

**T**omorrow the European Parliament will elect its new President, following current President Martin Schulz's decision to resign to re-enter German politics. Seven candidates are running for the post: Antonio Tajani (European People's Party), Gianni Pittella (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats), Guy Verhofstadt (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), Eleonora Forenza (European United Left-Nordic Green Left), Jean Lambert (The Greens-European Free Alliance), Helga Stevens (European Conservatives and Reformists) and Laurentiu Rebeaga (Europe of Nations and Freedom).

*Over the period under exam Guy Verhofstadt was by far the most debated among the seven candidates, in terms of both retweets and mentions.*

In this article we look at the presidential race from the social media angle, focusing particularly on Twitter. We want to answer such questions as: who are the most popular candidates? How are they performing online? Is the EP Presidential election debated beyond the so-called Brussels bubble?

## **The candidates' Twitter power**

Figure 1 illustrates a "power matrix" of the candidates based on a combination of their online following and Twitter activity since the opening of their accounts. A candidate's ideal position should be on the top-right part of the graph, with many followers and a high number of tweets. In our case, none of the seven candidates fits this profile. Instead we can observe a twofold kind of lead. ALDE's candidate Guy Verhofstadt comes first in terms of popularity, with 116,000 followers—a remarkable number, considering Verhofstadt's relatively low number of tweets (3,288). As for tweeting activity, the most vocal candidate is without a doubt Gianni Pittella, with 18,000 tweets.

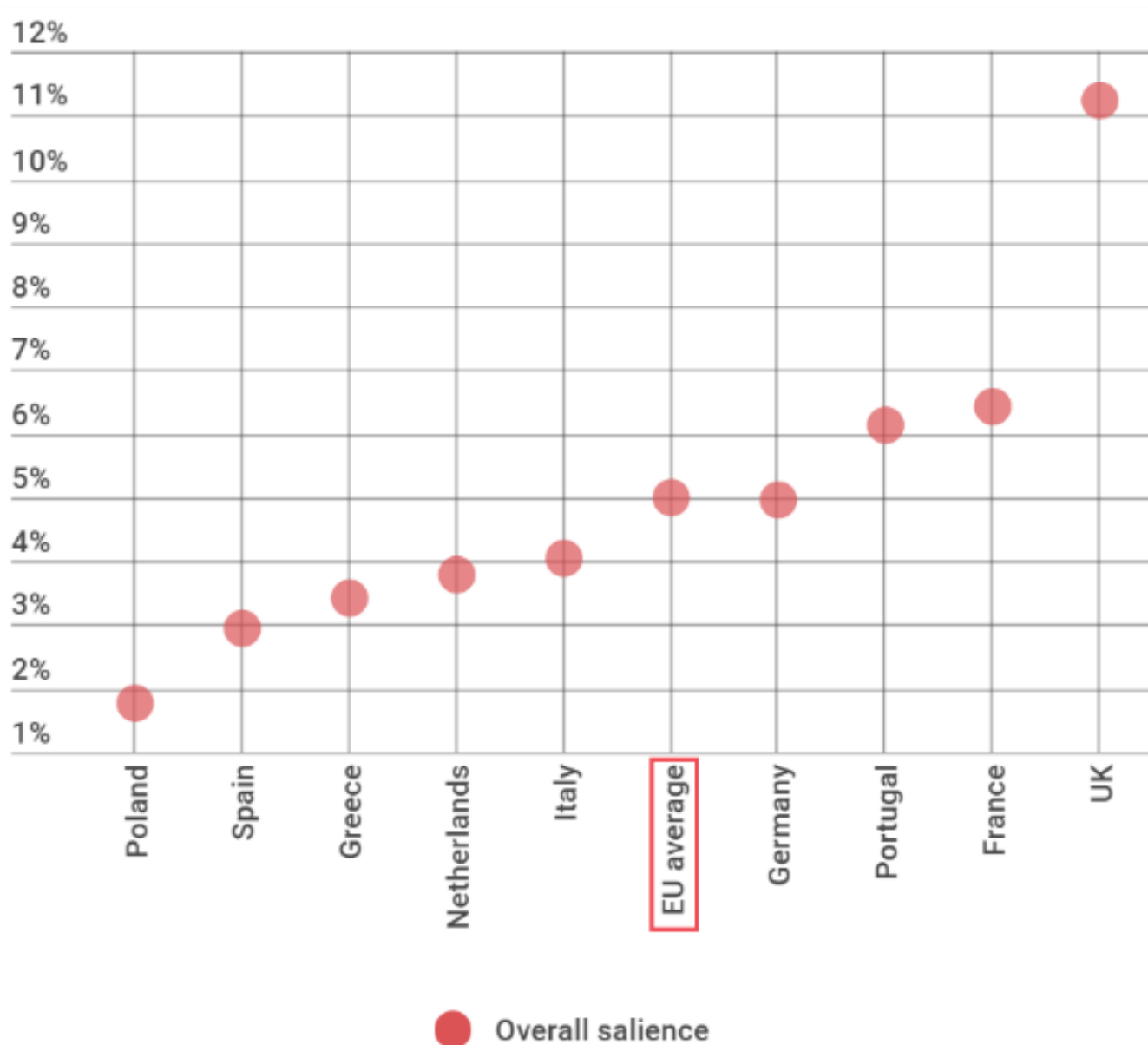


Figure 1: The candidates' "power matrix"

## A closer look at online discussions

On January 4-14 we collected all tweets that either mentioned or retweeted one of the candidates, for a total sample of 22,145 tweets. As suggested by Figures 2 and 3, over the period under exam Guy Verhofstadt was by far the most debated among the seven candidates, in terms of both retweets and mentions.

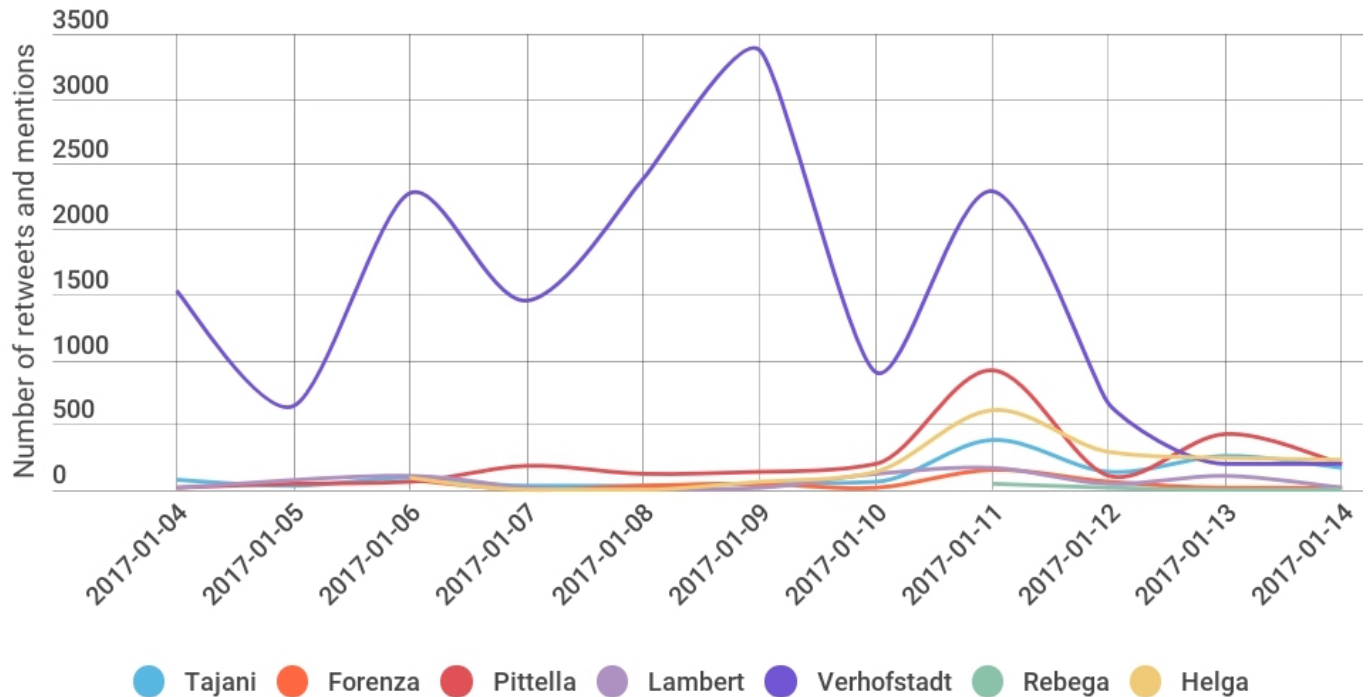


Figure 2: Mentions and retweets of the candidates over time - January 4-14.



Figure 3: Mentions vs. retweets of the candidates - January 4-14.

In the timeline we can also identify three peaks in the number of tweets: the most recent, involving all candidates, took place on January 11, the day of the first [presidential debate](#). The previous two peaks occurred on January 6 and 9, and concerned just Guy Verhofstadt as he, respectively, announced his presidential bid, and [rejected the Five Star Movement's controversial request to join the ALDE parliamentary group](#):



*Twitter discussions around the EP Presidential race seem to involve to a great extent the so-called Brussels bubble.*

Unsurprisingly, many of the tweets mentioning Verhofstadt appear to be quite critical of the liberal candidate and his previous decision to consider opening the ALDE group's doors to the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement. Below are just a few examples of these reactions:

Deleted on Facebook but not forgotten! @GuyVerhofstadt on #M5S in 2014. Now ready to let them join @ALDEgroup despi... <https://t.co/OkVGIAfSVL>

I'd like just to remind my friend @GuyVerhofstadt we've always fought together for a 12 stars Federal EU not for a 5 stars anti€ one

5 Star to join @ALDEgroup: Is @GuyVerhofstadt that desperate for votes for Presidency to welcome a group he said was incompatible w/ #ALDE?

## The Brussels bubble and national frames

Finally, we looked at the distribution of tweets by country. Similarly to what already highlighted in a [previous analysis](#), the Twitter discussions around the EP Presidential race seem to involve to a great extent the so-called Brussels bubble. tweets coming from Belgium add up to 21.2% of our sample, placing this country in the second position behind the United Kingdom (31.1%)-the latter's figure, however, is likely to be due to Britons' higher overall propensity to use Twitter.

As for language, while the majority of tweets are, unsurprisingly, written in English (63.1%), the second most used language is Italian (13.8%). What is interesting is that Italian citizens seem to have intervened in the debate not only to discuss the merits of the presidential race-two of the most prominent candidates, Pittella and Tajani, are Italian-but also (and often mainly) to express opinions on the ALDE-Five Star Movement fiasco. Among the tweets in Italian, #m5s is the most frequently used hashtag, and the Movement leader Beppe Grillo's is the fourth most mentioned account, behind those of the three lead candidates: Verhofstadt, Pittella and Tajani.

To sum up, while discussions on the EP presidential race respond to a significant extent to the Brussels bubble logic, there seems to be a debate that goes beyond that, which however focuses less on the candidates' specific proposals than on general politics (national and/or European). In these online discussions, Verhofstadt is by far the most debated, but also the most criticized, of the seven candidates.

The race for the European Parliament's Presidency as seen on Twitter  
By Francesca Arcostanzo

*Photo Credits CC [Drew Streib](#)*