MEPs Political Communication Strategies Online: A Case Study of MEPs Elected in Lithuania

Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė* and Sima Rakutienė

Abstract

This article contributes to the wide-ranging academic debate on the lack of interest European citizens have in European Union policies and the efforts of politicians to increase citizen attention to EU affairs. The focus of our research on the communication of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)[1] during a non-election period is rather new and not studied intensively, especially in 'new Member States' of the European Union. The aim of this study is to examine and compare the online political communication strategies of 9th-term MEPs elected in Lithuania, explaining how they communicate with their constituents during a non-election period and how much attention they pay to European affairs through their online channels. The research combines qualitative research methods (interviews with MEPs, content analysis of their Facebook profiles) and a quantitative public opinion poll. The latter survey reported that Lithuanian citizens have not enough information on the EP and MEP activities. However, MEPs believe that the issue is not a lack of information but rather a lack of interest among citizens in EP matters. The analysis of social media messages indicates that messages on MEP activities usually comprise slightly less than half of MEPs Facebook posts. However, the article shows that the daily communication of MEPs has the potential to increase the interest of citizens in EU politics and contribute to greater knowledge of EP matters, but the majority of MEPs must rethink their communication strategies.

Keywords: Political communication, European Parliament, MEPs, social media, Facebook

Introduction

This article contributes to the wide-ranging academic debate on the lack of interest European citizens have in European Union policies and the efforts of politicians to increase citizen attention to EU affairs. The research (Norris, 2011; Schmitt, 2005) continuously demonstrates the lack of interest European citizens have in the issues of the European Union (EU), and relatively low voter turnout in European Parliament (EP) elections (Charvat, 2017; Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, 2017). Moreover, public opinion polls indicate that 40–45% of Europeans declare that they do not know how the EU works (Standard Eurobarometer 71, 2010 and Standard Eurobarometer 92, 2019). Therefore, the European Parliament seeks to increase the publicity of its achievements (Vergeer, Hermans & Cunha, 2013, p. 129) and raising public interest in EU politics. Despite the growing role and political authority of the EP following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty (Rakutienė & Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, 2020), it seems that European Parliament members are "still striving hard to increase their visibility to EU citizens" (Lappas, Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2019).

However, new communication technologies and new tools such as social media have the potential to make the political communications of the EP more effective. Although much of the research on social media adoption for political communication (Strömbäck, Maier & Lynda, 2011; Boicu, Branea & Stefanel, 2017; Šuminas, 2019, etc.) analyses EP election campaign communication paying no attention to the daily communication of MEPs, we suggest that the online communication of MEPs during non-election periods may be no less important and make a significant contribution to closing the information gap on EP matters and increasing the interest of citizens in European politics. Non-election periods are of great importance for MEPs in establishing a positive

relationship with EU citizenry, attracting their attention and being able provide more information about EP decisions and their own activities to make the EP as an institution and themselves as MEPs more visible to European citizens. As online communication is growing in popularity among the citizenry,[2] we may expect the same tendency among MEPs.

As data shows, MEPs follow the major trends in society, and across the different legislative terms of the EP the usage of social media has increased. In 2009, only 33% of MEPs utilised social media (Lappas, Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2019). The presence of MEPs in the new 2015 term across online channels indicates that there has been widespread social media adoption among MEPs. As the European Parliament Digital Trends Survey (2015) reported, five years ago 88% of MEPs were already users of Facebook and 76% had accounts on Twitter. Out of 100 MEPs surveyed for the report, 96% said Facebook was their top platform for communicating and interacting with their constituents. MEPs are increasingly trying other social media platforms beyond Facebook and Twitter – 28% of MEPs were LinkedIn users in 2015. As Brett Kobie, digital strategist, has commented on the "growth potential for LinkedIn. Only 34% of MEPs were on Twitter in 2011, while 76% use the platform now" (Euroactiv, 2015). MEPs filling the survey reported that they use personal websites (80%), newsletters (48%) and online video (32%) for communicating with their constituents. It is reasonable to expect that online communication and usage of social media has grown in importance among MEPs in the 9th legislative term, when we consider the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic in limiting direct communication.

The main goal of this study is to examine and compare the political communication strategies of 9th-term MEPs elected in Lithuania on one of the most popular social media platforms Facebook (Facebook penetration in Lithuania is 65%[3]) to explain how they communicate with their constituents during the non-election period and how much attention they pay to European affairs in their public communication. During the research, we aim to compare not only the online communication strategies chosen by different MEPs, but also the opinion of Lithuanian citizens on the information they receive about the MEPs activities and the communication channels prioritised by citizens. Therefore, we aim to find out whether the online communication strategies of MEPs have the potential to provide sufficient information on EU affairs to Lithuanian citizens and increase their interest in EU politics. By addressing this question, we expect to answer additional research questions regarding the preferences of MEPs in using online platforms: we would like to know the communication strategies used on Facebook by MEPs, the popularity of their messages among their followers, how the followers engage when reacting to the information provided by MEPs, and how Lithuanian citizens assess the communication activities of MEPs based on the data from the quantitative survey.

The research is organized as a case study of MEPs elected in one EU country – Lithuania. In total, the online communication of 11 MEPs is analysed using a combination of data collection methods – interviews with politicians, content analysis of Facebook, and a quantitative survey of Lithuanian residents. This study contributes to the relevant research in several ways. First, it enriches our knowledge on the topics discussed and the online communication strategies used by MEPs in social media. As Jackson and Lilleker (2010) and Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2013) note, there is a lack of research that examines the online communication strategies used by individual MEPs during the non-election periods. Second, it deals with MEPs social media usage. MEPs communications provide a basis for the study of social media usage and effectiveness, since the offline participation of constituents in discussing the relevant issues with politicians is a tradition that can be successfully transferred to social media platforms. Third, this study focuses on the social media communication of MEPs elected in Lithuania during a non-election period. Until now, the research on the social media communication of MEPs in Lithuania has been conducted during election campaigns. Hence, less is known about the types of content published by MEPs on

the social media platforms during non-election periods. This case is a small part of the whole EP picture but may provide insights into how MEP communication may contribute to the visibility of EU affairs. Although Lithuania is a small state, analysis of the communication of its MEPs can be used as a starting point for larger studies and for comparative studies.

Conceptual framework: social media adoption for political communication

Since MEPs represent multiple audiences (EU citizens, national parties and their European parliamentary political groups) as well as representing EP as an institution in their countries and across the EU, they communicate with various groups on different issues and provide information which could reach the targeted groups. At the same time, MEPs work at a distance from their constituents at EU headquarters, most of the time. Therefore, online communication is becoming increasingly important.

This political and geographical remoteness of MEPs from their countries and constituents[4] influences their communication. For many MEPs, communicating online can help them connect more closely with their constituents. Online communication on social media platforms can be used by MEPs to disseminate information, communicate with constituents by asking for feedback on important issues, design of new initiatives, build networks with party members and the electorate.

There are several research streams on MEP online communication: from focusing on EP election communication tools and strategies (Boicu, Branea & Stefanel, 2017; Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Michalski, Gibson & Zajac, 2020; Strömbäck, Maier & Lynda, 2011; Vergeer, Hermans & Cunha, 2013; etc.) to analysing what motivates MEPs to be involved in online communication, social media platforms and the popularity of the MEPs' online communication.

Research has concentrated on explaining the motivation of MEP involvement in online communication, and has suggested that parliament members should use online communication and social media more actively (Coleman & Blumler, 2009) and has even presented a model of e-representation (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009, Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013) for building networks that include constituents, party activists, and those interested in specific areas of their work as MEPs. The studies have argued that the motivation for greater involvement in online communication for MEPs could be twofold: first, it could be personal interest in building networks and connections with party members, establishing closer relationships with constituents and the electorate, as well as the motivation to enhance their political communication strategies and adapt to the communication transformations (Lilleker & Negrine, 2003; Negrine, 2008); second, as scholars (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2013) have noticed, MEPs have been encouraged by the European Commission (EC) to contribute to EC initiatives in enhancing the reputation of the EU and promoting greater levels of interaction between the EP, various EU institutions and citizens of Member States.

The newer research literature uses social media adoption to analyse the factors influencing how MEPs communicate in social media. One scholarly work on MEP communication (Lappas, Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2019) suggests a few factors that influence social media adoption by candidates (they examined the differences in Facebook and Twitter usage between MEPs of the 7th and 8th term by conducting statistical Chi-square tests), such as individual characteristics (gender – male candidates were more likely to use both platforms Facebook and Twitter), party-related characteristics (more MEPs from pro-European and centre ideology parties adopted social media compared to far-right and Euro-sceptic parties), country of MEPs origin (Twitter adoption and activity was positively related to actors originating from large European districts; MEPs that originate from countries with low representativeness in the EU, for instance such as Cyprus, Latvia,

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4   Though MEPs represent all the EU citizens in the EP, majority of their communication with citizens is focused on their national electorate. Having this in mind, we use a concept of constituents focusing on the MEPs communication with the citizens in their respective countries where they have been elected.

Lithuania, showed higher social media adoption rates). The mentioned factors can be tested in future comparative research and a few of the study variables, such as gender or party-related characteristics can be used in case analyses.

Looking at research focusing on online communication, we may find more factors explaining the MEPs' choice of online communication. An important factor could be the popularity of certain social media platforms in the country and citizen interest in politics (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013; Ross & Bürger, 2014). The more citizens go online for political information, the more politicians focus on certain online platforms. Online communication can help people draw closer to political processes and build relationships of trust (listening to citizens, involving them in the decision-making process), avoiding communication mediators, such as traditional media, especially at a time when there is a distance between politicians and citizens (Giansante, 2015, p. 7). According to Ross and Burger (2014, p. 53), much of Facebook's attractiveness is the indirect and often unmoderated nature of politician-citizen communication. This is extremely important for smaller parties that are repelled by the mainstream media. Given that political participation is declining (political party membership is declining, turnout is relatively low), the use of online communication by MEPs can be motivated by a desire to promote political participation through information, debate, invitations to various events, and so on. However, sometimes political actors connect to the internet using one-way communication only to provide information and simply to attract the media (Castells, 2007). The internet offers opportunities, but the purposes for which it is used always depend on the decisions made by political actors and on the reaction of voters (Chadwick, 2006). We will try to find out what motivation factors for communication online are prevailing among the MEPs elected in Lithuania.

Another important research on MEPs communication is focusing on the usage practice of social media platforms. European Parliament Digital Trends Survey (2015) reported, that 88% of MEPs were users of Facebook in 2015 making Facebook most popular social media platform among MEPs. Moreover, the data on the social media platform market share (Social media stat, 2020) in Lithuania indicate, that Facebook occupies 65% of the market leaving aside the other platforms (pinterest-17%, YouTube -7%, Instagram -4%, Twitter – 3,7%, etc.). Based on the numbers of consumers, it can be an appropriate medium for political communication both for individuals and organizations. As growing numbers of research literature on communication in Facebook indicate, Facebook is getting popular tool of online communication among the political actors such as political parties and individual politicians. Research notes that Facebook as a social media platform is suitable for political communication for several goals. First, through Facebook, parties and politicians can raise the visibility of their activities and personalities. Second, they can build a supportive and active community of followers (Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Michalski, Gibson & Zajac, 2020), and build a dialogue with those supporters. As Lucia Vesnić-Alujević (2012, p. 39) notice, "Social network sites are suitable for communication about political issues because young adults use them often, therefore through entertaining and informing the audience, they can get a feeling of being closer, which could encourage them to engage in politics". Third, since Facebook is based on constant information distribution and active, synchronous, and engaging communication and articulation of interests (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2016), politicians can raise the level of political information on certain relevant issues among their audience. In addition, most accounts on Facebook are private and its usage is based on one-way or reciprocal friendship ties, the audience for Facebook posts mostly consists of people already "liking" a politician's page (Stier, Bleier, Lietz & Strohmaier, 2018, p. 54) and showing a considerable interest in politician. Therefore, politicians can focus their communication on establishing friendly and close relationship with their followers as well as on building loyal audience.

A key component of all these communication activities in Facebook is finding the ways how to encourage followers to engage in liking, sharing, and commenting their content. However, there is a lack of studies focusing on MEPs online communication strategies in social media platforms as well as effectiveness of different communication strategies employed by MEPs. Nevertheless, several communication strategies that could be used for effective inclusive political communication using the Facebook network can be identified in the literature on Facebook communication:

representation, engagement, and networking with public. Representation is strategy through which political actors just disseminate information to voters to increase their knowledge on issues related to their activities, publicity and create a favourable image. This strategy success is related to the content and form of information. Politicians publishing quality content with reliable information may expect to attract loyal followers. Publishing content regularly (establishing real regularity of posts) but posting not too much (if someone publishes every hour, the posts will not be read by users who have many friends) is good strategy for building loyal audience as well (Giansante, 2015). Communication form might be a factor that encourages followers to engage. As Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Michalski, Gibson & Zajac (2020, p. 3) argue, "the vividness of communication, how eye-catching it is, makes content more likely to be seen, and in turn to be liked and shared; hence by using more vivid content parties might earn greater reach as users appear keen to share content that will be liked by their network". Accordingly, focusing on photos and engaging the audience with videos or live translations is a recommended form of content presentation for communication in Facebook.

Engagement strategy aims at increasing the interaction of constituents with politicians, facilitating a dialogue between them. Tactics related to this strategy include requests for submission of ideas and opinions through comments, invitations to participate in various online events. As research literature notes, parties and politicians may gain higher benefits if they promote greater interactivity offering a reciprocal communication experience (read comments and answer them) as opposed to restricting their communication strategy due to fears of the risks associated with interactive communication (Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Michalski, Gibson & Zajac, 2020; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Networking strategy is very important in online communication. It is related to interactive features of social media and is used by politicians to encourage followers to share content/messages of politicians to the networks of followers. Facebook is based on sharing. The more people share a content with members of their networks, the more extended reach and influence it can achieve (Bene, 2017). The mentioned strategies can be a starting point in the analysis of communication in MEPs Facebook profiles.

When trying to assess MEPs' strategies for communicating with their Facebook community, it is important to pay attention to Facebook user strategies in their profile. We can distinguish three levels of Facebook user participation in policy profiles: first, when the user becomes a "friend" with a politician such as an MEP or a "follower"; second, when the user adds "like" to a post or comment; and third, when the user comments on other people's posts, information is shared with their friends. Because direct Facebook feedback is expressed in sentiments (likes, emoticons), sharing, and comments, these features are an indicator of how people engage with content (Metz, Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2020; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). The number and frequency of observers' reactions to the recordings reflect the scale of their activities, as well as the ability of MEPs to use certain forms of reporting, whether textual or visual, personal or political.

Based on the preceding analysis it can be concluded that there are no stable audiences on social media, but there is an abundance of information where content from a wide spectrum of topics and creators competes for attention and to be shared (Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Bene, 2017). Accordingly, to be effective, communication on Facebook needs quality content, attractive form of content, encouragement for followers to engage in online activities and sharing the posts to their networks.

Data collection and methods

The study design is essentially qualitative but with additional survey statistics so that a combination of methods is used. First, MEPs elected in Lithuania in 2019 were interviewed to obtain information and opinions about the use of online communication platforms, their preferences, and arguments. All 11 MEPs were contacted but just 7 of them agreed to talk. Therefore, we used data from 7 interviews for the research.

Second, an analysis of Facebook as the most popular social media platform was conducted. To find the relevant Facebook profiles a direct search for the candidate's name on Facebook was conducted. Then the number of 'likes' (or 'followers', in the rare instances in which a candidate had a personal rather than a public page) of each profile was counted. We gathered and analysed the posts on the Facebook profiles of 11 MEPs over a period of three or four months. We consider this term is sufficient to ascertain the common tendencies in the MEPs' Facebook usage. We chose the period from July 2019 to October 2020 for our case study. Content analysis was performed for each profile. The coding was conducted by the authors. An initial quantitative analysis of profile messages allowed us to review the material and the communication strategies of the MEPs and their followers (number of messages per month, average number of messages per day, number of comments, number of positive reviews and emoticons, shares). Qualitative analysis was used in the later stages of the study. The records of each profile were grouped according to the issues discussed – political, non-political. Political reports were grouped according to the topics of the report – EU and EP affairs, Lithuanian politics, party politics, other political issues. The thematic analysis was performed in Lithuanian, and the data file is kept by the authors. This article will present the main trends of the analysis.

Third, the public opinion poll of Lithuanian citizens was conducted by Spinter Research company according to a questionnaire prepared by the authors of this text between 20 April 2020 and 30 April 2020. A portion of the questions (7 questions) related to opinions of the MEPs communication with citizens and access Lithuanians have to the information regarding EP decisions and MEP activities. A total of 1,011 respondents (aged 18 to 75 years) from the whole territory of Lithuania participated in the survey. A combined research method was used for interviewing the respondents: 50 per cent CATI (Computer-assisted telephone interviewing) and 50 per cent CAWI (Computer-assisted web interview). A standard error of 3 per cent was allowed. This paper discusses the questions related to the evaluation of the political communication of MEPs aiming to test whether the tendencies of MEPs' communication strategies on Facebook are congruent with the opinions of voters regarding the quantity and quality of information provided by MEPs on EU and EP matters.

Therefore, during the study, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

> RQ1: What online communication strategies do MEPs use and how does the information they provide reflect their activities in the European Parliament?
> RQ2: How does the electorate of the MEPs evaluate their communication and the information provided on the activities of the European Parliament?

The online communication of MEPs elected in Lithuania in 2019

In 2019, Lithuanian voters elected 11 MEPs representing one election committee (independent) candidate and six political parties. As the European Elections Monitoring Center (2020) informs, the EP elections campaign was dominated by the campaign messages of political parties on Facebook (156 messages on Facebook from a total of 220). Traditional communication channels were not so popular – 42 election posters, 16 video advertisements (on TV and the internet) and 6 advertisements in print media were found (Šuminas, 2019). These numbers indicate that the competition between political parties and basic political communication with voters was mostly online during the EP elections. This tendency suggests that during a non-election period, elected MEPs from Lithuania prefer online communication tools.

Perspective from the MEPs themselves on political communication with their constituents

During the interviews, the MEPs discussed their choices regarding channels for communicating with their constituents. All the MEPs agreed that online communication is essential, as their work is remote from the constituents. According to them, the second most important form of communication is direct visits and meetings with voters. The third most popular channel is traditional mass media. Therefore, the interviews confirm the tendency that MEPs focus on online

communication during a non-election period, which has been noticed during EP elections.

MEPs elected in Lithuania for several terms prefer direct meetings with constituents but also acknowledge the advantages of social media. For instance, one of the MEPs working at the EP for a second term and representing the Lithuanian Liberals Movement, Petras Auštrevičius, notes that direct contact and visiting constituents is a very effective form of communication. According to him, "This allows you to reach different groups of people from small villages to big cities, from schools to universities. Direct contact is irreplaceable. The visits allow voters to meet with the MEP and provide an opportunity to ask specific questions. Common questions are not interesting, so everyone needs details, things that interest them" (Auštrevičius, 2019). Despite the preference for direct contact, Auštrevičius thinks that "social media may reach big audiences and allows many possibilities too. It provides various information, but it is not enough to be there just on the screen" (Auštrevičius, 2019). Similar views are shared by another MEP working at the EP for a third term, Vilija Blinkevičiūtė, leader of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party. She mentions direct visits and meetings with constituents as an important way of communication. Blinkevičiūtė agrees that communication is a permanent and continuous process making it possible for Lithuanian citizens to be more informed on EP decisions and activities. She emphasizes that both channels – social media, and traditional media – are important. She herself works a lot with regional mass media and newspapers, thinking that senior voters are not present in social media platforms and the best way to inform them about the activities of the EP and the work of MEPs is writing articles in the newspaper (Blinkevičiūtė, 2019).

New MEPs elected to the EP for their first term are more likely to express a preference for social media platforms and various traditional media channels. For instance, Juozas Olekas, a member of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, notes that usually, all the MEPs provide much information on Facebook and websites, but print media and news media portals are important channels for providing information as well. He agrees that traditional media is not very interested in printing articles on EU matters but they do accept articles from EP members (Olekas, 2019). Liudas Mažylis, a member of the Homeland Union (Lithuanian Christian Democrats) is of the same opinion; he mentions that Facebook is his major social media platform. Usually, Mažylis posts information every day combining information on EP issues, his work on different committees and personal matters. However, he thinks that commentaries on television and news media portals are even more important for the visibility of EU matters. They even reach those citizens who are not especially looking for European issues or information on the work of MEPs (Mažylis, 2019).

Aušra Maldeikienė, an independent politician serving her first term as a MEP, pays most attention to communications in social media (Facebook, Twitter). She uses Facebook for active communication with constituents and has a special website (europoszinios.lt) where she and her team post texts on EU politics – all the resolutions (Maldeikienė, 2020). As an important type of communication, she mentioned the conferences of MEPs organized for special issues related to EU politics. The conferences usually attract the attention of citizens as well as the media. In such a way messages may reach wider audiences.

The interviews raised other communication issues related to the increasing interest of citizens in European issues. Olekas mentioned the issue of the disinterest of Lithuanian citizens in EU politics. According to him, MEPs should think more actively how to attract the attention of their Lithuanian constituents, how to present information in a more attractive way. He noted that the majority of MEPs started presenting video reports as a way to review their weekly activities in the EP and to make their posts more vivid (Olekas, 2019). Auštrevičius agreed with his colleague and stressed the major aim of MEP communication – to explain their work in a simple way. Accordingly, as he mentioned, his communication strategy on Facebook focuses on informing followers on political issues in understandable language.

Overall, all the interviewed MEPs elected in Lithuania agreed that information is important for increasing knowledge levels about the EU. The majority of the MEPs choose several channels of communication to make the European Parliament and their personal results more visible and

understandable. Most of them mentioned that there is enough information in Lithuanian now, but all institutions and MEPs will think about strategies to make it simpler and more attractive, and how to encourage voters to have constant interest in what is happening in politics at the EU level.

MEP communications on Facebook
The Facebook social media platform is the most popular among Lithuanian citizens (65% share of the social media market in 2020). Accordingly, if MEPs wish to reach more voters, they follow the habits of the constituents and are present and active on Facebook. It is evident that being online and using social media is inevitable for every MEP. As Swedish Liberal MEP Fredrick Federley argues, "For a politician not to use social media for dialogue and interactions with voters, would be like a writer not using words" (Euroactiv, 2015). EP spokesperson Katrien van den Broeck confirms this opinion: "Going digital is not only for young MEPs, even my 60+ year old MEPs understand the power of a selfie" (Euroactiv, 2015).

As monitoring the Facebook profiles of the MEPs elected in Lithuania indicated, all the MEPs have their profiles on the Facebook platform. Table 1 summarises the review of their profiles.

Table 1: Summary of basic quantitative measures of MEP profiles on Facebook

Name and Surname	Profile address	Political or personal	Likes	Followers	Friends
Andrius Kubilius	www.facebook.com/ kubilius.lt	Political	22,047	24,566	-
Aušra Maldeikienė	www.facebook.com/ maldeikiene www.facebook.com/ ausra. maldeikiene	Political and personal	46,573	51,723	5,000
Liudas Mažylis	https://www.facebook.com/ mazylis.liudas	Personal	-	2,022	1,539
Rasa Juknevičienė	https://www.facebook.com/ rasa.jukneviciene	Personal	-	18,066	Not provided
Viktoras Uspaskich	https://www.facebook.com/ viktorasuspaskich/	Political	24,580	43,115	-
Petras Auštrevičius	www.facebook.com/ PetroAustreviciausbiuras	Political	9,694	9,670	
Vilija Blinkevičiūtė	https://www.facebook.com/ vilijablinkeviciute	Political	4,615	4,703	
Juozas Olekas	https://www.facebook.com/ juozas.olekas.5 https://www.facebook.com/ MEPOlekas	Personal/ Political	4,278	456/6,246	4,544
Stasys Jakeliūnas	https://www.facebook.com/ stasys.jakeliunas https://www. facebook.com/profile. php?id=100011345915163	Political/ personal	1,040	1,076/644	-
Bronis Ropė	https://www.facebook.com/ rope.bronis	Political	6,696	6,700	-
Valdemar Tomaševski	https://www.facebook.com/ VTomasevski	Political	3,287	3,367	-

Source: prepared by authors

When the data were collected (April 2020), the MEPs profiles had reached approximately between 1,000 to 51,000 followers (average 15,569). Usually, more popular politicians actively engaging in daily online communication and political profiles have more followers. The most popular profile is the personal profile of A. Maldeikienė, which generates approximately 50,000 likes and followers. She usually provides a critical and different opinion from the others attracting certain groups of the public. We may notice that the majority of the MEPs have big groups of fans and may reach a rather wide audience with information on their own activities at the EP being able to increase the awareness of Lithuanians on EP matters.

After the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the posts over a randomly selected period of three months, we obtained the following results. Different MEPs use Facebook with different frequency. The majority of them write messages every day, but we also find certain periods when many of them post more than one message per day or do not post any post for a few days. In terms of interactivity, a minority of the MEPs encourage the engagement of citizens in interactive participation Accordingly, the most popular communication strategy used on Facebook by MEPs elected in Lithuania is the promotion of themselves using Facebook in a top-down manner to push one-way information to citizens. The content analysis of the posts indicates that many MEPs use Facebook not only for promoting topics they are working on but for reacting and commenting on topical issues in Lithuanian and European politics, expressions of attitude, and marketing of various events. In the following sections we will provide a short analysis of a few separate Facebook profiles.[5]

Andrius Kubilius is a new MEP and has a big audience on Facebook (more than 24 thousand followers). He posted 118 messages (more than one per day) in the period from October to December in 2019. The posts generated approximately 9,000 likes, 600 comments and more than 300 shares. There were approximately 155 likes, 15 comments and 7 shares per post. Kubilius only shares actual information and reviews the most important events in European, Lithuanian or World politics paying less attention to self-promotion (posts on his leisure time, family and so on, are rare). Although posts on EP matters comprise about 40 per cent of the total posts, these posts are informative and generate a rather large number of reactions. Every week this MEP prepares video messages together with his colleague, Rasa Juknevičienė, lasting 10–20 minutes, where they discuss their activities or important events and decisions at the EP. Moreover, Kubilius writes articles on the topics he is interested in at the EP (foreign policy and relationships with neighbouring EU countries), and also shares links to his own speeches in the EP on various topics. The second most popular topic of his messages is Lithuanian politics (35% of total posts), and the third, discussion of political events in other regions (23%). Kubilius provides a lot of information and has a clear communication strategy focusing on self-promotion, clarity and informativeness.

Another popular politician on Facebook is Aušra Maldeikienė, serving her first term as a MEP, she has more than 50 thousand followers. During the three months of the study (October–December 2019), she posted 101 messages (more than one per day). Her posts generated approximately 14,000 likes, 2,300 comments and 445 shares. There were approximately 139 likes, 23 comments and 5 shares per post. The majority of her posts were related to Lithuanian politics (44%); the second most popular topic was EP work and activities (33%). The other portion of her posts were on non-political issues. It is important to notice that posts on EP issues were among the most popular posts. Maldeikienė, like other MEPs, periodically posted video messages discussing her weekly EP activities and her own work. She likes to discuss issues which have different interpretations and tend to escalate conflict. Maldeikiene tries to relate all EP decisions to Lithuanian politics and in her weekly reviews she also talks about hot topics in Lithuanian politics. Several messages related to EP work were related to the Istanbul Convention and received many reactions from her followers. It is important to notice that she tries to react to the comments and answer them. Overall, we can see that Maldeikienė focuses her communication strategy on interactivity and reciprocal communication with her followers as well as on clarity of communication.

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5   Due to the limits of the length of the article we cannot discuss each MEPs profile. So, we selected the profiles of MEPs representing various groups as well as serving first term and more terms at EP.

One MEP serving already for a second term and who has rather a big number of followers (around 10 thousand) in comparison to the other Lithuanian MEPs working for a longer period in the EP is Petras Auštrevičius. In the three-month period of the study he posted 68 messages (less than one per day). His posts generated approximately 3,500 likes, 125 comments and 270 shares. There were approximately 51 likes, 2 comments and 4 shares per post. His posts on the work and decisions of the EP were the most active. More than half of his posts (52%) related to EP matters. Although experienced MEPs provide a lot of information on EP matters, they receive less reactions due to having less followers. Auštrevičius' communication is dominated by video messages and photo albums from meetings and various events. He posts video information about the EP sessions and his participation. Like other MEPs, he provides weekly video reviews of the most important EP activities and decisions and calls this his "Brussels diary". Auštrevičius prepares 10-minute videos and presents all the events very professionally, discussing the topics he is working on. Accordingly, his strategy focuses on clarity of communication and the understandable presentation of information.

One more MEP working at the EP not for the first term and with a lot of followers (43 thousand) is Viktor Uspaskich. He is a very popular politician and the leader of the Labour Party. He attracts the attention of his audience not by discussing EU matters but more with his talks on different topics even not related to politics. In the three-month period (October–December 2019) he posted just 39 messages (approximately 13 per month). However, the posts generated a lot of reactions – 25,186 likes, 3,546 comments and 1,797 shares. There were approximately 646 likes, 91 comment and 46 shares per post. The reactions indicate the rather high activity of his followers using the strategy of reciprocal communication. Uspaskich posted just two messages related to EP matters. He discussed the resolution on child rights and the elections of the European Commission. It looks like the MEP is not interested in EP work and has no intention to present information on EP matters to his constituents. Instead, he likes to discuss Lithuanian political issues, and criticise the government decisions. He periodically performs livestream meetings usually on Sundays, 10 livestream meetings with followers in three months) where talks about Lithuanian politics, about other non-political topics and answers the questions received in the commentaries. The livestreams usually have no specific topic. Uspaskich discusses the topics he likes, such as wellness and self-help. Uspaskich's Facebook profile is not useful for a reader to learn anything about EU politics. The MEP himself focuses on self-promotion and clarity of communication.

Vilija Blinkevičiūtė may represent MEPs working for a third term and has experience in presenting the EP and her work to her constituents. She has 4,703 followers on Facebook. In comparison to the previously presented MEPs, this number is not big but shows the real situation. Blinkevičiūtė has no intention of investing effort in attracting the attention of users on social media. During the analysed period of three months (October–December 2019), she posted just 16 messages (approximately 5 per month). Her posts generated 3,000 likes, 118 comments and 120 shares. There were approximately 187 likes, 7 comments and 8 shares per post. Although she has less followers than other MEPs, her followers are active and likely to engage in the communication. As Blinkevičiūtė mentioned in the interview, she is working closely with regional media and prefers meetings with constituents. It is obvious that she has no strategy in attracting younger citizens and Facebook users. Her Facebook profile serves as one more necessary platform for the dissemination of information and she concentrates more on a special group of people – her party (Lithuanian Social Democrats) supporters – because qualitative analysis reveals that the posts related to party politics receive more reactions than others. Approximately one third of the posts were on EP matters (6 posts). They presented the activities of the MEP and the issues she is interested in, such as child rights, labour issues, Globalisation fund rule changes etc. Such inactive communication suggests that Blinkevičiūtė informs citizens on EP matters using other channels. She is well known by the citizens but probably not from her communications on Facebook. The mobilisation of the party electorate is her main communication strategy on Facebook.

Based on the data from the five Facebook profiles reviewed in more detail and on the analysis of all 11 MEPs profiles as a whole, it is clear that with the exception of Uspaskich and Tomaševski (Facebook profile in polish language and the majority of his posts are shared from his party

website) tried to provide followers with informative posts as well as entertaining posts (these do not dominate and are usually related to personal leisure activities and greetings on holidays such as Teachers Day or Christmas). Accordingly, the Facebook profiles of the MEPs are dominated by communication strategies focusing on the mobilisation of followers, self-promotion, clarity and the provision of understandable information. Self-personalisation and interactivity are also evident.
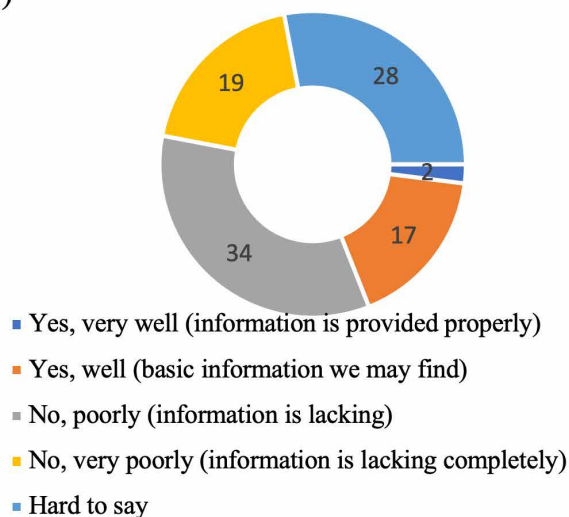
Quantitative analysis of reactions indicates that not all followers are active and are likely to show their reaction to the posts provided by the MEPs. We can assume that those people who react really like the text, the visual ideas of the post or the politician in general and try to show support by clicking likes. Comments are not a very popular form of engagement for followers and not all the MEPs are trying to react to the comments. This shows that the majority of the MEPs still use their Facebook account as a tool for posting information and avoid establishing closer relationships with followers. However, we can see that certain topics and the format of the message can activate supporters and involve them in communication, such as in response to Uspaskich's live broadcasts. A rather attractive form of information presentation are video messages with reviews of weekly activities, which generate a higher level of reactions and mobilise followers to engage.

How are Lithuanian constituents informed about the activities of the EP and their MEPs?

To evaluate the political communication on EP matters on Facebook by MEPs and how these are congruent with the constituents' opinions and their awareness of the EP and the MEPs activities, the results of a Lithuanian public opinion poll (Spinter Research, 2020) are discussed.
First, the respondents were asked whether they have enough information about the EP. The results indicate that about 43% of respondents are lacking information while 41% have enough and 16% cannot evaluate (see Figure 1).

Q: What do you think, do MEPs elected in Lithuania themselves inform Lithuanian constituents on their activities, concrete works and interest representation well? (N=1011)

- Yes, very well (information is provided properly)
- Yes, well (basic information we may find)
- No, poorly (information is lacking)
- No, very poorly (information is lacking completely)
- Hard to say

Figure 1: Information about the EP
Source: prepared by authors according to the data provided by Spinter Research

Accordingly, this highlights the issue that information on EP activities does not reach most Lithuanian citizens, but it is not clear whether this situation occurs due to the disinterest of citizens or the lack of information. As half of the respondents answered that they do not look for information themselves about the EP and MEPs work and rely on occasional information on certain communication channels, we can suggest that this lack of information is due to the low media coverage of the EP.

Second, the survey asked the respondents how much information they have about the MEPs activities. Only one third of the respondents replied that they have enough information while around half of them (47 %) answered that they are lacking this information (see Figure 2).

Q: Do you have enough information about the activities of the MEPs elected in Lithuania? (N=1011, results are provided in %)

Legend:
- Yes, quite enough
- Yes, enough
- No, not enough
- No, not enough at all
- Hard to say
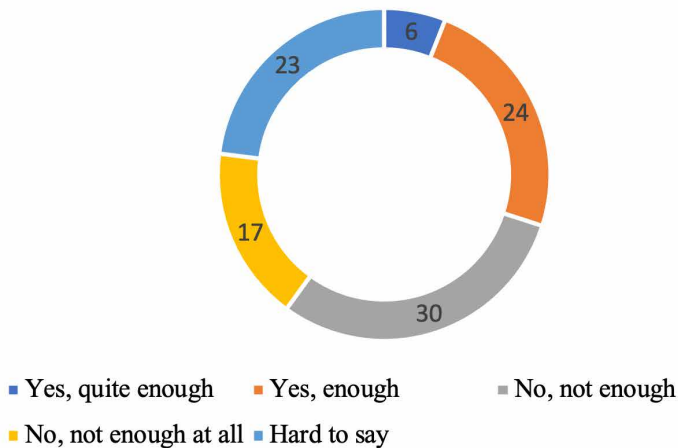
Figure 2: Information about the MEPs' activities
Source: prepared by authors according to the data provided by Spinter Research

Comparing the results of Figure 1 and Figure 2, we can see that the respondents tend to have general information about the EP but are not well informed about the MEPs' work and activities. This lack of information closely coincides with the inactive participation by citizens in EP elections. Having no idea about what the MEPs are doing at the EP, not being informed about the important decisions and lacking explanations about how these decisions may influence their daily life, Lithuanian citizens are not motivated to go and elect MEPs. This uninformed citizen sometimes even chooses candidates randomly or according to other factors than the readiness of the candidate to work in the EP. As the analysis of the Facebook profile of one MEP (Uspaskich) shows, the MEP attracts followers with topics that are unrelated to the EP and he even has no interest in informing the people on EP matters. Nevertheless, he has already been elected to the EP for three terms. It seems that the strategy of self-personalisation and clarity works better than focusing on relevant issues related to the functions of a MEP.

The respondents were asked to evaluate the communications of MEPs elected in Lithuania with citizens in general. The findings (see Figure 3) do not differ a lot from the previous findings in Figure 2. Evaluating the informativeness of the communications of the MEPs, even more than half of the respondents answered that the information provided by the MEPs themselves is lacking and poor. Only 18 per cent of the respondents could find basic information.

Q: What do you think, do MEPs elected in Lithuania themselves inform Lithuanian constituents on their activities, concrete works and interest representation well? (N=1011)
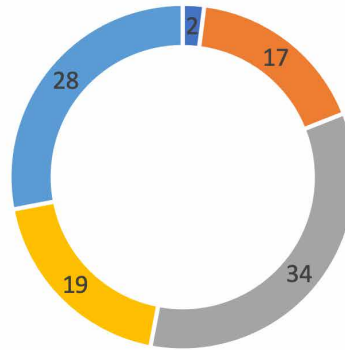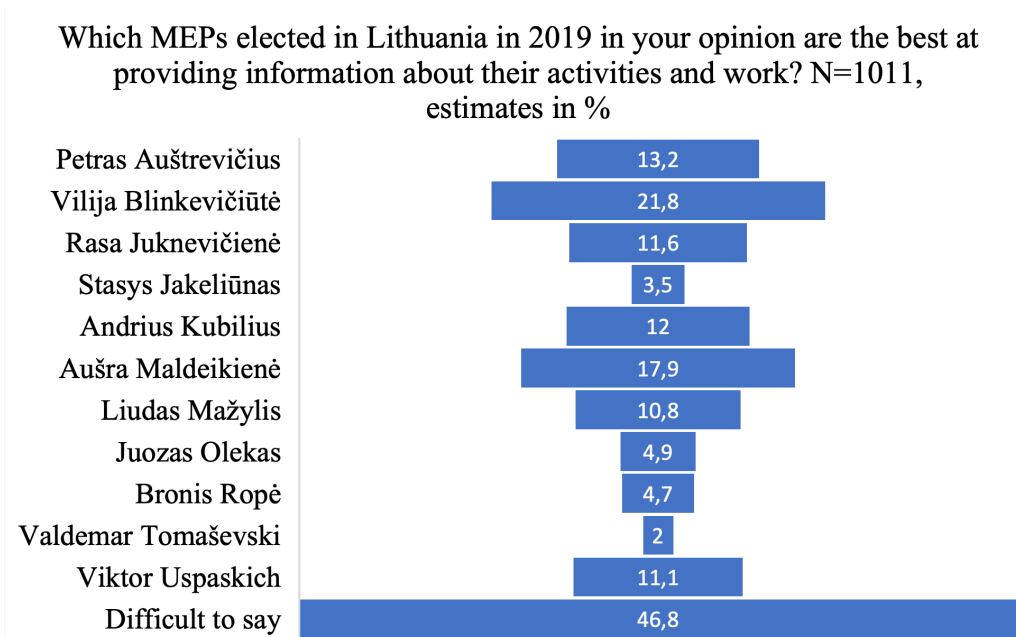

- Yes, very well (information is provided properly)
- Yes, well (basic information we may find)
- No, poorly (information is lacking)
- No, very poorly (information is lacking completely)
- Hard to say

Figure 3: Quality of information about the activities of the MEPs elected in Lithuania
Source: prepared by authors according to the data provided by Spinter Research

Third, the respondents were asked to evaluate specific MEPs on how well each of them informs citizens about their work. Based on the findings (see Figure 4), half of the respondents could not evaluate any specific MEPs (47%) and the other half listed five MEPs as the best in informing the constituents. These all score highly in terms of Facebook communication, have a rather large number of followers and provide at least one post per day.

Which MEPs elected in Lithuania in 2019 in your opinion are the best at providing information about their activities and work? N=1011, estimates in %

MEP	%
Petras Auštrevičius	13,2
Vilija Blinkevičiūtė	21,8
Rasa Juknevičienė	11,6
Stasys Jakeliūnas	3,5
Andrius Kubilius	12
Aušra Maldeikienė	17,9
Liudas Mažylis	10,8
Juozas Olekas	4,9
Bronis Ropė	4,7
Valdemar Tomaševski	2
Viktor Uspaskich	11,1
Difficult to say	46,8

Figure 4: Evaluation of the communication of MEPs elected in Lithuania in 2019
Source: Prepared by authors according to the data provided by Spinter Research, 2020
Note: More than one answer was possible

The leader according to the results is Blinkevičiūtė, who is serving a third term as an MEP. Blinkevičiūtė was mentioned by lower-income respondents from smaller towns. This is no accident. She is still one of the most popular politicians and tries to work more with senior constituents trying to provide information not only on Facebook or her website but in the regional media as well. It seems that this strategy is working. Maldeikienė is well known among 26–55-year-old respondents, representatives with the highest income living in the bigger cities. Juknevičienė and Kubilius were mentioned by respondents from big cities with higher education and the highest income. The findings indicate that seven out of the eleven MEPs are noticed for their communication by the respondents (more than 10 per cent of the respondents mentioned individual MEPs as being best at informing citizens about their activities). The others (only 2-5 percentages of respondents mentioned four MEPs as performing their communication best) should work more on the improvement of their communication, especially if they will seek re-election and have no wish to rely on chance.

Looking at the results, all the MEPs should review their strategies if they would like to contribute to the visibility of EP and their own works. As the MEPs in the interviews point out, they think that there is enough information and they are doing as much as possible to provide information (from direct meetings to paid articles in newspapers or news media portals, they always agree to talk on TV if asked). However, it seems that the information does not reach the constituents and the majority of MEPs should think about new communication strategies to attract the attention of the citizens and be more visible. This argument is supported by the data from Figure 3. The respondents' answers clearly show that they are not well informed by the MEPs themselves on their work (53% think that MEPs inform poorly, and less than half (45%) that they inform well). As many of the respondents mentioned that the most useful channels for receiving information on the EP and MEP activities are television (62%) and news media portals (52%), leaving social media platforms in third place (36%) and radio in fourth (18%), MEPs elected in Lithuania should not rely only on the simple presentation of information in social media but should think how to make their communication with followers more attractive and how to engage journalists from mass media to be more visible and more often present in mass media channels.

Conclusions

Research on online communication highlights two basic motivation factors for greater involvement in online communication for MEPs – 1) personal interest in building networks and connections with party members, establishing closer relationships with citizens and the electorate; 2) the European Commission (EC) encouraging MEPs to contribute to enhancing the reputation of the EU and promoting greater levels of interaction between the EP and the citizens of the Member States. Based on the interviews and analysis of Facebook profiles, this article has examined how MEPs elected in Lithuania for the 9th legislative term tend to communicate online. The findings indicate that all the MEPs elected in Lithuania are motivated to engage in online communication, thinking that information on EP issues is important for raising the awareness of citizens about the EP and the EU. All MEPs are trying to contribute to the visibility and increased understanding of the EP and their work by using several channels of communication: from direct communication with constituents visiting them in their regions, articles in the regional media to various online platforms such as social media Facebook profiles, YouTube, websites, articles in the news media portals. Their choice is usually dependent on the targeted groups they would like to reach. Those who concentrate more on the older generation and people living in rural areas use traditional mass media more actively, leaving all the possibilities of social media less exploited. MEPs wishing to have a wider electorate try to use all the possibilities and actively engage in online communication.

Based on the findings of the quantitative analysis of the Facebook profiles of MEPs, the popularity of Facebook among the MEPs was observed. All eleven MEPs elected in Lithuania have Facebook profiles but not all of them have websites. Half of them have a rather large numbers of 'fans' who actively react to posts by clicking 'likes' but not so actively engage in commenting and discussing the information in the posts. The strategy of low involvement in communication such as reading information or watching video posts and expressing their sentiments via likes and emojis prevails among the followers. In addition, the findings suggest that the majority of the MEPs prefer to use Facebook just for the dissemination of information and message distribution instead of focusing on interaction and engaging the audience in reciprocal communication by asking questions, requesting opinion on certain questions and encouraging more active reactions to their posts. In general terms, the major communication strategies used by politicians on Facebook in seeking visibility and self-promotion are representation and engagement strategies. They focus on clarity and the dissemination of information as well as on the creation of a favourable image. Interactivity is a marginalised strategy.

The data from the qualitative analysis of the topics of the posts indicate that messages on EP activities comprise usually slightly less than half of the MEPs' Facebook posts. The majority of them choose a video message format to present information on the EP activities. The dominant topics on EP matters relate to issues each MEP is interested in and are working on in certain committees. Just two MEPs avoid EP-related messages and focus their communication on the national or party politics.

The analysis identified a level of incongruence between the opinions of the MEPs and Lithuanian citizens regarding the availability of information on EP matters: the MEPs think that the issue is not a lack of information but rather a lack of interest from the citizens in EP matters; the citizens report that they do not have enough information on the EP and the MEPs' activities. Although the MEPs provide information using a variety of communication tools and strategies, it seems that the information does not reach the constituents and the majority of the MEPs should consider new forms of communication to attract the attention of the citizens and to be more visible. Online communication on Facebook and other social media platforms can have positive effects on the visibility of the MEPs but the politicians should change their strategies. Focusing not only on representation but on engagement and networking strategies can be helpful. To mobilise followers to comment and share posts, their own involvement is important as well as visual cues, and regular posting is also important.

In summary, the political communication of MEPs has the potential to increase the interest of citizens in EU politics and contribute to a higher level of knowledge on EP matters, but the majority of the MEPs should rethink their communication strategies and make the communication simpler and more attractive, put more effort into engaging the constituents in steady interest in what is going on at the EU level in politics.

This case study is limited in scope and focuses on the online communication of just one term of MEPs in one country. Therefore, its findings cannot pretend to offer any generalisations. However, its focus on a non-election period is rather new and not studied intensively. Accordingly, this issue has many opportunities for future research. The trends from one case may encourage future comparative research. Moreover, future studies of MEPs' online communication during non-election periods could also focus on a comprehensive analysis of such communication strategies as seeking clarity, self-promotion, private self-personalisation, posts going viral (content of messages which generate active sharing) and aim to provide politicians with recommendations on how to improve their online communication.

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Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė is an associate professor and senior researcher at the Department of Political Science, Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania. Her research focuses on political communication, election campaigns and voting behaviour, Euroscepticism, and European Union politics. Her recent publications in journals are (co-authored with Sima Rakutienė) How Lithuanian citizens perceive the European Parliament? EU legitimacy issue and trust in the European Parliament in *Croatian International Relations Review, 28*(87), 2020; Representation of Lithuanian citizens in the European Parliament: between European and national interests in *Politologija*, 2020. She has recently written a book chapter in volume *Thirty years of political campaigning in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2019.
ORCID: 0000-0001-8756-7306

Sima Rakutienė is Head of the Department of Regional Studies, associate professor and senior researcher at the Department of Regional Studies, Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania. Her research focuses on European integration, EU foreign and neighbourhood policies, comparative regionalism, and EU institutions. Her recent book is called *Where is the power of Europe? Normative, institutional, and economic sources in the foreign politics of the European Union* (2019; in Lithuanian). Her recent publications in journals (co-authored with Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė) are How Lithuanian citizens perceive the European Parliament? EU legitimacy issue and trust in the European Parliament in *Croatian International Relations Review, 28*(87), 2020; Representation of Lithuanian citizens in the European Parliament: between European and national interests in *Politologija*, 2020.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6459-5224

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