FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

LESS IS MORE: HOW POLITICAL PARTIES REACH YOUNG VOTERS ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS ACROSS FOUR COUNTRIES

ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines the social media strategies of political parties targeting young voters ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, focusing on Facebook and Instagram activity in Germany, Sweden, Hungary and Poland.

Social democratic parties and the Greens posted the highest proportion of content related to young people, relative to their total posts, but struggled to generate comparable engagement. Conversely, far-right parties achieved the highest average interaction levels, despite posting fewer messages specific to young people, suggesting that precise, resonant messaging is more effective than broad outreach.

The analysis reveals that parties often addressed young voters as a homogeneous group, lacking nuanced messaging tailored to diverse subgroups within the young people demographic. Content varied significantly by country, and democratic parties frequently failed to meet young people's demands for concrete proposals and compelling narratives. This has left a gap that can be exploited by far-right parties, who effectively fill it with simplistic solutions. Additionally, the use of toxic rhetoric – most prevalent among far-right parties – not only boosts engagement but also corrodes democratic discourse by undermining respectful competition of ideas.

Recommendations for social democratic parties:

1. **Adopt a participatory communication model:** involve young people directly in content creation and dissemination to empower them as active contributors.
2. **Craft relatable and concrete messaging:** address the concerns of young people with clear, specific policies and engage in two-way communication to build trust.
3. **Avoid toxic rhetoric:** maintain constructive, respectful dialogue while actively challenging anti-democratic narratives.
4. **Regulate social media algorithms**: advocate for policies that discourage the promotion of divisive content and encourage healthier public debate.
5. **Strengthen and adapt legislation**: ensure robust enforcement of regulations like the Digital Services Act, while remaining flexible to address emerging challenges during the 2024-2029 legislative period.

AUTHORS

ELENA AVRAMOVSKA
Senior Researcher, FES

MATTEO DRESSLER
Policy Analyst, FEPS

MICHAEL JENNEWEIN
Researcher, FES

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG FES Regional Office for International Cooperation Democracy of the Future

DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

Policy Brief published in December 2024 by

This Policy Brief was produced with the financial support of the European Parliament. It does not represent the view of the European Parliament.

Builders of Progress

Builders of Progress is a FEPS-led series of research outputs that explore the key concerns and aspirations of young Europeans. It examines their opinions on a wide range of social issues, including (in)equality, climate change, political participation and the European Union. In the tradition of FEPS's previous Millennial Dialogue project, a major study is published every four years in which European youth are surveyed across many European countries. You can find the 2022 Builders of Progress survey here: https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Builders-of-Progress-Europes-Next-Gen.pdf.

Between these major outputs, we address important aspects highlighted in the surveys that deserve more attention and a more nuanced, often qualitative, analysis. This present publication is part of such a deep dive.

The research findings of the Builders of Progress series stimulate debate and provide sound advice on how to shape a progressive future with and for young people.

More information on Builders of Progress can be found here: https://feps-europe.eu/theme/youth-participation/.

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Introduction

Authors: Elena Avramovska, Matteo Dressler, Michael Jennewein[1]

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections have significantly shifted the balance of power in EU lawmaking. Far-right parties made substantial gains, while liberal and green parties were the biggest losers. Conversely, centre-right parties slightly increased their share of the vote, social democratic parties approximately maintained their seats and far-left parties gained some additional seats. These election results were highly anticipated not only for their impact on EU lawmaking, but also because millions of young people cast their votes for the first time. The recent lowering of the voting age to 16 for European elections in Germany and Belgium – joining Austria and Malta, which already allowed 16 year olds to vote, and Greece, which permits 17 year olds to vote – has heightened politicians' focus on mobilising young voters.

Traditionally, voter turnout in elections, including EP elections, has been low among young people. However, this trend began to change in 2019, with youth turnout reaching record highs in many European countries.[2] Driven strongly by concerns about climate change, this shift indicated growing interest in European politics among young people and increasing support for green political parties.

Five years and multiple crises later, the political landscape in Europe has changed dramatically. The 2024 European elections witnessed a decline in voter turnout among those under 25. Only 36% of eligible voters in this age group participated, marking a 6% decrease from the 42% turnout in the 2019 elections, while the overall population's participation rate remained stable at 51%.[3] Additionally, far-right parties have surged in popularity in many countries, with significant backing from young voters. In some nations, young voters are supporting anti-immigration or anti-establishment parties in numbers equal to or even greater than the rest of the population. Furthermore, far-right parties have adeptly utilised social media platforms like TikTok to attract new, young supporters.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief asks how political parties targeted young voters on social media in the campaign preceding the 2024 European elections. Which strategies were more successful in engaging voters on these platforms?

We analysed social media posts on Instagram and Facebook to identify key themes, the emotional tone of online conversations and messaging strategies. The platforms were selected based on public data accessibility, which enabled an automatic, text-generated analysis.

Country selection: we used a pragmatic approach of using the parameters of equal geographic distribution representative of all European regions: German; Hungary; Poland; and Sweden.[4] We opted for countries with larger populations, so our sample sizes are significant. Furthermore, we looked for different competition dynamics at the party group level. For instance, we were interested in countries where the far right is claimed to be strong at targeting young voters and combining this with countries where green (GER) and conservative (HUN) parties are apparently strong at reaching young voters. As a reference group, we consistently monitored social democratic parties in all selected countries.

National parties monitored:

Country	Party	Acronym	EP group (new group in brackets)
GER	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD	ID (ESN)
GER	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD	S&D
GER	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne	Green/EFA
GER	Christdemokratische Union/Christlich Soziale Union	CDU/CSU	EPP
SWE	Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti	SAP	S&D
SWE	Moderaterna	M	EPP
SWE	Sverigedemokraterna	SD	ECR
HUN	Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség	Fidesz	NA (PfE)
HUN	Tisza	TISZA	NA (EPP)
HUN	Democratic Coalition/Magyar Szocialista Párt	DK/MSZP	S&D
HUN	Mi Hazank Mozgalom	MHM	NA (ESN)
POL	Koalicja Obywatelska	KO	EPP
POL	Lewica	Lewica	S&D
POL	Konfederacja	Konfederacja	NA (ESN)

Data collection: our project partner Democracy Reporting International (DRI) helped us gather the database for this research by using CrowdTangle to collect data from Instagram and Facebook between 1 March and 15 June 2024 following three steps.

1. We gathered posts from a range of party accounts, including official party accounts of the party leadership candidates running in the European elections in electable positions and party accounts of the young people's wing.
2. We filtered our collection of posts to identify posts related to the EP elections using a keyword list developed by DRI.
3. We further filtered the data to find posts targeting young voters, using a separate keyword list. This list included single-phrase keywords and combinations like "apprenticeship", "birthrate", "brain drain", "civic service" AND "young".

Spin-off: the project included a separate qualitative analysis of the TikTok election campaigns of our monitored parties in Germany. [5]

Data analysis: we translated the selected young-people-related posts into English for standardised analysis. Using BERTopic – an unsupervised machine-learning approach for automatically identifying key themes and narratives in large text corpora – we analysed social media posts referencing young voters or topics related to young people to uncover the dominant themes. Sentiment analysis evaluated the emotional tone of these posts, while engagement analysis assessed audience interactions. Note that the voting age for European elections differs slightly in Germany (16 years old) compared to our other country cases, which might partly explain different dynamics there.

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1. Quantitative data analysis

Around 10.6% of all posts related to the EP elections were directed at young voters (389 out of 3,665). As expected, the total number of posts targeting young people increased as the European elections (6-9 June) approached. This rise was not linear but reflected a general uptick in posts related to the 2024 European elections as the vote drew nearer (Figure 1). The highest number of posts (11) was recorded on 1 May and 21 May 2024. Among the top-20 most active accounts, István Ujhelyi of the Socialist Party (MSZP) led with 20 posts, just above the official account of Poland's extreme-right party Konfederacja (19 posts).

Social democratic (132 posts), far-right (113) and conservative parties (64) had the highest absolute number of posts in our sample, partly due to our focus on these party families and the number of accounts monitored. In contrast, green (33), liberal (24) and other actors (23) targeted young voters significantly less. When considering the share of their total social media posts aimed at young voters, social democrats led with 14.8%, followed by the greens with 12.79%, while conservative and far-right actors had the lowest share of 8.3% and 8.5%, respectively.

Figure 1. Social media posts related to EP elections directed at young people.
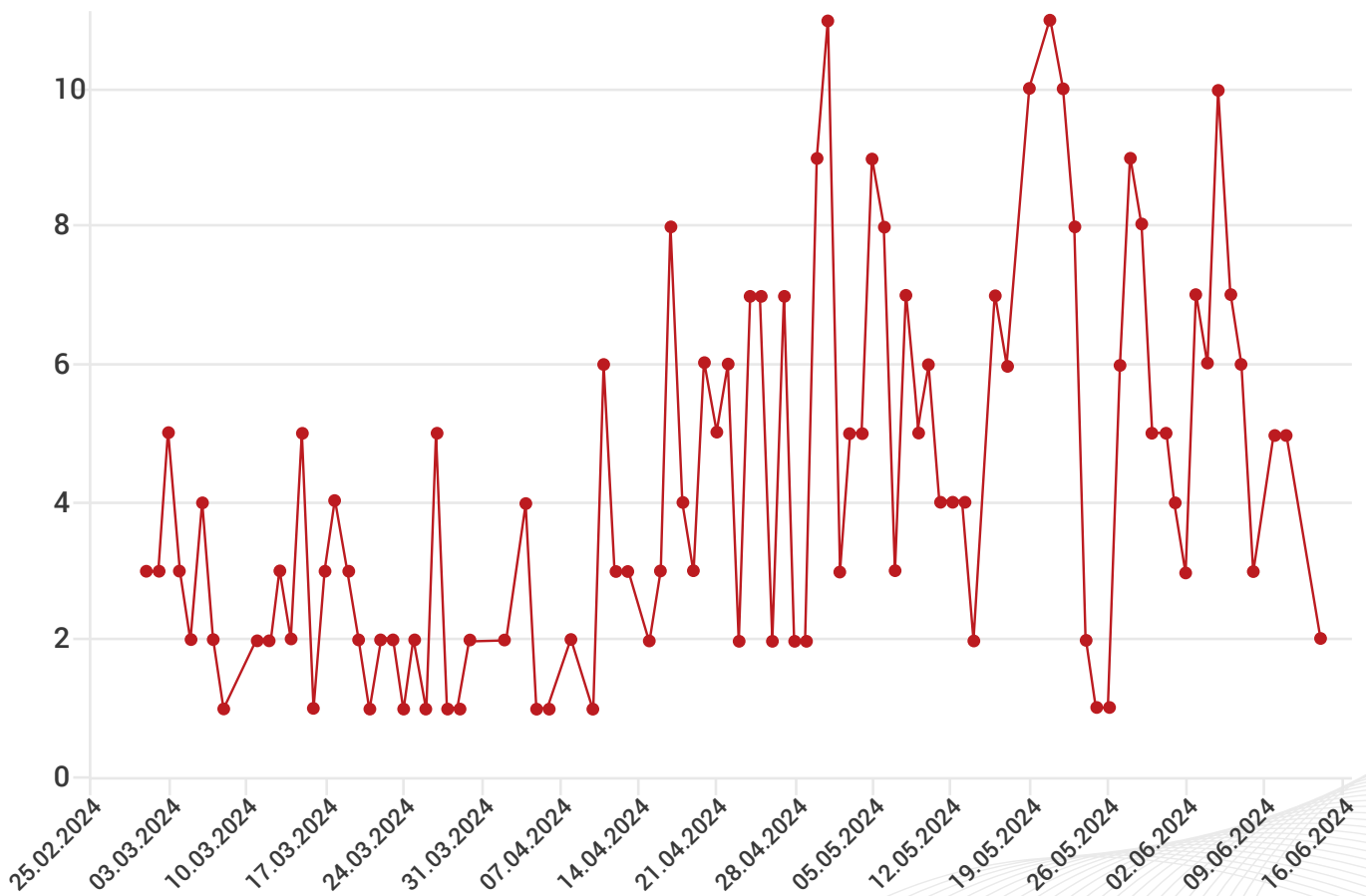
Furthermore, we observed significant differences in the social media targeting of young voters across countries (Figure 2). Hungarian (157) and German (110) politicians and party accounts were the most active at targeting young voters, while Swedish (43) were the least active in our sample. The scale of these differences suggests they might not only be due to chance, differences in platform importance by country or the slightly varying number of accounts analysed per country. Instead, the number of posts is also likely to be an indicator of the importance that political parties in the individual countries attach to young voters by addressing them more or less frequently on Instagram and Facebook.

While addressing young voters is the supply aspect of the equation, measuring whether these posts were actually liked, shared or commented on – our definition of measuring engagement on social media – gives a better idea of whether people were actually taking an interest in these posts. The highest engagement for posts related to young people were found for the far-right Swedish Democrats, followed by AfD in Germany and Konfederacja in Poland. Far-right parties led in engagement in every country we examined (Figure 3). Overall, far-right parties were trailed in engagement by green parties. Posts by conservative, liberal and social democratic parties, on the other hand, attracted the least engagement on average.

Figure 2. Number of social media posts targeting young people per country.
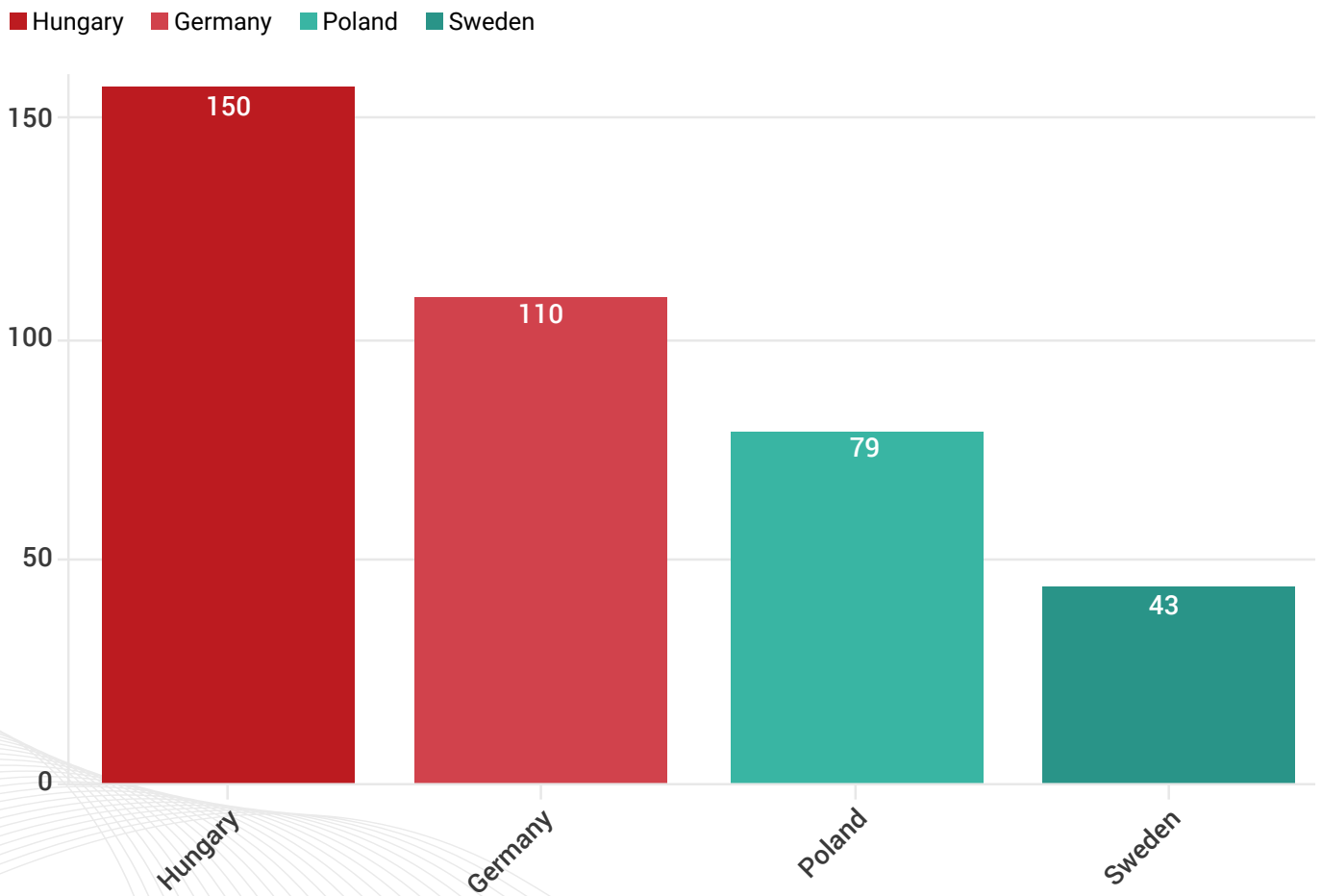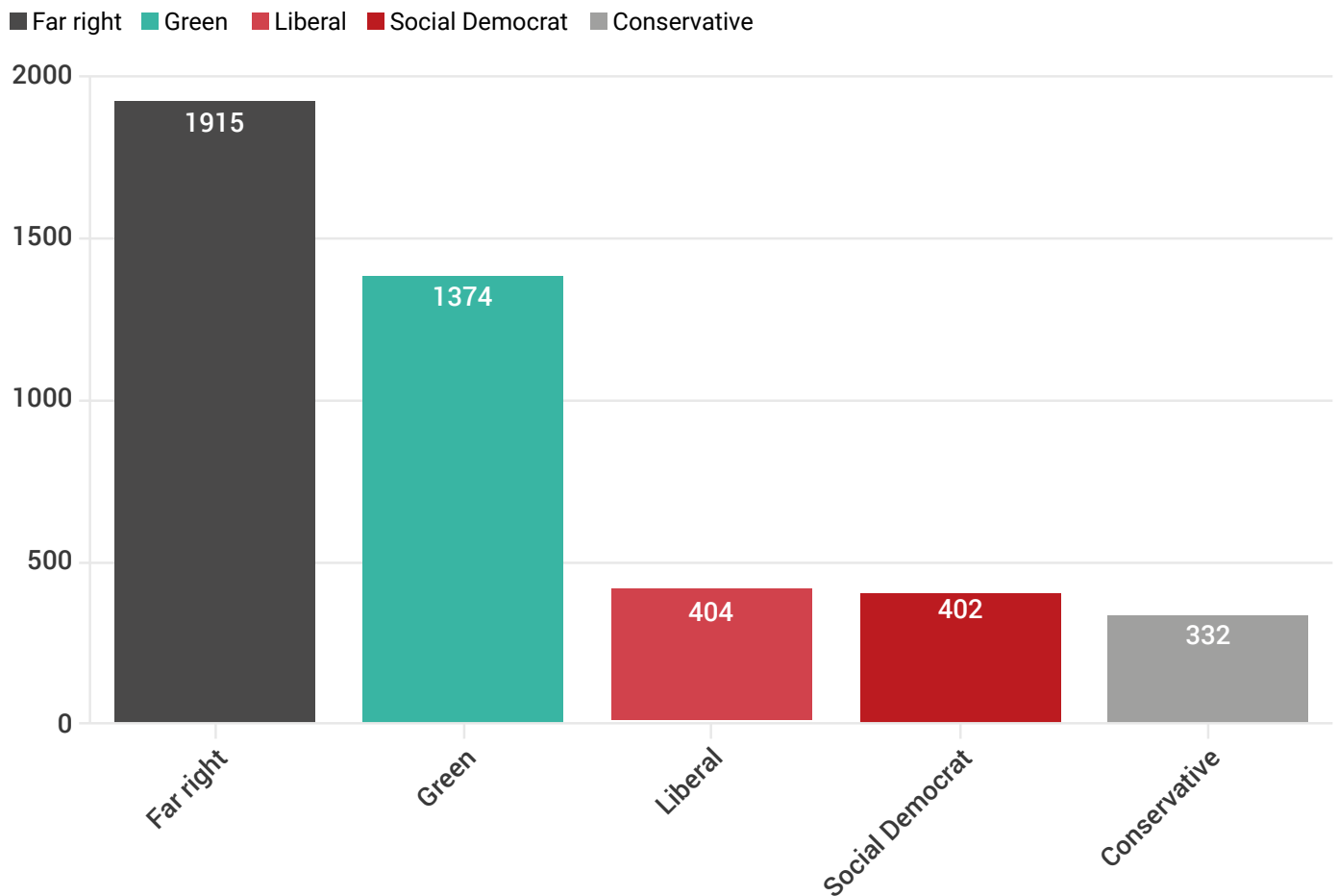

- Hungary
- Germany
- Poland
- Sweden

Country	Value
Hungary	150
Germany	110
Poland	79
Sweden	43

Figure 3. Average interaction with social media posts targeting young people by political ideology.

■ Far right ■ Green ■ Liberal ■ Social Democrat ■ Conservative


2. Sentiment analysis

To better understand which posts garnered more interactions – that is, create engagement, as defined above – we examined the relationship between their emotional tone (positive, negative or neutral) and political ideology. This often-used method in social media research, called sentiment analysis, allowed us to obtain sentiment scores ranging from −1 to 1, with −1 indicating very negative and 1 indicating very positive sentiment (Figure 4).

Although our analysis did not find a statistically significant relationship between post sentiment

and total interactions, our data indicates that far-right actors tended to produce the most negative content.[6] Notably, these actors, in almost all cases, also received the highest average engagement with their posts. Given that our findings lacked statistical significance – likely due to our limited sample size – it is important to consider broader datasets to assess how negative content influences engagement. Our analysis focused solely on post sentiment and did not examine the use of "toxic language" – language that is rude, disrespectful or unreasonable and likely to make someone leave the discussion.[7] However, our project partner DRI incorporated this aspect into their broader social media monitoring of the campaigns of political

Figure 4. Average sentiment score by ideology on a scale from −1 (very negative) to 1 (very positive).

■ Green ■ Conservative ■ Social Democrat ■ Liberal ■ Far right
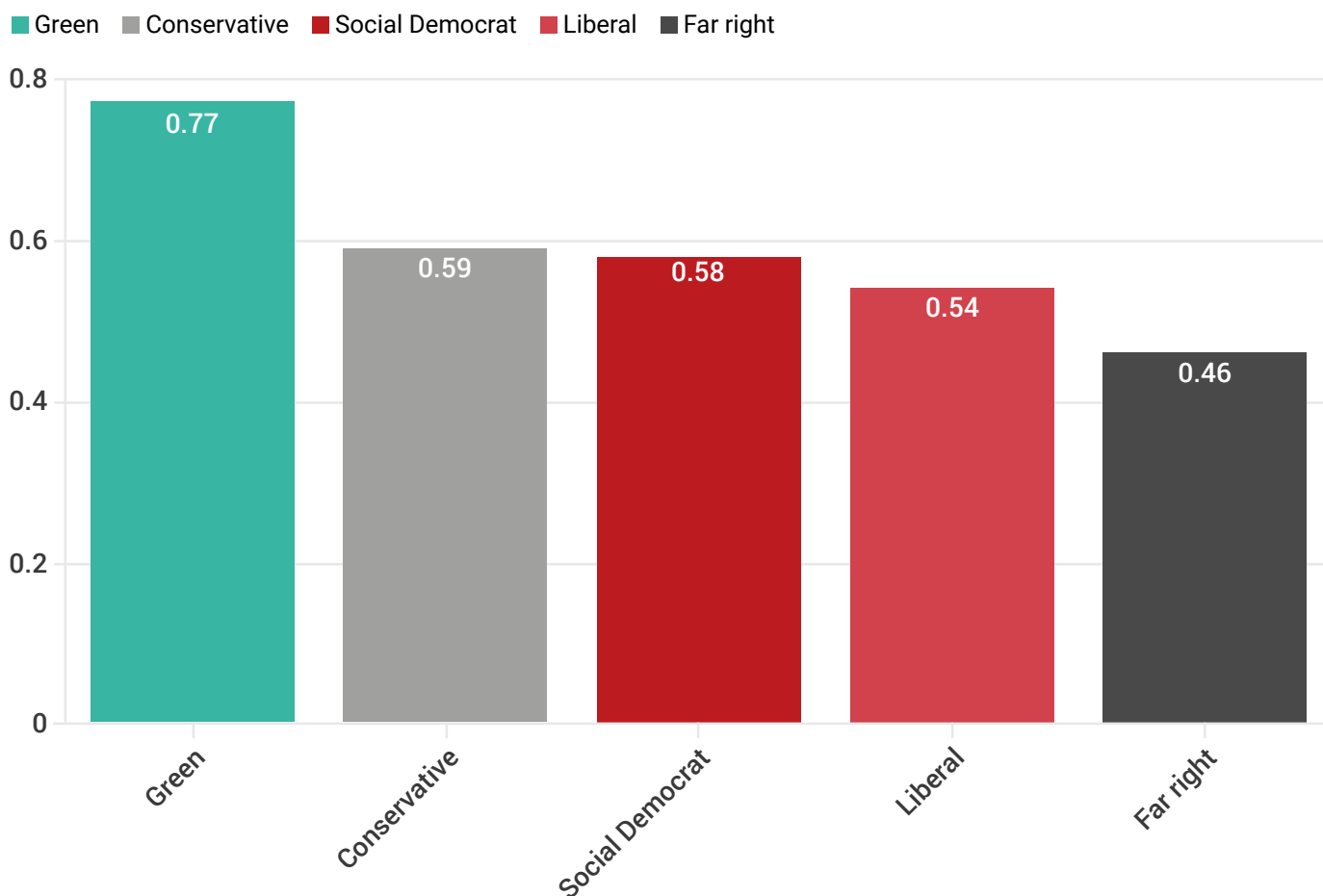
parties related to the 2024 European elections, extending beyond posts aimed specifically at young audiences.[8] Their findings reveal that Instagram and Facebook posts containing toxic content generated more interactions. Taken together, these results suggest that the engagement success of far-right actors may be linked to their use of negative and toxic content, highlighting the significant role such strategies play in driving social media interactions. These findings align with earlier research showing that negative content and news on social media tends to be shared more widely, thereby rewarding users who produce such material.[9]

3. Topics and narratives: A national story

European elections are still largely shaped by national contexts, and this is reflected in the respective election campaigns. To better understand the topics and narratives at play in each country, we analysed them on a country-by-country basis. Since automated modelling did not provide meaningful insights at this level due to the small sample size, we opted for a manual approach, reading and coding the content directly. Here is what we found.

Germany

Germany ranked second among the four countries monitored in terms of social media posts related to young people, with 110 posts focused on engaging young voters. The posts were relatively evenly distributed across political groups, with each group posting between 22 and 34 times. However, the engagement generated by these posts varied significantly (Figure 5). The far-right AfD achieved the highest average of 3,740 interactions per post, far outpacing other groups; the Greens followed with 992 interactions per post, while the SPD and CDU/CSU trailed with 409 and 159 interactions, respectively. Notably, the most popular single post also came from the AfD, amassing over 31,000 interactions.

The content focus of each party varied considerably. The CDU/CSU primarily created traditional campaign posts, frequently highlighting mobility programs for young people like Interrail. In contrast, the AfD consistently positioned itself as the "party for young people", using strong nationalist rhetoric, including a "Germany first" narrative, and responding aggressively to media scrutiny, especially an investigative report detailing their plans for mass re-immigration policies if they came to power.[10]

The Greens, meanwhile, emphasised mobility issues for young people, such as Interrail, and frequently referenced the EU's four freedoms, tying these themes to their core issue of climate change. Posts often highlighted climate change's impact on younger generations and celebrated the lowering of the voting age to 16, framing it as an opportunity for progressive voices to shape the future.

The SPD also discussed climate change but focused on presenting their vision for the EU's future. Unique among the parties, the SPD warned of the risks associated with rising far-right influence, emphasising the potential dangers for both young people and the broader population.

Hungary

Hungary emerged as the leader in social media posts targeting young people, with a total of 157 entries, primarily from the far-right Homeland Party and the social democrats (MSZP/DK). However, despite this high volume, engagement rates were relatively low, indicating that a large quantity of posts did not necessarily translate into high interaction. Notably, Peter Magyar of the Tisza party – an emerging centre-right figure – achieved the highest engagement per post, outperforming the established Green and other parties (Figure 5). In contrast, the most active posts from both the social democrats and the Homeland Party generated notably low levels of engagement.

The economy was a central theme across parties, with discussions focusing on EU fund allocation, public investment, youth employment and education. Campaign messaging frequently included criticisms of political opponents. Women's rights and gender equality also emerged as central topics in the debate. Politicians from Momentum and MSZP shared posts advocating for stronger protections of women's and girls' physical and mental health, with a particular focus on reproductive health. In contrast, representatives from Fidesz voiced opposition to the growing influence of "gender ideology" in their posts.

Peter Magyar's posts, though few, drew significant engagement by targeting the government with pointed critiques. Previously recognised mainly as the former justice minister's ex-husband, Magyar has now become a significant challenger to the ruling Fidesz party, aided by his recently formed Tisza party. Tisza's rapid ascent can be partially attributed to its success in mobilising young Hungarians.[11]

The ruling Fidesz party also produced a high volume of posts, primarily emphasising family policies, economic stability and peace, but these posts generally attracted limited interaction. Meanwhile, the social democrats presented a broad range of topics in their posts, with a strong emphasis on young people's mobilisation, although they focused less on anti-corruption messaging than other parties. This suggests a strategic variation among parties

in targeting young voters, with some emphasising economic opportunities and critique of governance, while others highlight social policies and national stability.
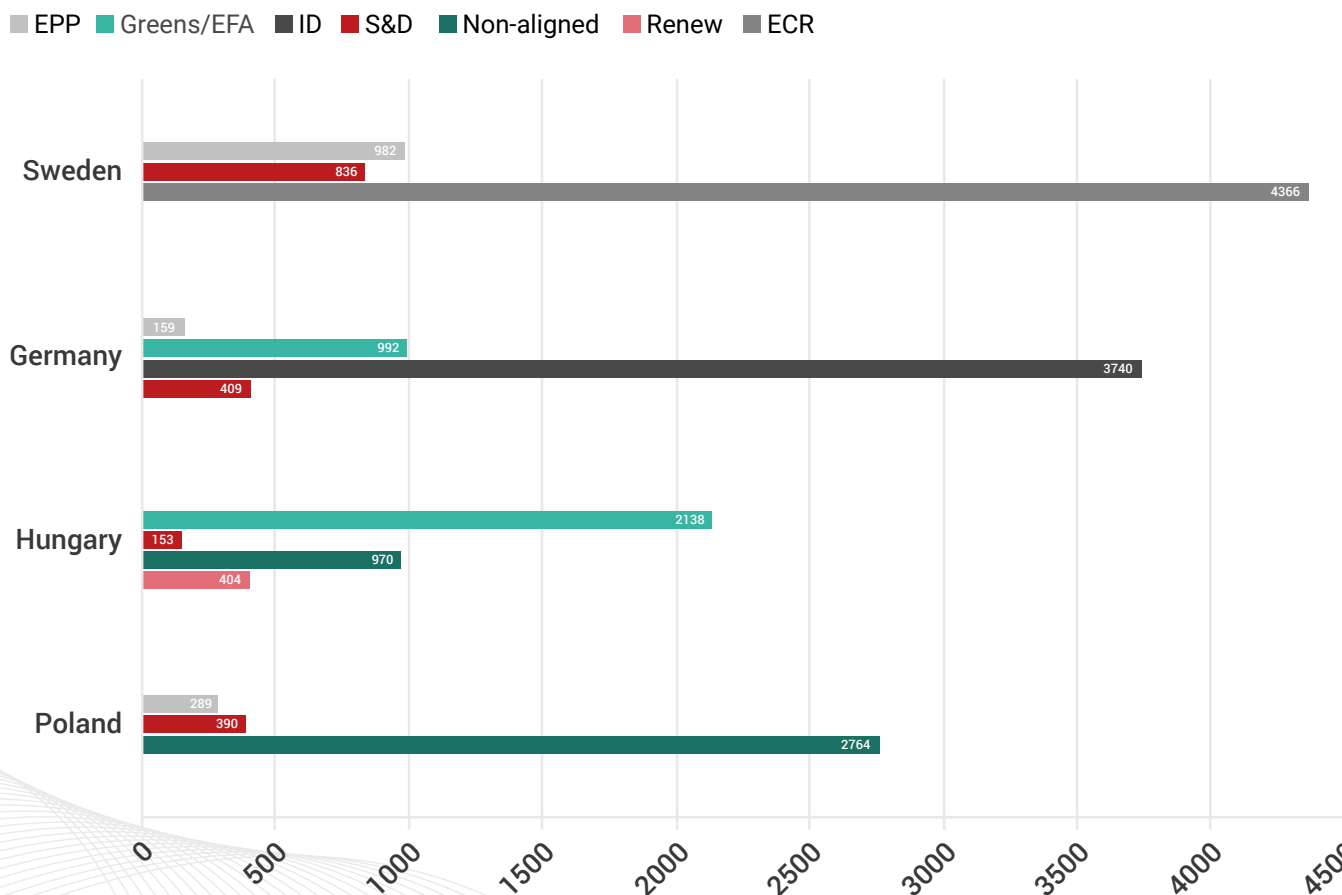
Poland

In Poland, 79 campaign posts targeted at young people positioned the country ahead of Sweden but below Germany and Hungary, in terms of online engagement focused on young people. Among the Polish parties, the social democratic Lewica posted the most young-people-related content, followed by the centre-right Civic Coalition (KO) and the far-right Konfederacja, which produced 20 posts aimed at young people in our sample. Despite Lewica's higher volume, Konfederacja achieved the highest average interaction per post, reflecting strong engagement with their messaging.

Distinct themes emerged across the parties. Lewica emphasised their vision for a socially just and equal EU, framing the EU as a platform for young people's involvement in shaping a progressive future. This approach underscored Lewica's focus on directly addressing young people's issues and promoting active young people's participation. The Civic Coalition's young-people-related content, by contrast, concentrated on family and children's welfare policies, highlighting initiatives to improve these areas.

Figure 5. Average interaction with a party family by country.

Legend: EPP, Greens/EFA, ID, S&D, Non-aligned, Renew, ECR

Sweden: EPP 982, S&D 836, ECR 4366
Germany: EPP 159, Greens/EFA 992, ID 3740, S&D 409
Hungary: Greens/EFA 2138, S&D 153, Non-aligned 970, Renew 404
Poland: EPP 289, S&D 390, Non-aligned 2764

Note: Before the election, when the data for this project was collected, Fidesz and Tisza in Hungary and Konfederacja in Poland were non-aligned with EP groups

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Konfederacja, with fewer posts but higher engagement, focused heavily on attacking political opponents and questioning the EU's role in delivering economic growth, coupled with strong anti-migration rhetoric. Their young-people-related content resonated with a segment of young voters attracted to their nationalist and Eurosceptic messages, indicating a strategic focus on mobilising disillusionment with the EU and concerns over economic issues. This varied approach among parties suggests differing strategies in appealing to young voters, from fostering EU-oriented progressive visions to capitalising on economic and nationalist sentiments.

Sweden

In Sweden's 2024 European election campaign, political parties exhibited relatively low social media activity targeting young people, with only 43 posts analysed across three main parties. The Social Democratic Party of Sweden (SAP) was the most active, contributing 27 posts, followed by the centre-right Moderatana party with ten posts and the far-right Sweden Democrats (SD) with six posts. Despite posting less frequently, the SD achieved significantly higher average engagement per post (4,366 interactions) compared to SAP (836) and Moderatana (982). The SD also had the most engaging single post, accumulating 9,528 interactions.

The predominant theme among all parties was campaign events, accounting for half of the posts. These typically included reflections on daily campaign activities, such as visits to schools and young people's institutions but seldom delved into broader campaign issues. The SAP uniquely focused on young people in their messaging, with their posts explicitly encouraging young people to vote or support young candidates. These appeals were primarily disseminated through the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League and occasionally tied to traditional social democratic priorities like free education and social cohesion.

Moderatana's content related to young people was minimal. Their young-people-focused posts featured politicians engaging with university students, launching young people's campaigns and discussing mental health support for the younger demographic. However, due to the small number of posts, definitive conclusions about their engagement strategy for young people are limited.

While the SD achieved high engagement rates, they had few posts targeting young voters. Their most engaging content centred on themes like national sovereignty, strict immigration policies and security concerns, often only mentioning young people in passing, not as the core part of their message.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our analysis of political parties' social media campaigns on Facebook and Instagram during the lead-up to the 2024 EP elections reveals several key insights into strategies to engage young people. Parties frequently mentioned young people in the context of general campaign events, calls to vote or criticisms of opponents. However, these references often treated young people as a homogeneous group, lacking targeted messaging to specific subgroups within the demographic.

Content related to young people covered diverse topics, such as the economy, EU fund allocation and women's rights, but without a consistent pattern across countries. Notably, increasing the volume of posts related to young people did not correlate with higher engagement. Social democratic parties and the Greens posted the most content related to young people, relative to their total posts, but did not achieve commensurate interaction levels. In contrast, despite fewer posts focused on young people, far-right parties garnered the highest average engagement, suggesting that targeted, resonant messaging is more effective than broad outreach.

Our findings are mirrored by analysis of TikTok campaigning in Germany, where the far-right AfD achieved significant interactions with fewer posts. The AfD's strategy included outsourcing content distribution to fans and followers, creating a more direct and engaging approach for young voters.

This may have contributed to their substantial gains among voters under 30.[12]

While our analysis did not find a statistically significant link between post sentiment and engagement, broader studies indicate that toxic and negative content tends to receive more interactions on social media platforms. This suggests a troubling pattern, where divisive content is amplified due to social media algorithms prioritising highly engaging material.

In addition to the findings presented in our research, other analyses have identified several key factors that explain the success of far-right parties' political content on social media. These factors include significant investment in digital communication resources, positioning themselves as alternatives to mainstream media, creating networks of politicians and activists who act as influencers, and fostering a strong collective online identity among supporters.[13]

Two primary challenges emerge from these findings. Firstly, democratic parties often fail to meet young people's demands for concrete proposals and narratives addressing their concerns, leaving a void that far-right parties can fill with simplistic solutions. Secondly, the prevalence of toxic content undermines liberal democratic discourse by eroding respectful competition between ideas.

Recommendations

1 Adopt a participatory communication model
Politicians should move away from a traditional sender-receiver approach and involve young people as active participants in content creation and dissemination. This "one to many to many more" model empowers individuals to amplify messages through their networks, increasing reach and engagement.

2 Craft relatable and concrete messaging
Politicians should address young people directly, offering specific takeaways in a dialogue-driven manner. Use storytelling to highlight issues, showcase institutions providing support and outline concrete policies. Engage young people as equals, valuing their input and encouraging two-way communication.

3 Avoid toxic rhetoric
Although negative content may boost engagement, progressive parties should refrain from using toxic language, as it contradicts liberal democratic values. This should not prevent them from calling out enemies of democracy – though this alone is not a sufficient strategy – or from polarising on issues they are traditionally known for, such as combating inequalities.

4 Regulate social media algorithms
Social democrats must ensure that policymaking reins in platforms that economically benefit from promoting toxic content and compels them to adjust their algorithms to encourage healthier political debates. At the same time, they must tread the delicate balance of not infringing too much upon the principles of free speech. Simple fact-checking and hate-speech monitoring are insufficient.

5 Monitor, implement and update legislation
Upcoming elections will test the effectiveness of current tools like the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the "Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising" directive. EU institutions should closely monitor their impact and be prepared to introduce updates or new legislation in the 2024-2029 mandate, especially considering the influence of US-based platforms in the context of a Trump government. Concretely, social democrats should support the effective implementation of regulations like the DSA, which depends on empowering digital services coordinators with resources and conducting public awareness campaigns about citizens' rights.

Endnotes

1 With the support of Ognjan Denkosvski.

2 "2019 European elections: Record turnout driven by young people". European Parliament, 24 September 2019.

3 "EU post-electoral survey 2024". Eurobarometer.

4 We also collected data for Spain to represent the south of Europe. However, due to insufficient data – possibly caused by the specific automatic search models we used – we had to exclude this case.

5 Details of this study (in German only) are given in M. Bösch (2024) "Von Reichweite und Algorithmen: Analyse des Europawahlkampfs ausgewählter Parteien auf TikTok". Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, September.

6 We consciously did not mention far-left parties because the small number of their posts in our dataset makes it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions about their performance. The "other" category also revealed very few posts and consisted of parties not aligned with political groups before the European elections but was dominated in our sample by the far-right parties Fidesz and Konfederacja and produced fairly negative posts.

7 "From engagement to enmity: Toxicity and key narratives in EP elections 2024". Democracy Reporting International, 24 June 2024.

8 "Dashboard: European elections 2024". Democracy Reporting International.

9 Watson, J., S. van der Linden, M. Watson et al. (2024) "Negative online news articles are shared more to social media". *Scientific Reports*, 14: 21592. DOI: 10.1038/s41598-024-71263-z

10 Bensmann, M., J. von Daniels, A. Dowideit et al. (2024) "Secret plan against Germany". Correctiv, 15 January.

11 Rutai, L. (2024) "Generation apathy: How Peter Magyar is mobilizing Hungary's youth". Radio Free Europe, 1 August.

12 Bösch, M. (2024) "Von Reichweite und Algorithmen: Analyse des Europawahlkampfs ausgewählter Parteien auf TikTok".

13 Hillje, J. (2024) "Social media: Die digitale Dominanz der AfD brechen!" Blätter, February, pp. 13-16.

About the authors

ELENA AVRAMOVSKA

Elena Avramovska is a researcher and practitioner specialising in various dimensions of democracy research. She holds an Erasmus Mundus PhD in political sciences from the Université libre de Bruxelles and the University of Geneva, as well as an Erasmus Mundus master's in global studies from the University of Leipzig and the University of Vienna. During the course of her PhD, she spent one year at the University of Oxford as a visiting researcher. Her work has received funding from the European Commission, the Swiss National Research Foundation and the Open Society Foundation. Elena has contributed to publications with Oxford University Press, Routledge and the *Journal of Democracy*.

MATTEO DRESSLER

Matteo Dressler is the Foundation for European Progressive Studies policy analyst in the field of democracy, participation and young people. From 2015 to 2018, he worked in Berlin at the peacebuilding NGO Berghof Foundation. As a researcher, he studied inclusive peace processes, EU support to peacebuilding-centred governance reform and the role of citizen participation in transitions from autocracy to democracy. From 2019 to 2021, he worked for the Flemish Peace Institute in Brussels, where he researched international firearms trafficking and firearms violence in Europe, focusing on EU policies on these issues. Matteo holds an MSc from Uppsala University in peace and conflict studies.

About the authors

MICHAEL JENNEWEIN

Michael Jennewein is a researcher and project manager at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Democracy of the Future Office in Vienna focussing on how economic concerns drive dissatisfaction with democracy, especially with regards to the rise of the radical right. In his work, he specialises in how to make empirical evidence understandable and useful to political decisionmakers. He holds a BA in philosophy and economics from the University of Bayreuth and an MA in technology governance and digital transformation from the Tallinn University of Technology. Michael previously worked as an economist at the Austrian think tank Momentum Institut.

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European Political Foundation - Nº 4 BE 896.230.213 | Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)

www.feps-europe.eu | Twitter/Instagram: @FEPS_Europe | Facebook: @FEPSEurope

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The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is Germany's oldest political foundation, working in over 100 countries to promote democracy and social justice. In Vienna, the Democracy of the Future Office focuses on the challenges facing democracy across the OSCE region, addressing issues such as the rise of autocratic tendencies and declining trust in democratic institutions. Through research on cross-country developments and collaboration with national FES offices and partner organisations, our mission is to provide insights and impetus on how democracy can be safeguarded and revitalised.

FES REGIONAL OFFICE FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION | Reichsratsstr. 13/5, A-1010 Vienna (Austria)

www.democracy.fes.de | Twitter: @FES_Democracy

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