Titel:

Analyzing the European parliamentary elections in 2019: Actor visibility and issue-framing in transnational media

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Kurzzusammenfassung

The chapter looks at the coverage of the 2019 electoral campaigns of the European Parliament (EP) in transnational media and examines the actor visibility and issue-framing by deploying a discourse network analysis. The results demonstrate that various domestic actors from different EU member states are featured in the media and that political conflicts on a transnational migration policy and transnational climate policy are strongly present. These findings shed light on the transnationalization of the public sphere, and the use of studying transnational media in EP electoral campaign.

Schlagworte

Transnational media, Discourse network analysis, Election campaigns, European elections 2019, Transnationalization of the public sphere

1. Introduction

The elections to the European Parliament (EP) are widely seen as the most serious attempt to reduce the democratic deficit of the European Union (EU). Electoral campaigns raise the public's awareness of and attention to European issues, and voters are influenced by these public debates (Schlesinger, 1999). Moreover, recent studies on the emergence of new political conflicts across Europe demonstrate that the immigration issue as well as the European integration process create new cleavages across Europe (Kriesi et al. 2012). However, EP elections are still understood as *second-order elections* (Hix & Marsh 2011; Reif and Schmitt 1980), because "there is less at stake" (Reif & Schmitt 1980, p. 9).[2] Additionally,

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[2] See also the chapter by Hendrik Träger and Lisa Andres.

communication studies corroborate this view by demonstrating that domestic issues and actors prevail in the EP electoral campaigns (Machill et al. 2006).

With regard to the emergence of a transnational or European public sphere, it has been argued that such a public is impossible due to differences in language, culture, heritage, and media systems. Nonetheless, transnational media – understood as "media that address audiences beyond and across national borders" (Brüggemann & Schulz-Forberg 2009, p. 696) – exist and form part of a European public sphere. Yet, transnational media are rarely studied in relation to how they mobilize the public and influence agenda-setting processes. The present study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing transnational media outlets in Europe covering the electoral campaigns for the European Parliament in 2019. Following the typology of transnational media set out by Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg (2009), I investigate the *Financial Times*, *politico.eu*, and *Deutsche Welle* so as to explore the effects of actor visibility and issue-framing by deploying the methodology of discourse network analysis (Leifeld 2016b).

2. Actors and Issues in electoral campaigns for the European Parliament

Studies on electoral campaigns for the EP usually focus on national media outlets and analyze the salience and frames of electoral campaigns in national contexts. In fact, such studies underline the *second-order elections* narrative, because they show the dominance of domestic issues and actors in these campaigns (Machill et al. 2006), although a slight increase in the Europeanization of actors and issues can be noted in recent EP electoral campaigns (Schuck et al. 2011). Accordingly, *my first expectation* is that a transnational actor constellation can be identified, demonstrating the visibility of different domestic actors from various EU member states and EU actors in the transnational media.

While an emerging European public sphere is seen as crucial in the bid to reduce the EU's democratic deficit, scholars have demonstrated that the Europeanization of the public sphere is rather segmented, policy-specific, and context-dependent (de Wilde et al. 2014; Heft & Pfetsch 2012; Wessler et al. 2008). Studies show that transnational media articulate and also normatively support the idea of a transnational public sphere. Since these transnational media have a rather small and elitist readership, they use different framing strategies to link local or national news with global issues to appeal to the broader public. Such strategies are reflected in the workings of journalists in these transnational media and also rely on transnational networks and collaboration between journalists (Chalaby 2002; Firmstone 2008; Heft & Pfetsch 2012; Williams & Toula 2017). However, transnational media are hardly considered as data

sources for the analysis of electoral campaigns. This is especially surprising in the context of the European Parliamentary elections, since these electoral campaigns are relevant for all EU member states and (potentially) create an *attention window* for European actors and European issues. Whether this is the case in transnational media is the question of the present study. Consequently, *my second expectation* is that the segmented and policy-specific Europeanization is also present in the issue-framing of transnational media. Especially issues that have come to wider attention in recent times of crisis (monetary and migration issues) might be more relevant in the transnational media sphere.

3. Data and Methods

The present study analyzes the transnationalization of public spheres by selecting transnational media outlets (Brüggemann & Schulz-Forberg 2009). The three transnational media sources (*Financial Times (FT)*, *politico.eu,* and *Deutsche Welle*) have different characteristics.[3] The *FT*, as global media, tries to frame issues and cover news across the globe even though the *FT*'s headquarters are located in the UK and situated in Europe. *Politico.eu*, as pan-regional media, focuses on a specific region, namely the EU. *Deutsche Welle*, as national media with a transnational mission, reaches people across the (German) national territory, but it offers German-influenced coverage of international news and reports. Additionally, the *FT* and *politico.eu* are perceived as highly influential media for EU practitioners (ComRes 2018; ECPA 2015). Hence, these three media have not been selected to compare their electoral campaign coverage, but rather as a first attempt to map the transnational media arena.

A keyword string in the database Factiva was used to select articles from the *FT* and *Deutsche Welle* (including the online version of these outlets).[4] The blog posts on *politico.eu* have been web scrapped with the R package rvest (Wickham 2016) by using the politico-tag *European Elections 2019* for the articles. All articles between May 1st and May 25th have been selected. On May 2nd, the *Spitzenkandidaten debate* at the European University Institute (Florence, Italy) took place and the lead candidates (Manfred Weber, Frans Timmermans, Guy Verhofstadt and Ska Keller) discussed a diverse range of EU policy issues. The event is understood as the starting point of the main phase of the EP electoral campaign. While the first election day was

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3 Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg define a fourth type of transnational media, the international media (like French TV station Arte). However, I was not aware of any (quality) newspaper that fits in this type and therefore, I excluded this type.

4 The following keyword list was used: (Europe* AND election* AND Parliament*) OR (EU AND election* AND EP).

on May 23rd in the Netherlands, I included the following two days to capture any final discursive changes before the main election day on May 26th.

In total, 308 articles have been selected (111 articles in the *FT*, 123 on *politico.eu*, and 74 in *Deutsche Welle*) and then coded in the software Discourse Network Analyzer (Leifeld et al. 2019). Based on the claims-making method (Koopmans & Statham 1999), single claims in the articles are analyzed by coding the speaker, the institutional affiliation of the speaker, the issue and whether the speaker agrees or disagrees with the claim. 419 statements have been identified (125 in the *FT*, 188 on *politico.eu*, and 106 in *Deutsche Welle*). The discourse network analysis combines social network and discourse analysis by investigating the co-occurrence of actors and frames in public debates (Leifeld 2016b; Wallaschek 2019). Discourse networks are affiliation networks, because two types of nodes are represented in the network and only different types of nodes can be linked in the discourse networks. I use *congruence networks* to analyze the actor constellation. This means that in these one-mode projection networks, actors are linked if they agree on the same issue (Leifeld 2016a).

4. Findings

4.1 Analyzing the actor constellation

The results are presented with regard to the actor constellation in the transnational discourse and regarding the issue presence. First, I show in Figure 1 an actor congruence network that visualizes the whole time period. If actors are linked, they share the use of an issue. The actors with the highest share of claims are labeled. The different shades of grey symbolize the different organizational actor types.

Mainstream parties (light grey nodes) are the most central actors and are strongly present in the electoral campaign discourse. The visibility of the Dutch PvdA, German CSU, Belgian OpenVLD, and German Die Grünen indicates a public debate among the lead candidates (Timmermans, Weber, Verhofstadt, and Keller). The numerous links between those parties, however, also show that they are not on opposite sides, but agree on several issues. Also, right-wing parties such as the National Rally, Lega or AfD (dark grey) are rather visible and connected to other actors in the discourse. These domestic actors come from different EU member states and are represented in transnational media. Business and media actors (e.g. Facebook) also play an important role in the electoral campaign, because debates on fake news and hate speech on social media platforms were important issues during the campaign. These debates also attracted several NGOs and think tanks which specialize on such issues and gain

greater visibility in the transnational media discourse. Hence, actors are linked and grouped either by a similar organizational affiliation or by single issues that they discuss. For instance, the British Labour Party and the Conservative Party mainly debate Brexit issues while right-wing parties share links by arguing against a common migration policy in the EU.

Summarizing the actor constellation, the actor networks showed a broad set of party actors from different EU member states and included NGOs and think tanks as well as business actors. Nonetheless, the four mainstream party fractions with a lead candidate (EPP, S&D, ALDE, European Green Party) are most present, in the center of the electoral campaign discourse, and strongly interconnected in the network. This media presence and the issue linkages indicate an issue-similarity among party actors and as such fewer conflicts between them. Hence, the expectation that various domestic actors – predominately party actors – from different member states as well as EU institutions are featured in the transnational electoral campaign discourse is supported.
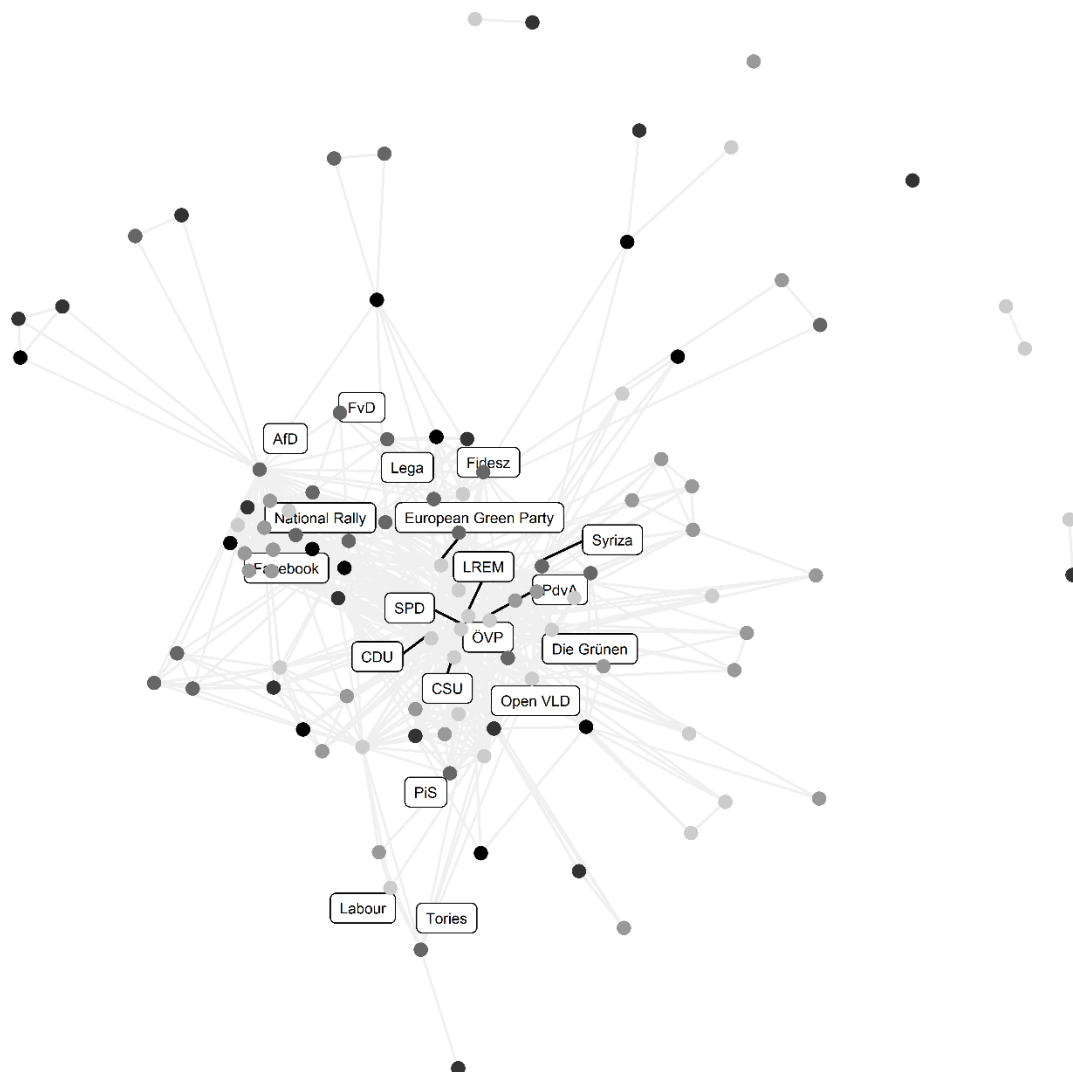
Figure 1: Actor congruence network in transnational media

Note: The following colors have been assigned to the subsequent actor groups: Mainstream parties (EPP, S&D, EGG, ALDE, GUE/NL) – light grey; Right-wing parties (ECR, IDN) – dark grey; Think tanks/NGOs/Academia/Trade unions – grey; Business/Media – black. Other actors – greyblack. The bigger the node, the more central those actors are in the network.

Source: Own illustration

4.2 Analyzing the framing

Now, I turn to the issue-framing in the discourse networks. Figure 2 depicts every issue that has been used in the transnational media. The first term indicates the scale of the concept,

differentiating between *national, international, and transnational*. The national scale relates to domestic issues, international concepts refer to issues between member states, while transnational relates to supranational issues that are related beyond the level of the nation state.

In total, 44 issues have been claimed in the EP campaign. The most present issues are transnational in their framing with the exception of the Brexit issue. The most visible issue is that of a common European migration policy, followed by debates on digital policies, fake news and disinformation campaigns in the EU. The third most visible concept is that of Brexit. The fourth and fifth issues are again transnational in their framing, because they are about a common European climate policy and claims on the unity of the EU. The latter is often invoked in response to right-wing populists and the recent crises (*Brexit, Euro crisis, migration crisis*). Besides these very present issues, 50 per cent of all mentioned issues (22 issues) are not discussed more than five times. So, even though a large number of different issues is addressed in transnational media, the media coverage of the electoral campaign focuses on a few issues.
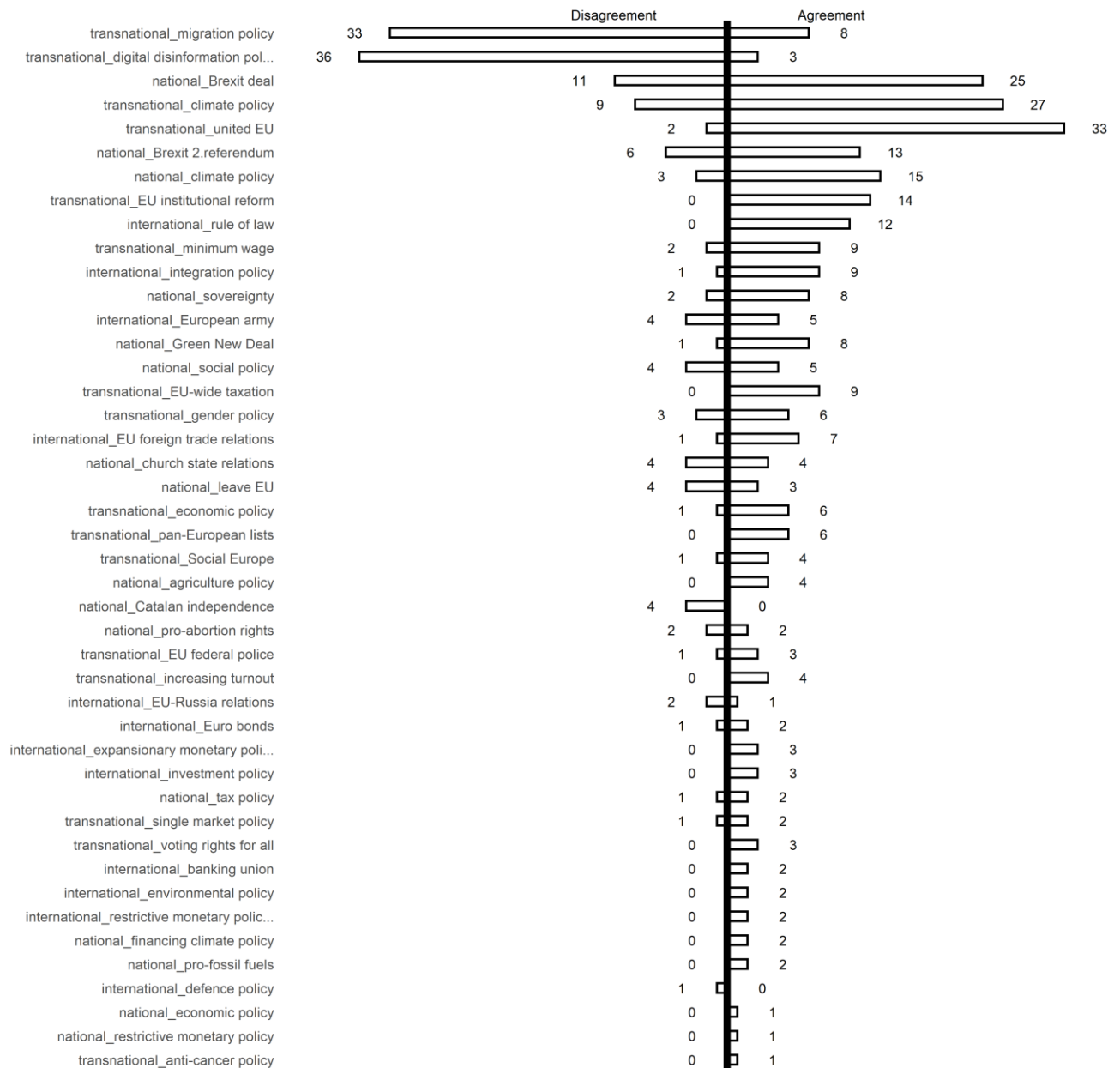
Figure 2: Actor conflicts on issues in EP electoral campaign

Source: Own illustration

Figure 2 also shows the conflicts around certain issues. For instance, the most present issue – *transnational_migration policy* – is claimed 41 times. While 33 statements reject the policy of a common European migration policy (coded as *disagreement*), eight claims favor this policy (coded as *agreement*). In the following, I discuss the issues of a transnational migration policy and transnational climate policy – the two most controversial issues in the electoral campaign – in greater detail. The most contested issue in the coverage of the transnational media is the migration policy in the EU (Figure 3). While right-wing parties (Fidesz, Lega) strongly disagree

that a common migration policy is needed in the EU and instead favor a renationalization of border controls and a fortress Europe, mainstream parties support a common European migration policy. The Dutch PvdA with its lead candidate Frans Timmermans as well as Syriza, the German Die Grünen or the Belgian liberal party (OpenVLD) with its lead candidate Guy Verhofstadt support a reform of the Dublin Regulations and a burden-sharing system to relocate refugees across EU member states. However, there are fewer statements in favor of a transnational policy than against it.
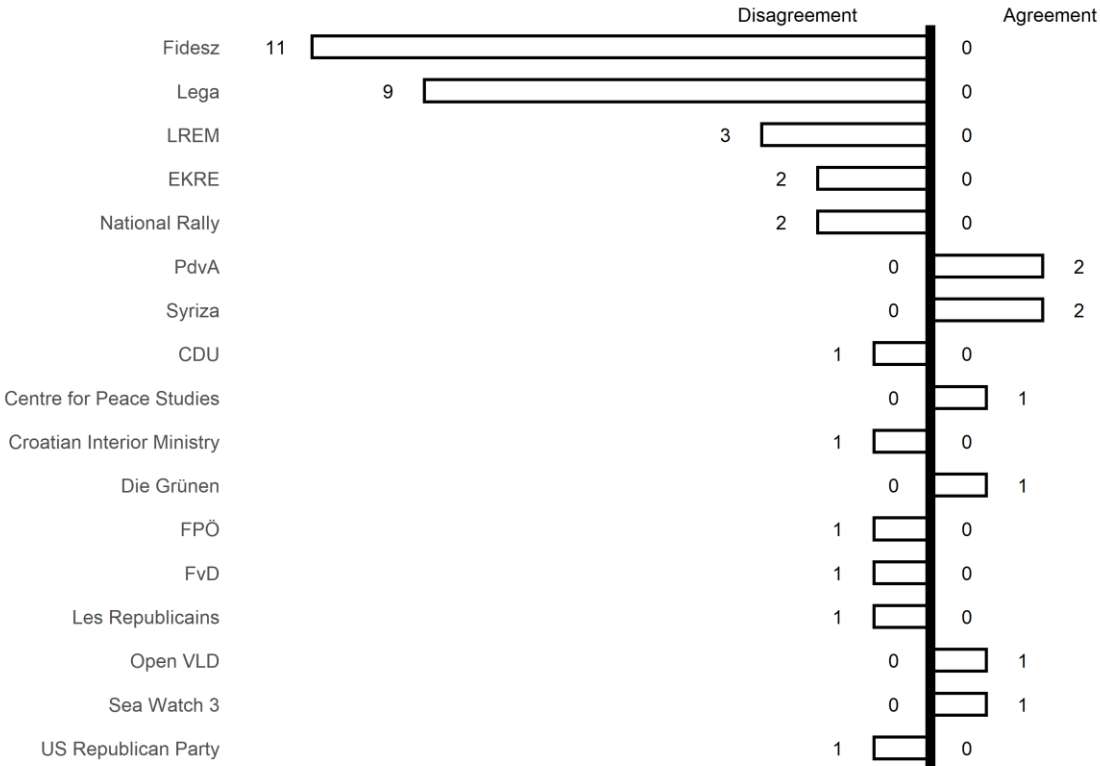

Figure 3: Actor conflicts on 'transnational migration policy' issue

Source: Own illustration

The second issue that I analyze more closely is the transnational issue of climate policy (Figure 4). It emphasizes that climate policies are not just a matter for domestic contexts, but that the EU as a political community has to propose policies in order to properly deal with climate change. Most right-wing parties (FvD, AfD, Sweden Democrats, Brexit Party, and UKIP) disagree on the urgency and relevance of the issue. By contrast, En Marche politicians, PvdA, and the Fridays for Future movement highlight this issue and demand European-wide solutions

and more active policymaking in this area. Other party and EU actors also claim climate and environmental issues in the electoral campaign.
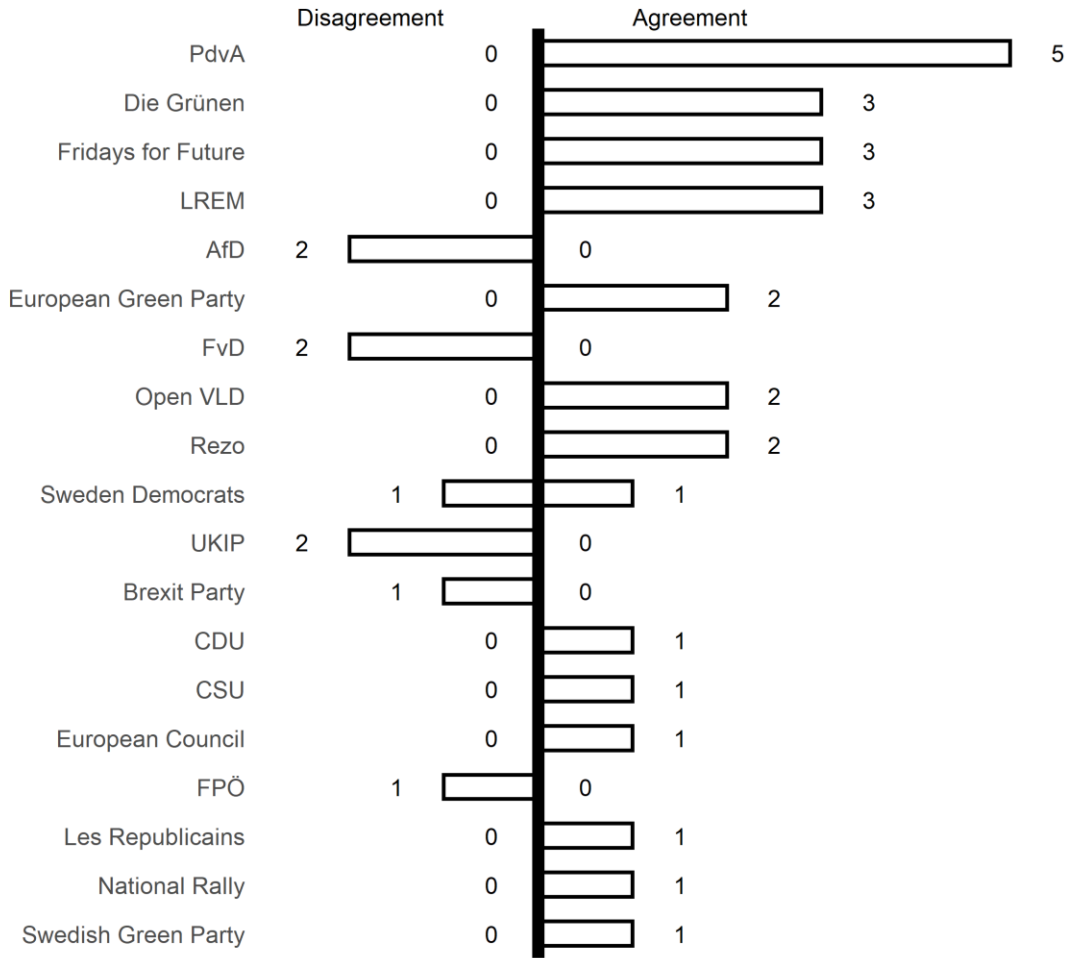

Figure 4: Actor conflicts on 'transnational climate policy' issue

Source: Own illustration

Summarizing the ideational side of the EP electoral campaign in transnational media, a strong presence of transnational issues is detected. The visibility of the Brexit issue linked to British domestic politics shows the ongoing situation and uncertainty with regard to coming to an agreement between the EU and the British government. It is hardly surprising that debates on migration and climate change gained public attention as well as statements criticizing fake news and digital disinformation strategies or defending the state of the EU in times of right-wing populism. While the migration issue, as expected, plays a crucial role in the electoral campaign, debates on monetary issues or on a European defense policy are almost absent (see Figure 4). Accordingly, the second formulated expectation as to the presence of transnational issues in

transnational media is supported. The rise of climate and environmental issues might be explained by the persistent public presence of the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, the Fridays for Future, and European Green parties and the subsequent rise in public awareness of these issues.

5. Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the coverage of the 2019 EP electoral campaign in the transnational media arena. The aim was to shed light on the rather unexplored field of how transnational media cover the EP campaign with regard to the presence of actors and issues.

The analysis brought out two main findings. *Firstly*, a transnationalization of the actor constellation in the transnational media arena can be established. Transnational media provide coverage for many different domestic and international actors. The parties of the lead candidates and here especially the liberal, social-democratic, and conservative parties dominate the discourse. Right-wing parties are represented in the electoral campaign discourse, but often at the margins. EU institutions as well as trade unions, NGOs, and think tanks are also included in the coverage.

Secondly, the issues that are covered most often in the transnational media go beyond the national context. Transnational media give a public platform to actors who frame their statements with regard to the transnational scope of this issue. This could be a result of these outlets' specific transnational agenda-setting. Since transnational media have a post-national readership, they also try to cover issues in this way. The high visibility of the Brexit issue demonstrates that domestic issues play an important role in EP electoral campaign, but also that the Brexit issue has a European dimension. The presence of, and conflicts over, a common European migration and climate policy are noticeable, but not surprising. Interestingly, they show two different framing strategies of salience and avoidance. With regard to migration, right-wing parties highlight their disagreement with such a European policy and claim a renationalization of national borders and focus on the perceived need to reinforce *Fortress Europe* (salience strategy). Those who support a reform of the Dublin Regulations and a relocation scheme for registered refugees across EU member states (e.g. the German party Die Grünen or the Dutch social-democratic party PvdA) hardly raise this issue in the electoral campaign (avoidance strategy). The reversed use of the framing strategies can be seen on the issue of an EU climate policy. While mainstream parties emphasize the need for a European climate policy, right-wing parties hardly claim this issue in the public and, if so, they disagree that such a policy is needed.

Having examined the coverage of the 2019 EP electoral campaigns in transnational media, the results of this study can serve as a first step toward analyzing transnational media in future studies. They should consider a longer time period, include further media outlets and compare the transnational media with the national media. This will help in assessing the relative salience of transnational issues in the media arena as well as scrutinizing accounts on the increasing transnationalization of the public sphere.

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