019 AND 2024 EUROPARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The development of digital platforms has determined a revolution in political communication and campaigning strategies. Social media is now playing an increasingly important role, potentially altering voters' perceptions, beliefs and their political behavior. This paper investigates the impact of populist parties' social media advertising spending on voter behavior during the 2024 European Parliamentary election, comparing it to spending and electoral results from the 2019 EP scrutiny.

The hypothesis I analyze in this research: *A high level of electoral advertising spending on digital platforms (e.g., Facebook, Google, Instagram) is positively correlated with high electoral outcome for populist parties in the 2024 European parliamentary elections.* I analyse the advertising expenditures of European populist parties Vlaams Belang (Belgium), Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), Fidesz (Hungary) and The Law and Justice (PiS) Poland during their electoral campaigns and examine correlations with voting outcomes. The selection of these parties was determined by several methodological considerations (ideological consistency –

populism, conservatism and far-right orientation; significant spending on digital political advertising; strong and active presence on digital and alternative media, high visibility in traditional media coverage and their relationship to power – in power or in opposition) which are relevant to the research's objective. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the new digital strategies employed by political parties, particularly in digital advertisement during electoral campaigns. Additionally, it highlights the need for awareness and regulation of commercial strategies that use targeting and algorithm-driven content, which can impact democratic systems, thus necessitating more comprehensive regulatory policies.

Introduction

New digital platforms have transformed the political sphere and its communication, enabling parties to engage with their audiences in a more direct, transparent and less regulated manner. Political parties and politicians now use social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) to communicate directly with their supporters and potential voters at a lower cost and with fewer restrictions than traditional media. Over the last decade, the public political arena has shifted from the traditional debate spaces – like public gatherings, conferences, newspapers and tv interviews, televised debates and talkshows to online platforms. Nowadays, almost every politician has at least one social media account on which he is present – such as a Facebook page, a X account or a TikTok profile.

Unlike traditional media, digital platforms offer several advantages: messages can be delivered faster, unfiltered, at a lower cost and even tailored for specific audiences. Nowadays, the political message is just one click away.

This development was skillfully speculated especially by populist parties. If the traditional media – television, radio and newspapers – which are mostly owned by private owner with specific political interest, or state-owned, but politically controlled, the digital space still benefits from the privileges of not being fully regulated and held accountable. Populist actors, marginalized from traditional media platforms and mainstream political debates, naturally gravitated toward alternative communication channels, particularly online platforms. These digital

spaces provided them with direct access to audiences, bypassing conventional media gatekeepers and enabling populists to disseminate their messages broadly and quickly (Carral, Tuñón, & Elías, 2023). Thus, the rise of social media has significantly amplified populist discourse, facilitating its spread and influence within contemporary political systems.

Defining populism and its core characteristics

Populism has been defined by one of the most influential intellectuals preoccupied by this political phenomenon, Cas Mudde, as a "thin-centered ideology", that opposes the heterogenous and oppressed group of "the people" to the "corrupt elite". It is anti-elitis and anti-pluralist, and characterized by "opportunistic policies" that offer quick and simple solutions to complex problems. In his paper "The populist Zeitgeist", Cas Mudde traces the rise and flourishing of populism, besides other factors, to the transformation of modern media, which, emancipated from the grip of the establishment parties and driven by commercial interests, gave the floor to the sensational and charismatic populist leaders. At the other end, populist politicians grabbed the new available platforms to deliver their messages (Mudde, 2004).

Margaret Canovan defines populism as a political movement in which "the people" rise against "the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of society", where the populist leaders are the "true democrats" which speak in the name of the ones "ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media" (Canovan, 1999, p. 2). Populists portray society as divided between *ordinary citizens* (the *"silent majority"* of "ordinary, decent people" (Canovan, 1999, p. 5) and a privileged, corrupt elite; they insist they speak for the people whose interests are *"overridden by arrogant elites, corrupt politicians and strident minorities"* (Canovan, 1999, p. 5).

Other political scientists note that populism is more a communication style, a discursive type or political strategy. Benjamin Moffitt, in "The Global Rise of Populism" (2016) defines populism as a political style rather than an ideology, as it is "performed, embodied and enacted" by politicians which emphasize in their public discourse the existing crises, in an aggressive but simple language,

accessible to the masses. Contemporary populism is going mainstream in established democracies, being favoured by the modern media which promotes spectacle. Also, populist leaders rapidly adapted to the new media, a new "stage" to show their political performance and to directly engage with their audiences and supporters (Moffitt, 2016). This perspective supports the hypothesis that the new social media platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube amplify populists' messages and naratifs – through highly emotional messages, direct interaction and engagement – and thereby spreading populist messages to a wide audience.

In 1998, Bruce Bimber, envisioned the restructuring of political communication in the digital age, with a bold academic hypothesis, which only a few years later will have become reality. In his research he explores how the Internet will reshape political communication and the relationships among the citizens and between the citizens and the governemnt, by dismantling traditional barriers. He was among the first to foresee that populism will flourish with the development of online media. According to Bimber, The internet holds the "transformative potential" of restructuring the dynamics within communities and between the citizens and governments, also due to its power to "equalize the balance" between the governed and the governors. In his vision, the citizens will be less dependent on intermediaries and news organiations because they will be able to interact directly with the politicians, thereby enhancing their political participation and influence: "the greater the capacity of citizens to communicate directly with governement, the more likely they are to be engaged in politics, and the more engaged they are, the greater their direct influence as individuals". (Bimber, 1998)

Italian political scientist Gianpietro Mazzoleni introduced a new concept "media populism", which describes the mutually beneficial and strong relationship between populist leader and media. According to Mazzoleti, populist leaders often exhibit charismatic attributes, "flamboyant personalities" and exceptional media competence "media savvy", which develop and cultivate "lasting public notoriety and intense media visibility" as a tool of "political capital in the pursuit of their goals" (Mazzoleni, Populism and the Media, 2008, p. 49) . Populist actors exploit the opportunities offered by media platforms, however, these dynamics unfold with media complicity. Mazzoleni emphasizes that traditional media institutions are not invariably aligned with or mouthpieces for political establishments.

Instead, driven by commercial interests and market dynamics, the media frequently prioritize sensational narratives, the critique of the establishment and emphasize dramatic events or crises within their coverage. Consequently, these factors facilitate the emergence of a distinctive variant of populism—"media populism." (Mazzoleni, Populism and the Media, 2008, p. 52)

Furthermore, Mazzoleni asserts that contemporary communication technologies, especially social networks, have compelled populist politicians to adapt their strategies to new media logics, allowing them to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly engage with citizens, thereby intensifying anti-elite rhetoric and personalizing their communication style. (Mazzoleni, Mediatization and political populism, 2014)

Social media populism

The development of new social media platforms has generated a new type of populism which has been addressed by political scientists – the digital populism or data-driven populism (Guerrero-Sole, Suarez-Gonzalo, Rovira, & Codina, 2020). This mutually beneficial dynamic, has been conceptualized as digital populism or data-driven populism, as digital tools can facilitate populism to flourish in the new media soils, by providing effective and targeted means to further disseminate and viralize populist messages.

This is a new type of political strategy used by populist leaders to deliver their messages via social media platform, which allow them to bypass the traditional gatekeepers (editors, journalists, tv show hosts) and to address the citizens, the digital platforms "have become one of the preferred communicative tools for political populists to spread their messages" (Guerrero-Sole, Suarez-Gonzalo, Rovira, & Codina, 2020, p. 1) *via Facebook Live videos, tweets, YouTube broadcasts or TikTok live videos and posts.* By eluding traditional media and its gatekeepers, populist leaders can freely, aggressively and directly address their audiences via social media platforms, engaging with users in a vivid and uncensored or mediated dialogue, thus empowering the voice of "the people" and "the people" legitimizing their discourse. *On the other end, these platforms allow social media users to directly interact with politicians, thus creating a sense of being heard and their needs and requests*

acknowledged. The algorithms powered by artificial intelligence and machine learning *programs* gather detailed information on individual user preferences and behaviors, *and can identify similarities between users based on their network, human-behavior and demographics, in order to optimize the reach of political content. Also, these algorithms are able identify if a message, video or post has the potential of becoming viral, by counting how many times it has been viewed, how much attention it has been given to it by users, if the user skipped or viewed the content from beginning to end or how many times it has been replayed, appreciated and shared, measuring meaningful social interaction score – a metric used by Facebook that prioritizes a content based on the interaction of family and friends* (Narayanan, 2023). Thus, populist messages can be precisely targeted, enhancing their persuasive impact and ability to influence voter behavior and electoral outcomes.

Populism, as a thin-centered and adaptable ideology, can easily merge with other thin or full ideologies like nationalism or socialism, making it appealing to a broad audience (Mudde, 2004). In addition, social media favours short, catchy and impactful messages, which can be easily taken out of the general context. Populists capitalize on to this structure and can govern through slogans, strong accusations and provocative remarks, albeit without a solid doctrine or a well-structured political program (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Buchel, 2016) .

Research has shown that there has been a shift in the people's consumption habits of media and news: social media is the preferred means of information on political and social themes for 42% respondents (aged 16-30), while traditional media like television still plays a dominant and important role among population in europe, but comes second for about 39% (Barometer, 2024).

Also, social media platforms offer cost-effective and precise reach, allowing politicians to deliver their messages in a quantifiable manner and a better cost-benefit ratio.

The 2019 and 2024 Europarliamentary elections witnessed an unprecedented use of social media advertisement used by populist parties to disseminate their messages bypassing the traditional media channels. This research compares the campaigning strategies employed by populist parties in the 2019 and 2024 europarliamentary rounds of elections and aims at establishing a correlation between electoral outcomes and spendings.

Methodology

The main hypothesis I investigate in this research is: *A high level of electoral advertising spending on digital platforms (e.g. Facebook, Google) is positively correlated with high electoral outcomes for populist parties in the 2024 European parliamentary elections.*

This research is based on a comparative analysis of political advertising expenditures and electoral results from the 2019 and 2024 European Parliamentary elections for European populist parties Vlaams Belang (Belgium), Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), Fidesz (Hungary) and The Law and Justice (PiS) Poland.

The selection of these parties was determined by a series of factors which are important and relevant for this research: firstly, the shared ideological family – populism. The selected parties (Vlaams Belang, Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD), Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) are all populist parties, sharing common values and narratives, which range from anti-elitist, conservative, nationalist and far-right elements. Secondly, these populists parties had a strong and active presence on digital platforms, and they rely on these means of communication with their audiences. Also, they use the online social media platforms as an alternative to traditional and mainstream media. Thirdly, by reling on digital platforms, and aiming to perform in electoral elections, each of the mentioned parties reported for 2024 a high spending on digital political advertising. The hypothesis is directly linked to this type of electoral strategy: high spending on digital advertising can positively correlate with high electoral outcome. The fourth argument for choosing these examples was due to their frequent feature in traditional media outlets, mentioning them as a consequence of their leaders' provocative declarations or extreme political discourse. Lastly, the selected parties have different relations with power: Fidesz is a governmental party, thus I analyze if digital spending can maintain the electoral basis and generate same or better electoral outcome; PiS transitioned from government to opposition, and AfD and Vlaams Belang aim to increase their electoral representation, gain more votes and conquer the power.

Data sources include: campaign spending reports from Facebook, Google, and other digital platforms available; electoral results from the European Parliament of

the major populist parties and other academic studies or media reports, analysis or news on social media ad engagement and voter behavior and electoral outcome.

Populists Digital Ads Spending in 2019 and 2024

The new political campaigning strategy is to maximize the cost-benefit ratio or the cost- delivery of the message. From an empirical personal observation as working as a political consultant and strategist in a political campaign, I noticed that by using traditional means which implied the delivering the electoral message through brochures, flyers and printed materials to potential votes, where the cost of these material would be estimated at around €1 per printed piece, therefore targeting one single individual, by spending the same €1 on a social media platform, by boosting a post/message, had the potential to reach around 100-200 persons.

Research shows that in the 2019 European Parliament elections, a one-euro boost could expose a political post to roughly 100–200 people on Facebook in many EU countries. By 2024, this potential reach had generally decreased due to higher advertising costs and competition. For example, research on Germany's campaigns found that political ads in 2021 delivered about 127 impressions per €1 on average (Bär, Pierri, De Francisci Morales, & Feuerriegel, July 2024). This implies a cost of around €7.9 per 1,000 impressions (CPM). In 2024, higher CPMs meant fewer impressions per euro – often closer to 80–150 impressions per €1 in many markets (i.e. €8–€12 CPM). Lower-cost countries like Romania could reach more people per euro than wealthier countries; in 2019 a €1 boost in Romania might reach around 200–300 people (lower ad prices), whereas in a high-cost market like Germany it might reach closer to 100–150 people. By 2024, even Romania's reach per €1 likely dropped (e.g. 150–250 impressions) as Facebook ad prices rose across the board.

Wealthier, highly competitive markets tend to have higher costs for miles (CPMs) and cost per click (CPC) because the advertising environment is highly competitive and it is more expensive to catch users attention. (Lebesgue, 2024).

Therefore, in comparing the digital spendings during the 2019 and the 2024 european elections we can observe that both the costs for impressions (CPM)

and click (CPC) rose, there is still a difference between established economies and regions in European countries: the Western European countries (which have more digital ads) have higher costs than Eastern European countries in which one can reach more people for the same amount of money.

An investigation ran by independent europeandatajournalism.eu shows that in 2019 Europarliamentary elections countries like Malta, Belgium, The Netherlands and Denmark spend about €0,3 per possible voter, while costs in countries like Portugal or Poland costs are lower, as €0,01 per potential voter. A positive correlation in the study is confirmed for the Flemish party Vlaams Belang (second party in electoral election, 11,68%), between social media exposure and results in elections (Barbiroglio, 2019).

In 2019 EU elections, Germany registered the highest spending in Facebook ads (€3,5 million) and had the highest CPMs (Europeandatajournalism.eu, 2019). For the 2024 european elections Germany a gross sum of €5,363,108 were spend on ads for different pages of the political parties, top spenders being the CDU (€556,471), SPD (€446,350) and the Die Grunen (€432,943), but what is extremely interesting is that the far-right populist party Alternative fur Deutschland (148,115 euro) spent almost 3 times less than the traditional parties (ResetTech, 2024). The extremist far-right german party had in the beginning of the European electoral campaign the largest social media coverage in terms of followers on the main platforms (Janson, 2024) which helps the organization organically disseminate their messages and reach broader audiecences without having to pay for it (ResetTech, 2024).

Populist parties and their leaders understood the importance of dominating the social media platforms and use the advertising embedded tools to boost their messages. Data shows that across Europe there has been a increase in budgets for online ads during electoral campaigns for the European Parlaiment between 2019 and 2024, despite the extensive regulations of the Digital Services Act (DSA).

The spendings for the 2019 elections for European Parliament in numbers

In 2019, Facebook was the primary platform for political ads in Europe. Data shows that €23.5 milion were spent on social media political advertisements on

Facebook, during the three months (March to end of May) before the elections for the European legislative forum. Political parties in Germany spent €3.5 million, €3.3 million in the United Kingdom, €2.7 million in Spain, €2.4 million in Belgium and €1.8 million in Italy. In addition to national parties competing for seats, the European Parliament and the European Commission were among the big spenders on social-media publicity and allocated €3.9 million for almost 6,686 ads (Hametner, 2019).

Populist parties leveraged Facebook's microtargeting to reach specific demographics with tailored messages and their strategy proved successful. **Spain's VOX**, **Belgium's Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest)**, and **Italy's Lega**, were among the **top spenders on Facebook ads**, using the platform for targeted messaging, tapping into sensitive issues like immigration and national sovereignty, wrapped in a populist discourse.

Belgium: For example, the right-wing populist party Vlaams Belang is one of the first and most skilled political organizations which rapidly integrated social-media and advertising tools in its electoral strategy. The new Dutch-speaking party seized the opportunity to build a new "digital community", as Bart Claes, member of parliament and the coordinator of the social media department declared (Sijstermans, 2021). Vlaams Belang's messaging focused on Flemish nationalism and anti-immigration, often with the slogan "Our People First." Their Facebook ads heavily emphasized the migration crisis and opposition to Brussels, aligning with Vlaams Belang's surge in Flanders, where it runs strong.

Electoral results: Vlaams Belang obtained 3 seats in the European Parliament.

Germany: Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) focused heavily on social media dissemination of their messages, using all digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) in comparison to other German parties. Studies have shown that AfD's digital strategy and political communication represented the major factor for the parties' success in gaining visibility, followers and voters (Medina Serrano, Shahrezaye, Papakyriakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2019). Albeit there is not much data available to correlate with paid advertisement on digital platforms, the populist far-right party managed to develop a successful

electoral campaign for the European Parliament focusing on organic reach and dissemination.

Electoral results: Alternative für Deutschland (AfD): gained 11%, won 11 seats (out of Germany's 96 seats). AfD increased its vote share compared to the 2014 elections.

Hungary: Fidesz

Hungary's ruling party led strong-handed by its populist leader and prime minister Viktor Orbán, engaged in an effective online campaign for the Europarliamentary elections in 2019, which secured a decisive victory. The digital strategy relied on social media platforms like Facebook to spread the anti-immigration populist narrative, the main theme of the elections. In addition, the government blocked oppositions' weekly newspaper advertisements, thus limiting its adversary's visibility and tightening the control over the public discourse. Fidesz's online efforts were complemented by a extensive offline campaign (Mészáros,2019). Electoral result: Fidesz secured 52.6% of the vote and won 13 seats (out of Hungary's 21 seats) in the European Legislative.

Poland: Law and Justice

In the May 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, Law and Justice achieved a decisive victory. It secured 45.4% of the popular vote, translating into 26 of Poland's 51 EP seats (electionseuropeennes, Results of the 2019 European elections , 2019) (27 seats once an additional post-Brexit seat was allocated). This was the strongest result for PiS in any election up to that time. The battle was fierce: the European Coalition (left, centrist and liberal parties) opposing Law and Justice obtained 38,47% which translated into 22 EP mandates. Also, the voter turnout was 45,42% (Cienski, 2019), the highest ever of a Polish European Parliament election. The main themes of the populist party centered on culture-war narratives, the people against the elite, the traditional values against the LGBT community. PiS's 2019 EP campaign centered on **conservative social values, national sovereignty, and opposition to liberal "ideologies."** A key theme was **vilifying LGBT** (Ciobanu, 2019) **rights as a foreign threat** to Polish society. In the run-up to the May 2019 vote, PiS leaders disparaged LGBT

equality measures as imported ideas "harmful to traditional values and a threat to Polish identity, nation and to the Polish state" said Jaroslaw Kaczyński in (Davies, 2019) in Poland, appealing to the deeply conservative and Christian religious polish. Also, the online political campaign was dominated by the dichotomic narratives about sex and religion.

During the 2019 EP campaign, PiS and allied nationalist groups were active on social networks, using unofficial pages, bots and fake accounts to amplify their messaging. Reports indicate that PiS used a complex online electoral strategy to spread its narratives (Heinmaa, 2020).

The spendings for the 2024 elections for European Parliament in numbers

Regarding the year of 2024, at European level data shows that spending continued to rise significantly due to increased digital campaigning, with reports suggesting that digital ad spending had grown by approximately 20-30% compared to 2019. However, the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), which took effect early in 2024, imposed strict new regulations on political ads. The DSA limits how parties could target users, allowing only broad demographic targeting (age and location) within 60 days of the election. The European law also requires comprehensive ad transparency, including disclosure of spending and sources, which affects how political parties and platforms approach digital campaigning. The new European regulations determined the digital savvy populist parties to elaborate more sophisticated digital campaigns, but also to explore effective way to comply with the rules and also to evade then. This measure led to higher online transparency, funding traceability and improved accountability.

Social media ads investment and electoral outcome 2024

Belgium: Vlaams Belang: The separatist Flemish party Vlaams Belang allocated 2,35 million euro for social media advertising on Facebook and Instagram (Belga, 2025), meaning almost half (42%) of its electoral budget (Walker, 2025), focusing on economic themes as the high cost of living, accusing the European

Union for higher energy prices, and developing the existing narratives. One the party's MPs declared: "Facebook is a story of money. A Facebook (page) with half a million people is not that difficult. A few hundred thousand euros, and in a few weeks, you have one" (Sijstermans, 2021). The party's **targeting strategy broadened**: rather than only microtargeting right-wing voters, Vlaams Belang used Meta ads to try and depress support for competitors (e.g. subtle negative ads about the governing Flemish parties) and **mobilize youth via Instagram**. They also used a **proxy non profit organization** – allegedly affiliated to Vlaams Belang, *Vrijheidsfonds*, which spent approximately €100,000 on Google ads to support VB's agenda for the 2024 European elections (Goujard, Scott, Mackenzie, & Cokelaere, 2024). This tactic has been highly criticized at higher European level, as it was seen as a way to bypass regulations imposed by the EU for funding transparency and money traceability. Vlaams Belang remains the top digital ads spender in Belgium and represents the largest party in Flanders.

Belgium is among the high spenders at European level in electoral political ads, its savvy political parties having learnt that online adversiting is the nowadays' electoral and communication strategy. If in 2019 all Belgian parties spent €6 million for digital ads, in 5 years, for the electoral year of 2024, the spendings more than doubled, reaching a record of €15 million (Walker, 2025). For the populist party Vlaams Belang, the strategic use of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, played a decisive role in reaching and engaging with a digital community, thereby enhancing its political influence during the election period, rocketing the votes and securing political representation in legislative forums in less than a decade.

Electoral result: Secured 20% of the vote, the second most represented party in Belgium and kept their 3 seats in the European Parliament.

Germany: Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is another interesting case of populist party which mastered digital advertisement strategies. According to a Politico report, for the 2024 Euro parliamentary elections, the radical right populist party spent significantly on social media ads (albeit not the biggest spender in Germany): in just one month (may 2024) before the voting, AfD allocated €108,000 for more than 90 ads which have been shown more than

90 million times in Germany. Non-profit organizations like Campact, linked to AfD, have also stepped in the electoral campaign and paid thousands of euros for more than 470 videos which have been disseminated on social media platforms. (Goujard, Scott, Mackenzie, & Cokelaere, 2024).

Another social media platform entered the political game in 2024 and swayed perceptions and votes: TikTok. Even if the Chinese app officially prohibits paid political advertising, this type of content is available on the platforms. Politicians and influencers can create and disseminate original content for the platform, but cannot paid for advertisement, and since 2023, the platform requires political organizations to be labeled accordingly. An independent journalist investigation shows that TikTok and X tend to have twice as many posts which lean to the right ideological axis. In the same experiment, data has shown that the radical right populist party AfD had the most displayed contents on X and TikTok, among all the German political competitors: "On TikTok, 78% (28/36) of the recommended content was supportive of AfD and On X, 65% (14/22)" and one possible hypothesis was correlated by journalists to the party's popularity and number of posts, but further research has invalidated it. Another observation made by the investigation group highlighted a breach in TikTok's policies: a paid ad supporting the populist party AfD was promoted and viewed more than 60,000 times, which was removed by Tiktok after the journalists reported it. (GlobalWitness.org, 2025)

The 2024 results for the European Parliament indicated that Alternative für Deutschland increased the vote share since the previous 2019 elections (from 11% to 15,9%), which translates into 15 seats, gaining 4 more MPs. AfD is also the strongest party in Eastern Germany (Anadolu, 2024).

Hungary: Fidesz: Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party was the top big spender in electoral ads for the European Parliament scrutiny. During the final weeks of the electoral campaign Fidesz invested approximately €60,000 on a single Facebook advertisement, which resulted in 10 million views in just 11 days, twice the population of Hungary.

Electoral result: Obtained 44% of the vote, a drop from 52% in 2019, losing two seats and obtaining 11 out of Hungary's 21 EU parliamentary seats.

The Political Capital Institute's report on Hungary's 2024 election highlights major imbalances in political advertising spending, with the pro-government Fidesz significantly outspending the opposition. Fidesz and affiliated groups primarily promoted anti-Western and pro-Kremlin hostile disinformation, dominating social media narratives. This disinformation targeted opposition candidates, the Ukraine war, and anti-government forces portrayed as foreign-influenced.

According to the source, Fidesz started the electoral campaign for European Parliament almost half a year in advance, preparing the audience for a high intensity, aggressive, misleading and polarizing communication and a sophisticated electoral strategy. Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, created a large network of parties, NGOs and other proxies institutions, including mass media, which supported the populist parties' main themes and discourse. Fidesz alone spent €2,2 million on digital advertisements on all social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Google, in comparison to all the other opposition parties which spent all together €764,558. With the help of a network of supporting proxies, like Megafon and Civil Union Forum which also invested €2,3 million in ads, Fidesz managed to amplify their messages coverage in the national media and online platforms. Also, media institutions allegedly close to the governmental party also helped in the campaign by spending €1.8 million on advertising. The report conducted by Political Capitals sheds light upon the political communication strategy employed by the populist party: the negative rhetoric of the opponents was mainly advertised by third parties (€1,6 million), not by Fidesz itself (only €397,137). The main narratives adopted and promoted by Fidesz focused on Euroscepticism, peace versus war, culture war, traditionalism, anti-migration and anti-LGBTQ. The ads' online data also shows the main disinformation narratives which have been boosted: discrediting Peter Magyar, a former Fidesz member (928,256), Orbán stated that Fidesz is the "party of peace" and repeatedly accused the opposition of seeking involvement in the Ukraine conflict, pro-war European politicians wanting to start a third world war (684,457) (Orbán, 2024), attacking the left opponents (90,768), anti-government forces which are funded by foreign interests (184,955) and other negative and misleading messages (Political Capital Institute, 2024).

Fidesz, in a just six months, became Europe's single-largest political advertiser on online platforms (Goujard, Scott, Mackenzie, & Cokelaere, 2024), escalating their digital presence compared to 2019. The populist party led by prime minister Viktor Orbán used in the 2024 Euro parliamentary scrutiny one of the most sophisticated electoral strategies, combining digital tools, ideological communication and disinformation messages, extensive online propaganda, accentuating on fears, euro-scepticism, culture-war and censoring of other political opponents. The governmental party also relied on a well-structured offline campaign. To attain a maximal electoral score, Fidesz cleverly **scheduled Hungary's local municipal elections on the same day 9th of June as the EP elections.** This dual election day was a tactical move: Fidesz's party machinery could mobilize its rural base to vote for both local Fidesz mayors and Fidesz EP candidates together. Despite the digital investments and electoral strategy, the party obtained 52,56%, meaning 11 seats. Fidesz lost 2 seats compared to the 2019 EP elections.

Poland: Law and Justice (PiS)

The political scene in Poland underwent a deep shift and by the 2024 elections for the European Parliament, the populist party Law and Justice (PiS) did not longer hold power and returned to opposition after 8 years. In 2024, the voter turnout at election day was 40,65%. The Law and Justice noticed a considerable decline in electoral outcome and this may be due to a series of factors: the consolidation of the governmental Civic Confederation KO, led by prime minister Donald Tusk, a strong pro-European advocate, political erosion of the Law and Justice party while it hold power for 8 years (2015-2023), a saturation observed among voters (Szczerbiak, 2024), backlash of their unpopular measures, euro-sceptic and conservative discourse and nationalistic views. The narratives focused on the European Union's policies which can affect Polish's lifestyle and economy.

The populist party had an extensive offline campaign and also invested in spreading its message on social media platforms. They used Facebook as their primary platform (Stedler, 2024) of communication, also because their electorate consists in elderly people.

Electoral results: the populist party Law and Justice (PiS, Sovereign Poland) obtained 36,16%, having won 20 mandates, and in comparison, to 2019, they lost 6 seats (electionseuropeennes, Results of the 2024 European elections, 2024).

Conclusions and perspectives

These digital and political transformations raise new challenges to democracy and its core values. The substantial investments in social media advertising by populist parties in these countries indicate that the electoral campaigning is becoming more sophisticated and diversified. As populist parties continue to use social media digital tools effectively, their voice within the European forums becomes stronger, generating further discussions about the implications for democratic processes and the regulation of political advertising online.

Broadly, **heavier online spending coincided with higher electoral results** for some populist parties, though causation is complex and not fully understood. However, the relationship is not a guaranteed recipe for a success. Some high spenders did not dramatically improve their results, others even lost votes, also due to publics' saturation or in-power erosion. Some successful campaigns relied on organic reach in addition to paid ads and also, extensive offline activities, party support and grassroot mobilization. Academic research also indicates political ads can sway elections results (Bär, Pröllochs, & Feuerriegel, 2025) in close races, but effects may plateau once voters are saturated with the same messages. Therefore, the main hypothesis of this paper can be partly invalidated, as it is was not proven true in analyzed cases and should be revised as follows: *A high level of electoral advertising spending on digital platforms (e.g., Facebook, Google, Instagram) is **not** positively correlated with high electoral outcome for populist parties in the 2024 European parliamentary elections.*

This undoubtedly pressures populist parties to adjust their digital strategies: they must operate more transparently and within stricter content boundaries. Even with the Digital Services Act (DSA) enforced, political parties found way of evading the regulations by using third-party proxies in spreading their messages. Also, there is an increasing need for further regulation of paid advertisements and commercial practices in electoral campaigns, both from national states and digital platforms.

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