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# Media Personalization during European Elections: the 2019 Election Campaigns in Context\*

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## Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) placed great hopes in the *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates) procedure, which was first employed in the 2014 European elections and entails that European party families nominate pan-European lead candidates for the president of the European Commission (EC). Following the nomination and subsequent election of former lead candidate Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission president in 2014, the EP evaluated the procedure as successful and argued, among other things, that the procedure ‘fosters the political awareness of European citizens in the run-up to the European elections’.<sup>1</sup>

However, the election of Ursula von der Leyen as Commission president in 2019 led to the provisional abandonment of the procedure and casted doubt on the impact of the procedure on European Union (EU) politics in the long run. Although many of these concerns address inter-institutional relations (see Hobolt, 2014), low levels of recognising lead candidates (Gattermann and de Vreese, 2020; Hobolt, 2014) as well as their limited potential for mobilization (Schmitt *et al.*, 2015; Gattermann and Marquart, 2020) indicate that the *Spitzenkandidaten* have not yet fully resonated with European citizens. Why is this the case?

This contribution sheds light on this phenomenon by examining it through the lens of the personalization of politics at the EU level. Personalization implies that individual politicians come increasingly into focus at the expense of political parties and institutions (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007, p. 65). I argue that in order to understand the (limited) impact of European *Spitzenkandidaten* among European voters one needs to understand the personalization of EU politics in context. First, context is time dependent, which requires an assessment of the scope of personalization as a development over time. In other words, public attention paid to *Spitzenkandidaten* is likely to be contingent upon longitudinal changes in the personalization of EU politics more generally. In the absence of any such trend, it would hardly be surprising if the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure failed to engage

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<sup>1</sup> Decision on the revision of the Framework Agreement on relations between the EP and the EC, 7 February 2018 (2017/2233(ACI)).

voters. Second, context also varies at the domestic level, in terms of political cultures as well as media and electoral systems. Put differently, some domestic contexts are more prone to personalized politics than others (see Gattermann, 2018; Holtz-Bacha *et al.*, 2014; Kriesi, 2012; Šimunjak, 2017), which may explain potential cross-country variations in the attention paid to *Spitzenkandidaten*.

For these reasons, I analyse the personalization of EU politics in seven countries over the course of five European elections since 1999. I specifically examine the extent to which European broadsheets report on individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and *Spitzenkandidaten*. Media coverage is important for European voters to learn about candidates and issues at stake. If media do not report on candidates, and *Spitzenkandidaten* in particular, their impact on voter awareness and behaviour is likely to be limited. The findings indicate that EP election coverage generally does not become more personalized over time. This also holds for attention given to *Spitzenkandidaten* between 2014 and 2019, although they are often more visible than a typical MEP from the same party family. This leads me to conclude that the *Spitzenkandidaten* process is somewhat detached from mediated personalization developments at the national level. In the concluding section, I briefly discuss the implications of these findings.

## I. European Elections in the Media

EP election campaigns have become more salient in European media outlets over recent years, although cross-country variation is still prevalent (Boomgaarden and de Vreese, 2016). Furthermore, scholars have observed that media coverage of EP elections has not become more European in nature, but continues to focus on domestic issues and political actors (Belluati, 2016; Boomgaarden and de Vreese, 2016; Schuck *et al.*, 2011). Yet political actors at both levels have often been studied as a collective, that is, no distinction has been made between politicians, parties and institutions, which impedes any examination of personalization trends.

We know relatively little about the media visibility of individual candidates during EP elections, with the exception of their activities on social media (Daniel and Obholzer, 2020; Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2016). The *Spitzenkandidaten* have received slightly more scholarly attention (Belluati, 2016; Nulty *et al.*, 2016; Braun and Schwarzbözl, 2019; Schulze, 2016), and studies indicate that there is considerable variation in terms of media or campaign attention paid to *Spitzenkandidaten* among individual candidates, political parties and country contexts. However, it is difficult to assess whether these findings pertain to the very – pan-European – nature of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure and individual candidates put forward, or whether they actually align with personalization trends at the domestic level (or absence thereof). Put differently, existing research has rarely offered insights into media personalization trends with respect to EP elections.

## II. Why Mediated Personalization of European Elections?

Proponents of the personalization of politics thesis have argued that mediated personalization is linked to three main factors (see also Gattermann, 2018; Gattermann and Marquart, 2020). First, scholars have observed a trend towards partisan dealignment as citizens have become more detached from political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000).

As a consequence, voting behaviour has become more volatile in recent decades, which impacts on party competition in the electoral arena and offers opportunities for personalized electoral behaviour (Garzia, 2014; Lobo and Curtice, 2015). Second, and most prominently, scholars have identified mediatization processes as being responsible for the changing relationship between media and politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). Journalists have become more independent over time and have gradually gained the upper hand in setting the campaign agenda, and political communication has been increasingly influenced by media logic as opposed to party or political logic, which entails a greater focus on individuals and personalities, among other things (see Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck, 2008). Third, developments in political institutions, such as electoral system reforms, may trigger changes in the way the news media report on politics (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007).

Despite these developments, there does not appear to be any universal trend towards the increased personalization of media coverage because findings differ across countries (Langer, 2007; Šimunjak, 2017; Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011), also with respect to election campaign coverage (Holtz-Bacha *et al.*, 2014; Kriesi, 2012; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). Regarding the mediated personalization of EU politics, I could not confirm such a trend with respect to individual commissioners or the Commission president at the expense of the institution itself amid considerable variation across several EU member states (Gattermann, 2018). Although I have argued that a focus on individual politicians instead of institutions and political parties could potentially make EU politics less abstract and hence more tangible and accessible to its citizens (Gattermann, 2018, p. 347), the reverse appears to be the case with the EC. Commissioners are not directly elected by EU citizens and their party affiliation plays only a subordinate role to their work in the EC, which undermines the provision of additional heuristics that help the audience understand who they are. These circumstances, alongside the rising complexity of EU politics that entail an abundance of individual responsibilities, may explain why journalists opt to report on the institution at the expense of individual commissioners if their aim is to make EU politics accessible to their audiences. However, this may be different for the EP because '[i]ts members are directly elected and, hence, incentivized to gain media attention, and journalists have greater responsibilities to hold them accountable' (Gattermann, 2018, p. 362).

So, why would we expect mediated personalization of EP elections? As second-order national elections, EP elections are prone to low voter turnout and high voter volatility because parties and voters prioritize domestic issues (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). This may be a favourable condition for personalized voting behaviour, although a preliminary empirical assessment showed that it mainly occurs among sophisticated voters and that party preferences still play a more decisive role compared to candidate evaluations (Gattermann and de Vreese, 2017). Likewise, few voters actually recognize *Spitzenkandidaten* (Hobolt, 2014) and thus their impact on voter turnout and vote intention is somewhat limited (Schmitt *et al.*, 2015; Gattermann and Marquart, 2020). This may also indicate that media coverage of EP election campaigns as main source of information for voters is not very personalized (see Belluati, 2016; Schulze, 2016).

Nonetheless, high volatility also provides incentives for personalized campaigning. Generally, EP election campaigns tend to be less professionalized compared with national ones (Tenscher and Mykkänen, 2014). However, over the course of eight EP elections, campaign posters of national political parties in the Netherlands and Italy have placed

greater emphasis on individual candidates, suggesting that campaigning has become more professionalized in that respect (Gattermann and Vliegenthart, 2019). As professionalization and mediatization processes are interlinked (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 240) and notwithstanding the potentially limited scope of such developments, this may also indicate that mediated personalization of EP elections has taken place over time.

Lastly, the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure has clearly been a structural innovation in EP elections. As electoral reforms are considered to impact on mediated personalization (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007), they may also trigger more personalized media coverage of EP elections – not only with respect to *Spitzenkandidaten* themselves, but also regarding MEP candidates. However, such structural innovations have generally not led to more personalized broadsheet coverage of the EC, as new treaties have not had any impact on longitudinal changes (Gattermann, 2018). And while more contestation during EP election campaigns triggers more comprehensive media coverage (Schuck *et al.*, 2011), long-term trends of the politicization of EU integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Hutter *et al.*, 2016) do not appear to play a crucial role for the mediated personalization of the EC (Gattermann, 2018).

Regardless of these considerations and given the mixed evidence from national politics, we are likely to find considerable variation across domestic contexts. While this may not necessarily hinder mediated personalization trends from emerging over time, as they could evolve at different levels of personalization, we should not ignore differences in media and electoral systems that potentially condition the scope of personalization trends (Holtz-Bacha *et al.*, 2014; Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011). EP elections have been based on proportional representation since the coming into force of the uniform electoral procedures in 2002, but electoral institutions differ in terms of how much emphasis is put on individual candidates versus parties. For example, the Irish single transferable vote system allows voters to rank individual candidates across parties, whereas French voters choose between parties on the ballot. One assumption is that the more personalized the electoral system, the more personalized the campaigning of election contenders (Bowler and Farrell, 2011), which the media is likely to pick upon.

Likewise, traditional media systems differ in terms of levels of political parallelism, professionalization of journalists as well as commercialization and market competition, among other things (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). This has consequences for the degree to which media coverage is personalized. Studies, for example, find more pronounced personalization trends in the UK than in Germany (Holtz-Bacha *et al.*, 2014) and the Netherlands (Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011), suggesting that the highly competitive British newspaper market plays a role in this. Differences in media systems are also reflected in the extent to which broadsheets personalize their news about the EC (Gattermann, 2018). Taken together, system-level differences at the domestic level may also explain why studies have found cross-country differences in the attention paid to *Spitzenkandidaten* (Belluati, 2016; Schulze, 2016), and it remains to be seen whether such patterns prevail with respect to the mediated personalization of EP elections over time.

### III. Case Selection and Analysis

The study considers five EP elections (1999–2019) in seven countries, namely Ireland, the UK (England only), France, the Netherlands, Poland, Austria, and Italy. The countries are

diverse in terms of the length of time they have been members of the EU; size and therefore number of elected MEPs; traditional media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, 2012); and electoral systems, although proportional representation has been employed in all countries under study and at all points in time.

For the content analysis, one left-leaning broadsheet per country was chosen: *The Irish Times*, *The Guardian* (UK), the French *Le Monde*, the Dutch *De Volkskrant*, the Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the Austrian *Der Standard* and the Italian *La Stampa* (note: *La Stampa* is considered rather centrist). As Poland joined the EU in 2004, only four elections are considered for *Gazeta Wyborcza*; the study period of the Austrian broadsheet comprises three elections since 2009 due to lack of data availability. I am aware that the newspaper selection does not include other media outlets with different political leanings or different types of media. However, newspapers are well suited for a study of personalization as a longitudinal process (Holtz-Bacha *et al.*, 2014; Langer, 2007; Vliegthart *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, personalization trends are, for example, comparable between newspapers and television (Kriesi, 2012, p. 831).

For each election period, six weeks are considered, namely four weeks prior to the final election day and two weeks thereafter, which resulted in a total number of 21,423 articles collected (see Table A1).<sup>2</sup> The data collection and automated content analysis procedures are described in Gattermann (2018, p. 352) and the corresponding supplementary material. The data were retrieved from Nexis Uni by applying several keywords pertaining to EU institutions, MEPs in general and the elections themselves. These data were then analysed by searching the content for the names of all *elected* MEPs (and all *Spitzenkandidaten*) in each election, bar MEPs from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and French overseas territories (2004–14). Importantly, this means that we cannot generalize the findings at the individual level, because we do not take into account any news coverage of unsuccessful contenders. However, we are able to compare the results between periods before and after the elections (additional results are reported in the Appendix); the selection problem is no longer present after election day. A range of 291 to 313 elected MEPs is considered in each election across the respective countries (see Table A2). In 2014, there were six *Spitzenkandidaten*, while a total of 14 lead candidates contested the 2019 EP elections, because the Liberals presented a team of seven lead candidates. However, I consider only those nine *Spitzenkandidaten* from 2019 who took part in at least one of the pan-European televised debates (see Table A3).

To measure personalization trends, some studies have applied relative measures of individuals versus political parties (Kriesi, 2012; Vliegthart *et al.*, 2011). With respect to EP elections, the party political reference points for MEP candidates and *Spitzenkandidaten* are more difficult to identify using uniform measures for several reasons: national parties could be referenced with respect to domestic politics instead of EU politics; many national parties have joined electoral lists under one umbrella organization (e.g., Olive Tree in Italy); *Spitzenkandidaten* compete for transnational party families and sometimes there is no successful national party affiliated to any of them (such as Liberals in Poland in recent elections). Moreover, there are some independent MEPs, especially in Ireland; in other countries, independents often join electoral coalitions.

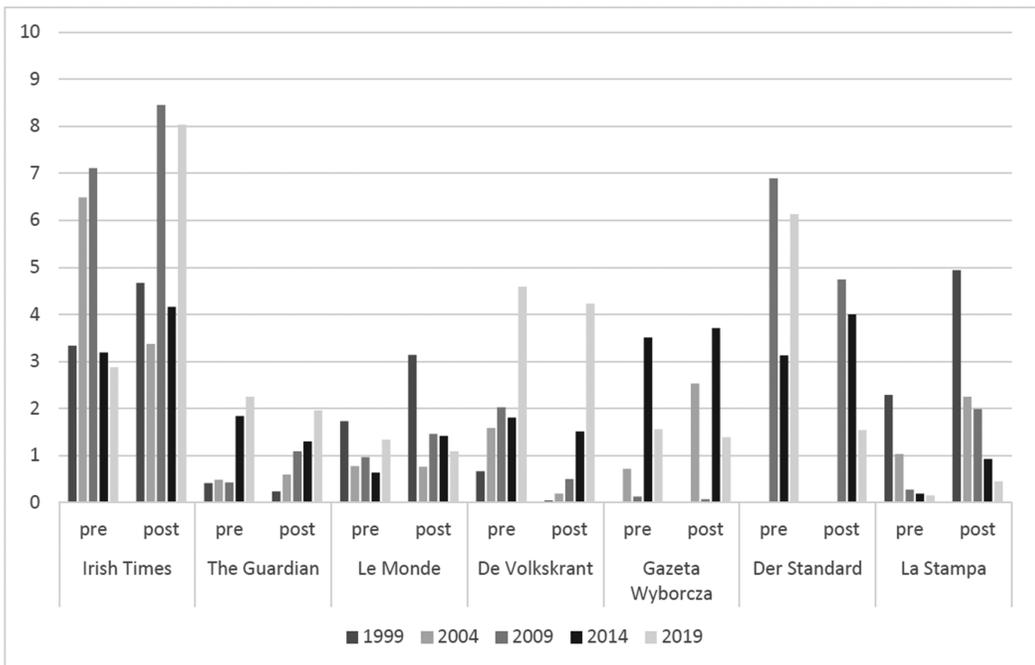
<sup>2</sup>There may be articles missing from the Polish sample may after 2007 (Gattermann, 2018, p. 353). Over-time patterns have thus to be interpreted with caution.

Thus, to allow for comparability across countries and over time as well as between MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten*, I analyse the absolute visibility of these politicians (for similar approaches see Langer, 2007; Šimunjak, 2017). Generally, all references to an MEP or *Spitzenkandidat*'s last name were counted on the condition that each of them is mentioned at least once by their full name in an article. Variations and nicknames were included. References in the headlines count twice compared with references in the article text (see also Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011, p. 99). The overall number of mentions were averaged per country and election across all respective MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten* included in this study (or any subsets of MEPs; see below). After that, all scores were averaged per 100 articles in order to compare the results across elections and newspapers.

#### IV. Findings

Figure 1 shows the average number of references to MEPs (disregarding *Spitzenkandidaten*) in each newspaper and election. It distinguishes between pre and post-election periods. Generally, Irish MEPs are the most visible: a typical Irish MEP receives between 2.9 (2019, pre-election) and 8.5 mentions (2009, post-election) in the *Irish Times*. *Der Standard*, *La Stampa*, *De Volkskrant* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* follow, despite considerable variation over time. The average values for English and French MEPs in their respective newspapers are lowest of all. This may be an indicator of electoral system differences as these MEPs, as well as Polish MEPs, are elected via closed party lists, while

Figure 1: Average number of references to members of the European Parliament (MEPs), pre and post-elections.

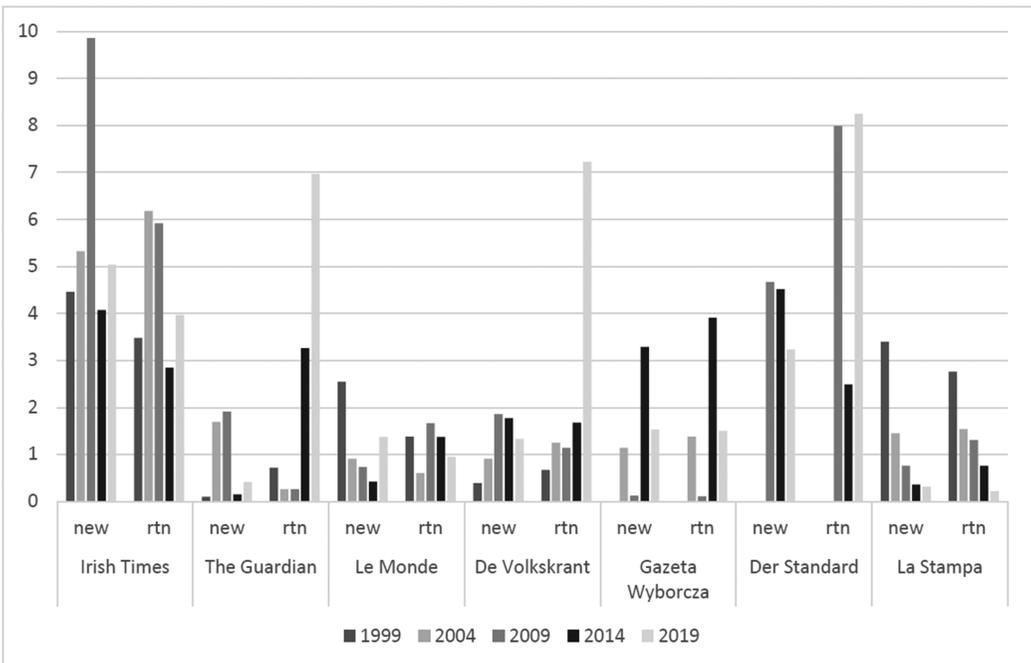


media system differences may not play a crucial role compared with the personalization of the EC (Gattermann, 2018).

However, we are mainly interested in variations over time to examine possible personalization trends. For most newspapers (*Irish Times*, *Le Monde*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Der Standard*) there are no clear patterns. English MEPs receive continuously more attention in *The Guardian* over time (increasing from 0.2 to 2 references per MEP between 1999 and 2019 in the post-election period), as do Dutch MEPs in *De Volkskrant* (in the pre-election period values rise from 0.7 to 4.6 mentions). However, there is a reverse trend for *La Stampa*: over time, Italian MEPs receive less attention during pre and post-election periods (for the latter period, average mentions of MEPs drop from 4.9 in 1999 to 0.5 in 2019). In the Dutch case, the 2019 scores could be driven by the fact that two *Spitzenkandidaten* were Dutch, but mediated personalization had already taken place beforehand. Moreover, the depersonalization trend in *La Stampa* occurs despite the candidacy of Italian *Spitzenkandidat* Emma Bonino in 2019.

To examine whether these trends are driven by particular groups of MEPs, Figure 2 distinguishes between newly elected and returning MEPs. Newcomers could receive more attention than returning members. Alternatively, the latter have an incumbency bonus which may show up in newspaper coverage (Kriesi, 2012). Figure 2 shows that patterns are generally similar to the findings reported above. With few exceptions, returning MEPs often receive more attention on aggregate than newly elected MEPs in all newspapers bar the

Figure 2: Average number of references to new versus returning members of the European Parliament (MEPs)



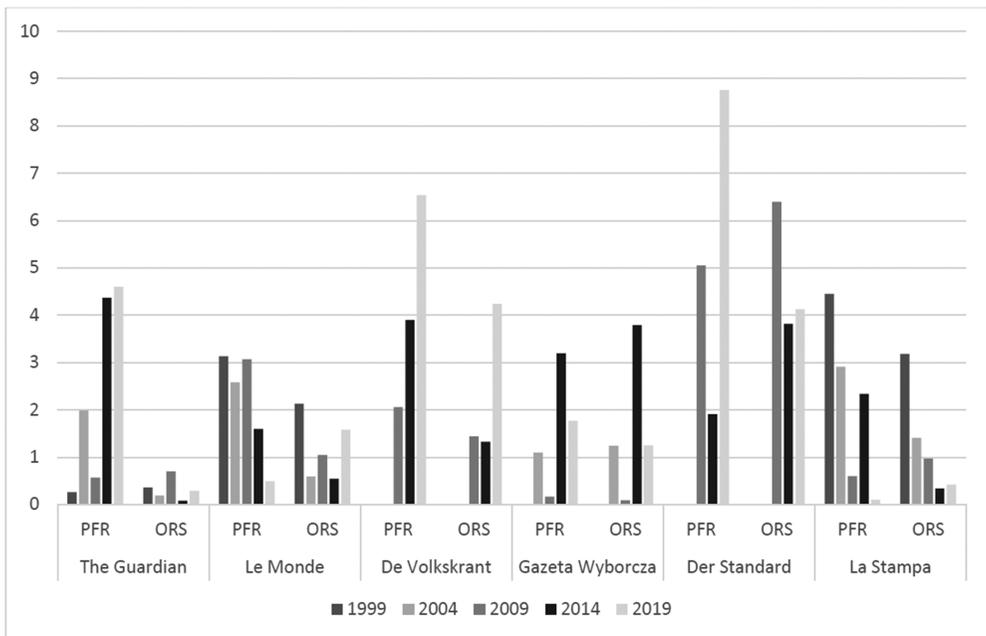
Note: Returning MEPs were in office at the end of the previous legislative term.

*Irish Times*. They also appear to be the main contributor to personalization trends in the British and Dutch newspapers, although newly elected MEPs sometimes receive more attention than returning MEPs in post-election periods (Figure A1).

As populist parties have gained more support in EP elections over time, Figure 3 distinguishes between MEPs from populist far-right domestic parties (based on the classification by Rooduijn *et al.*, 2019) and other MEPs. Personalization in *The Guardian* is more applicable for MEPs from the UK Independence Party and the Brexit Party compared with other English MEPs, while the previously reported (de-)personalization patterns are similar for Dutch and Italian MEPs from populist far-right and other parties, albeit at slightly different levels. On aggregate, the former group of MEPs often receives more attention than other MEPs, but this varies over time. Prominent individual MEPs, such as Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen or Matteo Salvini, may be driving this pattern, which we cannot examine using the current study design. The patterns are similar if we only assess post-election periods (Figure A2), with the exception of *De Volkskrant* in 2019 and *Der Standard*.

Having received an overview of the rather limited personalization trends for MEPs in European newspapers, we now turn to the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Figure 4 shows the average number of *Spitzenkandidaten* references in 2014 and 2019, distinguishing between pre

Figure 3: Average number of references to populist far-right versus other members of the European Parliament (MEPs)



Note: PFR, populist far-right, ORS, other MEPs; there are no PFR parties in Ireland. PFRs considered: UK Independence Party/Brexit Party (England); National Front/National Rally (FR); Freedom Party, Forum for Democracy (NL); Freedom Party of Austria; Northern League, Brothers of Italy.

and post-election periods. Though similar to Figure 1, the scale is larger in Figure 4, meaning that on aggregate, *Spitzenkandidaten* receive more mentions in European newspapers than MEPs. The British, Dutch and Austrian newspapers pay most attention to them, followed by the French and Italian newspapers. Remarkably, with the exception of *De Volkskrant*, which probably reported on the two Dutch *Spitzenkandidaten*, the pan-European lead candidates received less attention in 2019 than before. Likewise, in many newspapers the attention paid to *Spitzenkandidaten* is higher after the elections than before, but this is not the case in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in both years, *The Guardian* and *Der Standard* in 2019 and *Le Monde* and *La Stampa* in 2014. In the latter case this may relate to the fact that a Frenchman, José Bové, stood for the European Greens and the Greek Alexis Tsipras headed an electoral list in Italy; none of them had been considered as Commission president after the elections.

The final analysis constitutes a comparison between references to MEPs of the European People’s Party (EPP) and their *Spitzenkandidaten* as well as between MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten* mentions among the Social Democrats (S&D group in the EP, Party of European Socialists (PES) for *Spitzenkandidaten*) in Figures 5 and 6, respectively.

Individual *Spitzenkandidaten* are often mentioned more frequently than a typical MEP from the same party family, which also holds for the post-election periods (Figures A3 and A4). The differences are most pronounced in the French, Dutch and Italian newspapers for both party families, as well as for the EPP in *Der Standard*. In the remaining newspapers, the differences are more marginal and reversed for the EPP in two instances: Manfred Weber received less attention in 2019 (6.3 mentions) than EPP MEPs in 2009 (seven mentions on average; but not post-election) in the *Irish Times*, and less attention compared to Polish MEPs in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 2019 (0.9 versus 1.5 mentions). Nonetheless, there

Figure 4: Average number of references to *Spitzenkandidaten*, pre and post-elections

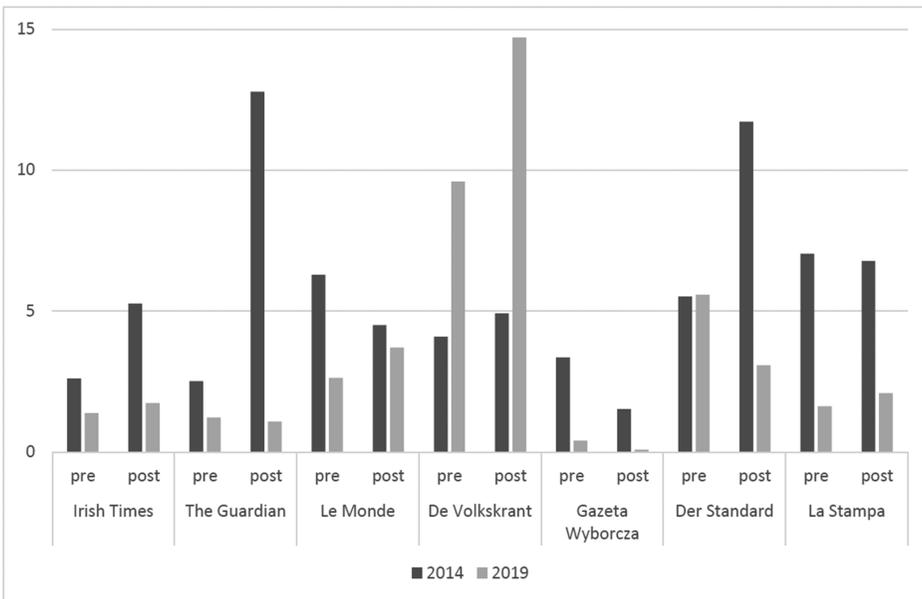
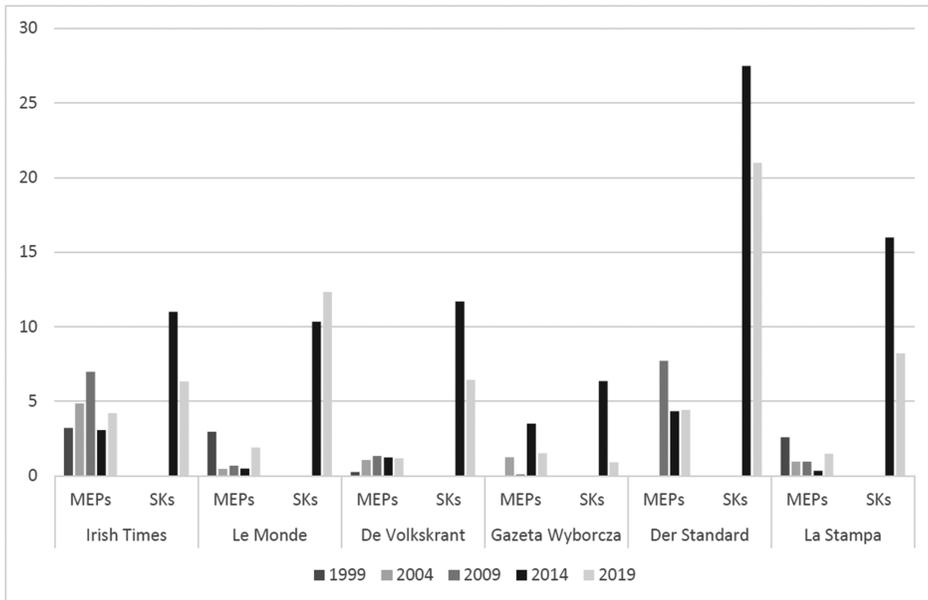


Figure 5: Average number of references to EPP members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and *Spitzenkandidaten* (SKs)



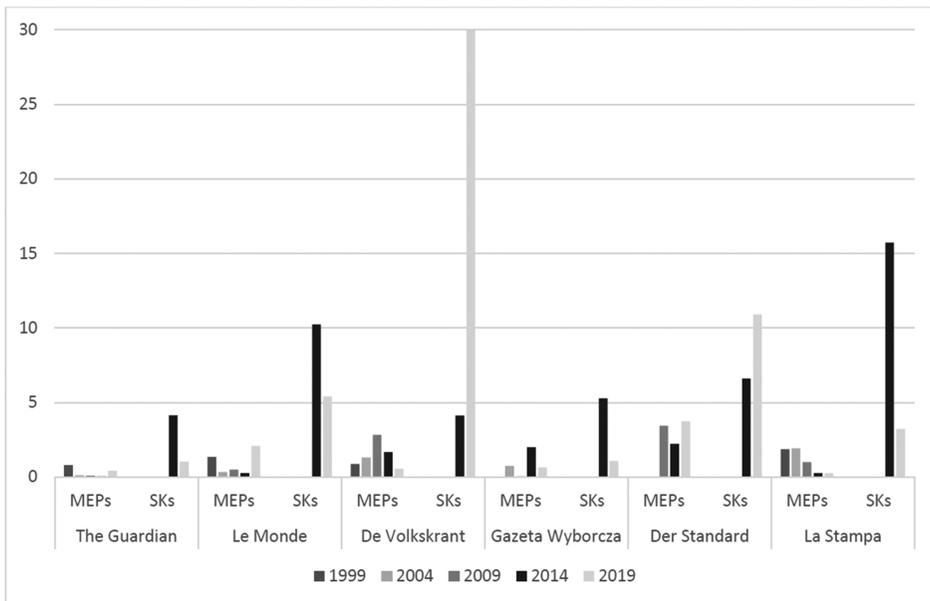
Note: The British Conservatives left the EPP in 2009 and are thus excluded.

does not seem to be a mediated personalization trend that relates references of *Spitzenkandidaten* to patterns of MEP visibility. Rather, *Spitzenkandidaten* appear to stand out from the respective national MEP delegation. Similar patterns are present only in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which reports less often about both MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten* between 2014 and 2019, while *Le Monde* reports more often about EPP MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten* and *Der Standard* increased its coverage of social democratic MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten* in 2019 compared with before; although these findings are not applicable if we consider only post-election periods.

## Conclusion

The aim of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was to raise voter awareness and participation. However, evidence suggests that their impact on electoral behaviour has been rather mixed (Gattermann and Marquart, 2020; Schmitt *et al.*, 2015). The purpose of this contribution was to study this phenomenon against the backdrop of mediated personalization processes during EP elections. As such, this contribution provides an important account of the media context in the 2019 EP elections, as voters learn about their prospective representatives through media coverage, which can ultimately inform their voting decisions. I argued that it is important to understand the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in the context of longitudinal developments and variations of personalized politics at the domestic level. Indeed, the findings show, first, that there are no universal personalization trends in the EP election coverage by European newspapers. Only *De Volkskrant* and *The Guardian* have

Figure 6: Average number of references to S&D/PES members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and *Spitzenkandidaten* (SKs)



Note: Irish Labour MEPs have not been elected after 2009 and are thus excluded. The *Spitzenkandidat* value is 63.19 for *De Volkskrant* in 2019. Timmermans was excluded in the calculations of the Dutch S&D delegation.

paid increasingly more attention to elected MEPs over the course of five EP elections, while the reverse is the case for *La Stampa*. The patterns for the remaining newspapers are mixed. There is generally considerable variation across country, while returning MEPs and those representing populist far-right parties tend to receive slightly more attention than newly elected and other MEPs, respectively. However, these categories are not mutually exclusive, that is, patterns could be driven by returning MEPs *from* populist far-right parties. As the analysis excludes unsuccessful MEP candidates, additional research is needed to examine individual-level variation. Second, *Spitzenkandidaten* altogether received less attention in 2019 compared with previously, except in the Dutch press, which suggests that EP election coverage has also not become more personalized at the pan-European level. However, and third, *Spitzenkandidaten* of the EPP and PES often stand out compared with the newspaper attention that a typical MEP from the same party family receives. In other words, the *Spitzenkandidaten* are somewhat detached from mediated personalization processes during EP elections at the national level.

This has both positive and unfavourable implications. On the one hand, *Spitzenkandidaten* have received special attention, most notably when the procedure was first introduced, which is a positive precondition for European citizens to learn about them (see Gattermann and de Vreese, 2020). On the other hand, this particularity could also be a disadvantage because European voters, except perhaps Irish voters, are not necessarily used to personalized media reporting about EP election candidates. For example,

as attention to individual candidates decreases in the Italian press, voters may have become less sensitized to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. However, as mediated personalization in the Dutch press has already occurred prior to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, voters here may have developed an apprehension for pan-European candidates, especially given that there were two Dutch *Spitzenkandidaten* in 2019.

If the procedure were to be revived, potentially enduring depersonalization trends would not enhance socialization with the procedure among European voters. One possible pre-emption would be to put forward candidates who already served in the EC. As the analysis showed, returning MEPs often tend to receive more media attention in European newspapers. Nominating *Spitzenkandidaten* with experience of serving in the EC would allow the media, and ultimately citizens, to hold them accountable for their past performance in future European elections, which would eventually mitigate the EU's accountability deficit (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014).

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Table A1:** Data overview, number of articles collected.

**Table A2:** Number of elected MEPs who directly took up their seat, per election (considered in this study).

**Table A3:** Overview of *Spitzenkandidaten*.

**Figure A1:** Average number of references to new versus returning MEPs post-election

**Figure A2:** Average number of references to populist far-right versus other MEPs post-election.

**Figure A3:** Average number of references to EPP MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten* post-election.

**Figure A4:** Average number of references to S&D/PES MEPs and *Spitzenkandidaten* post-election.