In a previous article, EuVisions analysed the Twitter conversations of current European Parliament (EP) members with colleagues of different nationalities. In the run-up to the EP elections, our aim was to investigate MEPs' role in triggering an online debate about the European Union that could cross national boundaries and interest all EU countries.

In order to get a complete overview of the extent to which a transnational debate is developing in Europe, I changed the perspective from MEPs to citizens. I wanted to see whether and how European people online interact with MEPs of different nationalities to their own, and to what extent they favour the development of a transnational debate compared with MEPs' activity.

Citizens' conversations across Europe

In October, EuVisions started tracking the online activity of all MEPs, by collecting the tweets they sent as well as reactions to them in terms of retweets and replies.

To detect a citizens' transnational debate, in the initial dataset **I identified all the retweets and replies that EU citizens sent to foreign MEPs and compared them with the number of Twitter interactions people had with their own nation's representatives in the EP**.

Chart 1: Citizens interactions distribution – transnational vs. national

Out of **an overall total of 1,052,269 citizens' interactions, 25.5% were transnational**. It should also be noted that citizens transnationally interacted more frequently than did their own MEPs; as we saw in *Part I* of our analysis, EP members' transnational conversations corresponded to only 17.5% of their overall interactions.

In order to further compare the roles of MEPs with that of citizens in developing a transnational debate, we looked at which EU countries' citizens were more active in replying and retweeting foreign MEPs.

Chart 2: Distribution of transnational conversations sent per EP country

What emerges from both graphs is an almost half and half distribution: **citizens from 15 EU**

countries sent more transnational than national reactions, while citizens from the remaining 13 countries did the opposite.

Looking at the *overall interactions* amounts, the larger countries—such as UK, Spain and Germany—are the ones whose citizens contributed the most to the transnational online debate, confirming the same trend we observed for MEPs.

Looking at the *interactions-per-citizen ratio*, people tweeting from smaller countries, such as Cyprus, Malta and Hungary, emerged as the most active in retweeting and replying to MEPs of different nationalities rather than their own. Nonetheless, citizens were not polarised in the same way that their representatives were: users tweeting from eastern and western countries could be found at both the top and the bottom of the list. Moreover, in our MEPs analysis, eastern countries' representatives emerged as more active than their western colleagues in triggering transnational online debate.

Citizens' political engagement

As a second step of our analysis, **we wanted to know which EP groups' members were more able to engage foreign citizens' interests and consequently to receive more retweets and replies**. The graph below shows how many transnational (and national) reactions citizens sent overall, and how many were received for a single MEP's tweet on the basis of his membership of one of the EP groups.

Chart 3: Distribution of transnational conversations received per EP group

The ALDE received the highest number of transnational reactions, both overall and per single tweet. It was also the only EP force to attract more transnational than national interactions with citizens, suggesting a major role for this group in developing a common, online dialogue across countries.

As expected, the nationalist EFDD received the highest number of national reactions, both overall and per single tweet. **However, both this political force and the other EP nationalist group, ENF, also received among the highest volumes of transnational reactions per tweet—second only to ALDE**. This is pretty surprising, considering that in our MEPs analysis both groups emerged as being neither interested in sending, nor able to attract, MEPs' transnational reactions.

Debating Europe ahead of the EU Elections 2019: do MEPs and
citizens interact on Twitter?
By Martina Zaghi

While in our previous analysis the EPP received the highest number of MEPs' transnational interactions, here the major force in the Parliament emerged as unable to engage foreign citizens to the same extent. The Christian Democrats came just fifth in terms of the total number of citizens' transnational reactions received; nor does it get any better when we look at their interactions-per-tweet ratio: every tweet sent by a Christian Democrat received just one reaction from foreign citizens.

Transnational issues

As a last step in our analysis, **we wanted to investigate the content of citizens' transnational conversations.** We identified the 50 top hashtags used by citizens in their transnational messages and compared them with the top 50 hashtags used by MEPs. The yellow-coloured hashtags are those included in the top 50 of both MEPs and citizens, while the blue ones belong only to the citizens' list.

Chart 4: Top 50 hashtags used by Citizens in transnational conversations

Brexit (*#brexit*, *#peoplesvote*, *#theresamay*) emerged as the main topic of both citizens' and MEPs' (as we saw in *Part I*) transnational discussions, confirming it to be a core concern in the European public sphere.

Looking instead at citizens' distinctive hashtags, *#iameuropean* emerged as the most used, followed mainly by features related to countries' internal issues (*#catalogne, #gilletsjaunes*).

Interestingly, an EP elections-related hashtag—*#ep19*—was included in the citizens' top 50 wordcloud but not in the MEPs' one, in which were found no references to next May's elections but instead a main focus on the organisation of EP groups and party congresses. On their side, citizens seemed not so interested in those issues but were rather more interested in discussing with foreign MEPs what actually happens in other European countries.

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