

From Hashtags to Votes:

Social Media Patterns in Poland's 2023 Parliamentary Elections



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Acknowledgments

This report was written by Jan Nicola Beyer (DRI) and Tobias Kleineidam (DRI) with data visualisations by Francesca Giannaccini (DRI) and content contributions from Sonia Horonziak (IPA) and Filip Pazderski (IPA).

Forset designed the layout of this publication.

Date: December 2023

The report is part of the [access:// democracy](https://access://democracy) project, funded by the Mercator Foundation. The contents of this report do not necessarily represent the position of the Mercator Foundation.



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Executive Summary

The 2023 Polish Parliamentary elections, held on 15 October, were a pivotal moment for the nation's political landscape. The opposition, a coalition of centrist, centre-right, and left-wing parties, won the majority of votes over the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) party, which has been in power since 2015. This significant shift was underlined by the highest voter turnout in the history of the Third Polish Republic, at 74.4 per cent, indicating a marked change in Poland's domestic politics and potential shifts in its relationship with the European Union.

This report covers the role of social media in shaping the political upheaval witnessed during the elections. It provides a detailed analysis of how various political actors used platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), examining the quantity and impact of their digital engagements. The report scrutinises the tone and sentiment of the online discourse, identifies key topics and narratives, and assesses how social media strategies might have influenced voter perceptions and the outcome of the elections.

The main findings:

- **Frequency vs. Resonance:** High posting frequency did not necessarily equate to successful audience resonance. For example, the leaders of the far-right Confederation (Konfederacja) party posted a very high number of messages, but this did not result in high engagement with the online audience.
- **Focus on Adversaries:** Certain candidates, notably from PiS, focused more on criticising adversaries, and especially Donald Tusk, leader of the opposition Civic Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), than promoting their own platforms, reflecting a strategy of negative campaigning.
- **Negative Sentiment Not Equating to Toxicity:** Negative sentiments were prevalent in the communications of several candidates, notably Confederation's Krzysztof Bosak and Sławomir Mentzen, as well as Mateusz Morawiecki, the incumbent PiS prime minister. Importantly, this negativity did not generally translate to toxicity, meaning offensive, excessively rude, or intentionally hurtful content that could potentially discourage active participation. We found toxicity in only a small percentage of posts. The examination was restricted to official social media accounts, however, and did not cover private or unofficial accounts, nor did it include comment sections, where toxic interactions are often more prevalent.

- **Ukraine as a Mobilising Narrative:** The Russian war against Ukraine emerged as a critical topic, with parties like PiS and Confederation using it to mobilise voters. While PiS initially maintained its supportive stance, expressing support for Ukraine, it increasingly shifted towards the position of Confederation, criticising Poland's aid to Ukraine and its involvement there.
- **Migration in Campaign Discourse:** Migration was a pivotal issue, used differently by various parties. The PiS government had scheduled a referendum for the same day, which put migration at the centre stage of the campaign. On the other side, the “bribes for visas” scandal, also linked to migration, was picked up by the opposition’s campaign. Hence, both the governing party and the opposition tried to raise fears and foster an emotive electoral campaign by invoking migration-linked narratives.

Introduction

The 2023 Polish Parliamentary elections, held on October 15, marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape. The opposition, an alliance encompassing centrist, centre-right, and left-wing parties, won against the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) party, which had been in power since 2015. The Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), with the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) as its primary component, and led by former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, played a pivotal role in this change. Alongside Third Way (Trzecia Droga) and The Left (Lewica) parties, they garnered enough support to establish a new government. They also won a majority of seats in the Senate.

This election, notable for its [high voter turnout](#) of 74.4 per cent, a record in the Third Polish Republic, signifies a profound transformation in both domestic politics and, potentially, Poland's interactions with the European Union. It may influence the country's approach to crucial matters like media freedom, civil rights, and judicial independence.

This election result was exceptional, considering the substantial challenges posed by the incumbents. The campaign honored the rights to association and assembly, yet it was tainted by the ruling party's inappropriate use of public assets, as highlighted in a [post-election report by OSCE](#). Their campaign strategies often blurred the lines with government information campaigns, with state-controlled entities playing a notable role, especially in the context of the referendum. The lack of comprehensive pre-election campaign finance disclosure, and the insufficient regulatory framework around the referendum undermined transparency and accountability in political and campaign finance. These factors did not allow fair competition.

This report aims to dissect the critical role of social media in the elections. It offers an in-depth overview of how political entities used the platforms Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) before and during the election. The analysis covers their online activities, measuring both the volume and impact of digital engagements. It scrutinises the tone and sentiment of online discourse, examining content for signs of toxicity and general sentiment, and identifies predominant topics and narratives in the online political discourse. This comprehensive examination seeks to provide insights into how social media strategies influenced voter perceptions and played a role in the election's outcome, highlighting the evolving role of digital political campaigning in Poland.

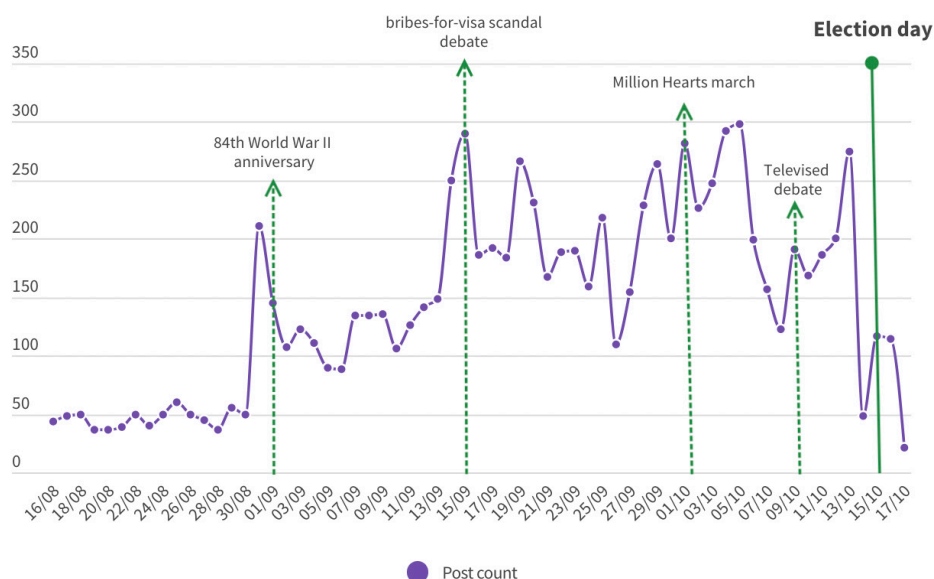
Activity Analysis: Personal versus Party Reach

The tracking of posting frequency by politicians during election campaigns is important, as it provides a window into the heart of modern political engagement strategies. By monitoring how often candidates and parties post, we can gain insights into the intensity and focus of their digital campaigns. This frequency serves as an indicator of how actively politicians are engaging with the electorate online, the adaptability of their campaign strategies to current events, and the prioritisation of digital outreach in their overall communications plan.

Our analysis encompasses 16,794 posts, collected from the accounts of the main politicians and political parties between 16 August to 17 October. It clearly indicates an overall upward trend, with a notable intensification beginning in mid-September. Such an intensification approaching election day is to be expected, as politicians try to sway the voters just before the vote. However, throughout the period of observation, we observed significant fluctuations. These variations offer insights into specific events or developments that shaped online narratives during the election campaign.

Total number of posts by politicians

Facebook and X posts for all politicians monitored



Graph 1

Activity Analysis: Personal versus Party Reach

A notable spike in social media activity on September 15, for example, can be linked to the unfolding of the [bribes-for-visas scandal](#). The first revelations of a scandal were based on the reporting of the newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, which brought to light suspicions of a corrupt scheme, whereby Polish officials allegedly issued visas (covering the Schengen zone) in exchange for bribes from non-EU citizens. The scandal gained further traction on 14 September, when the news website Onet released an in-depth report on the issuance of multiple-entry visas to Indian migrants.

Reacting promptly, the European Commission called for comprehensive clarifications from the Polish government about these visa issuances. The opposition party PO leveraged these revelations by launching targeted [election advertisements](#). They aimed to undermine the ruling PiS government by highlighting the contrast between their professed stringent migration policies and the scandalous revelations. This series of events had a significant impact on public discourse, as evidenced by the surge in political engagement on social media platforms during this crucial period.

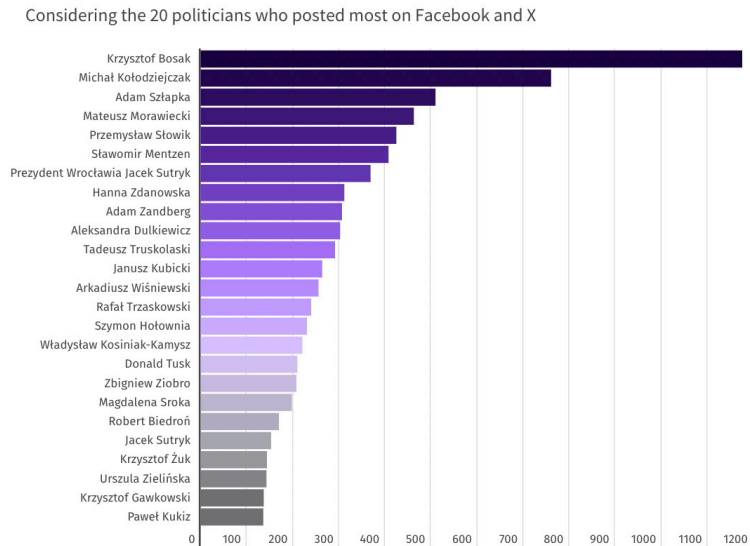
Outliers, in terms of posting activity, were not only caused by the Polish visa bribery scandal, but also linked to other key moments during the election campaign.

Notably, a peak in activity on 1 September coincided with the 84th anniversary of the start of the Second World War, a day of deep historical and emotional resonance in Poland. Another marked increase in social media posts was observed on 1 October – this time in reaction to the [Million Hearts march](#). This event, organised by the opposition, successfully rallied close to a million participants in a demonstration. Additionally, it shows a pronounced spike on 9 October, aligning with the only televised election [debate](#), on state broadcaster TVP. This debate was a crucial juncture in the campaign, marking the only instance where all six major contesting groups agreed to appear together on stage.

To deepen the analysis, we break posting activity down by individual politicians and political parties, as depicted in Graph 2. Through this step, we can see that Krzysztof Bosak, co-leader of the far-right Confederation party, stood out as the most active individual poster. His significant online presence was trailed by Michał Kołodziejczak, of the AGROunion (AGROunia) party, affiliated with the Civic Coalition, and Adam Szłapka, leader of the Civic Coalition's ally, the Modern (Nowoczesna) party. Other notable figures, such as the incumbent prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki of PiS, Przemysław Słowik of The Greens (Partia Zieloni), Sławomir Mentzen of Confederation, and Jacek Sutryk, the mayor of Wrocław, also demonstrate high levels of personal engagement on social media.

Tusk's relatively lower posting frequency (less than 200 posts in the observation period) suggests a different approach, or lesser reliance on personal social media engagement.

Total number of posts per politician

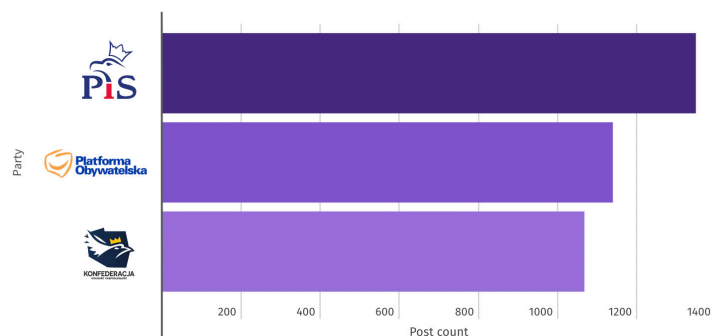


Graph 2

Looking at party-level activity in the period from 22 September to 17 October, and focusing on three pivotal parties, PiS, Civic Platform, and Confederation, the following becomes visible. While the differences in post counts are less stark at the party level, PiS still led, with over 200 more posts than both PO and Confederation.

Total number of posts per party

Considering the three selected parties' posts on Facebook and X



Graph 3

Activity Analysis: Personal versus Party Reach

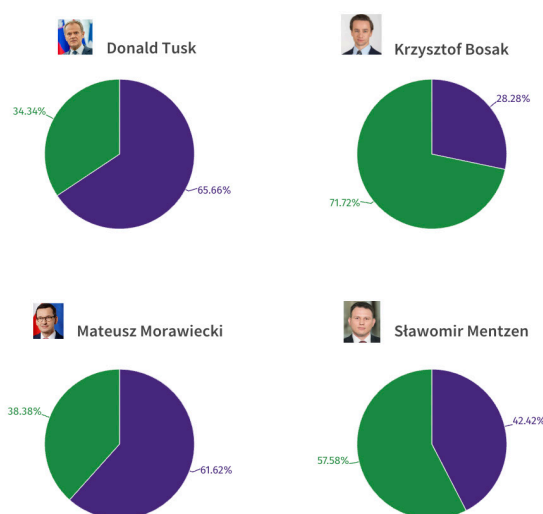
This suggests that PiS relied more on the party's centralised accounts for messaging. This stands in contrast to Confederation, which relied heavily on the accounts of its two leaders, Bosak and Mentzen. These patterns of social media usage might provide a window into the varying digital strategies employed by the parties, with some focussing on leveraging the reach and influence of their front runners, while others opted for a more collective approach through their party accounts.

Differences can also be seen when looking at how selected politicians used the two social media platforms under observation. Variations in the platform used could suggest that the selected politicians were aiming to connect with different audiences.

Proportion of posts per politician

Considering the distribution of posts on Facebook and X

● Facebook ● X



Graph 4

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democracy

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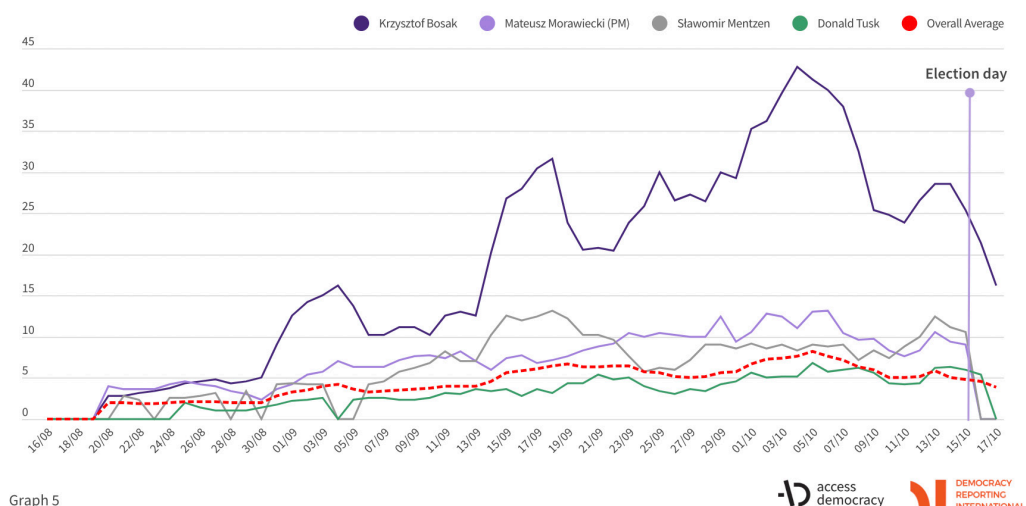
Notably, Confederation's Bosak and Mentzen showed a preference for X, diverging from the more traditional choice of Facebook. Bosak, in particular, demonstrated a strong preference for the platform. This strategic decision seems to reflect an intention to connect with a user base that is potentially more active or prevalent on X than on Facebook, such as national politicians, journalists, and the international audience. In a contrasting approach, Tusk and Morawiecki leaned more towards Facebook for their public communications. Given Facebook's status as the [foremost social media site for news in Poland](#), that choice is noteworthy. It likely represents an effort to engage with a wider, possibly more conventional, social media demographic in the country.

Engagement Metrics: The Disjuncture between Activity and Reach

Data analysis comparing posting behaviour with engagement metrics — such as likes, shares, and comments — reveals that a high number of posts does not necessarily equate to successful audience resonance. This is particularly evident in the case of Bosak.¹ During the campaign period, Bosak was the most prolific poster, out-posting other politicians almost daily (refer to graph 5). However, despite this high posting frequency, possibly a tactic to offset his party's [smaller campaign budget](#), it did not automatically translate into higher engagement or resonance with the audience.

Total number of posts per politician

Facebook and X posts for selected politicians based on 5-day rolling average

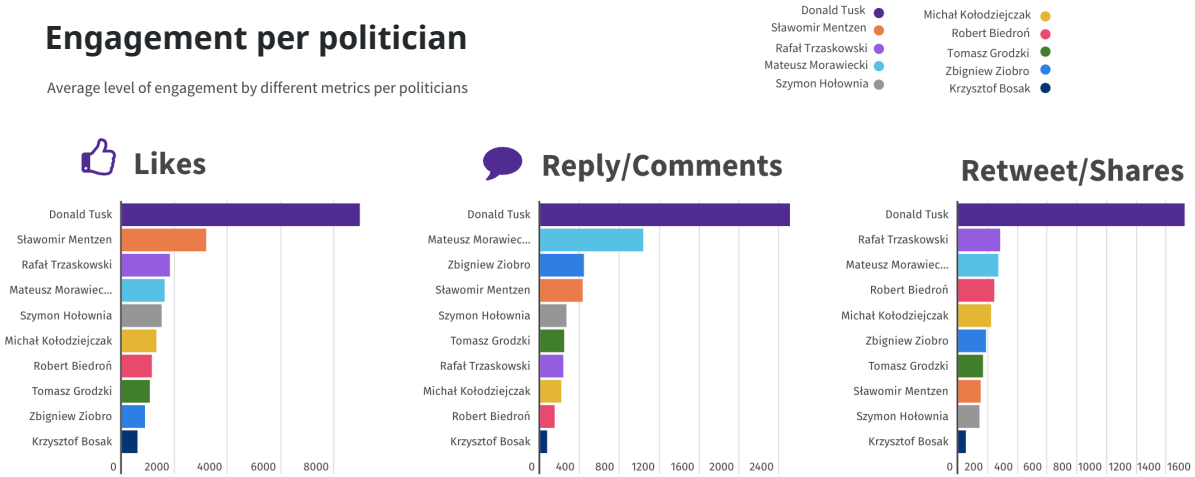


By contrast, Tusk markedly surpassed others in audience engagement. In retrospect, it might be argued that the subdued engagement performance of Bosak and Mentzen could have presaged the Confederation party's modest electoral results.

1 The exceptionally high posting frequency of Krzysztof Bosak, in comparison to other candidates, not only questions the effectiveness in engaging the public in this manner, but also raises doubts about the authenticity of his postings. To ascertain whether Bosak himself posted these messages or if artificial amplifiers like bots were used, we conducted a timestamp analysis. Timestamp analysis scrutinizes the specific times of posts, particularly noting if they occur during atypical hours, such as late at night. Posts at these times may suggest the use of bots or sock puppets to artificially boost posting frequency. Our analysis of Bosak's posts involved a detailed examination of the timing of each post to identify any indicators of inauthentic activity. The results, however, showed no unusual patterns or timings indicative of non-authentic posting. Despite Bosak's high post volume, there was no significant evidence suggesting the use of inauthentic means to bolster his online visibility.

Engagement per politician

Average level of engagement by different metrics per politicians



Graph 6

Tone and Toxicity: Negative but Not Toxic

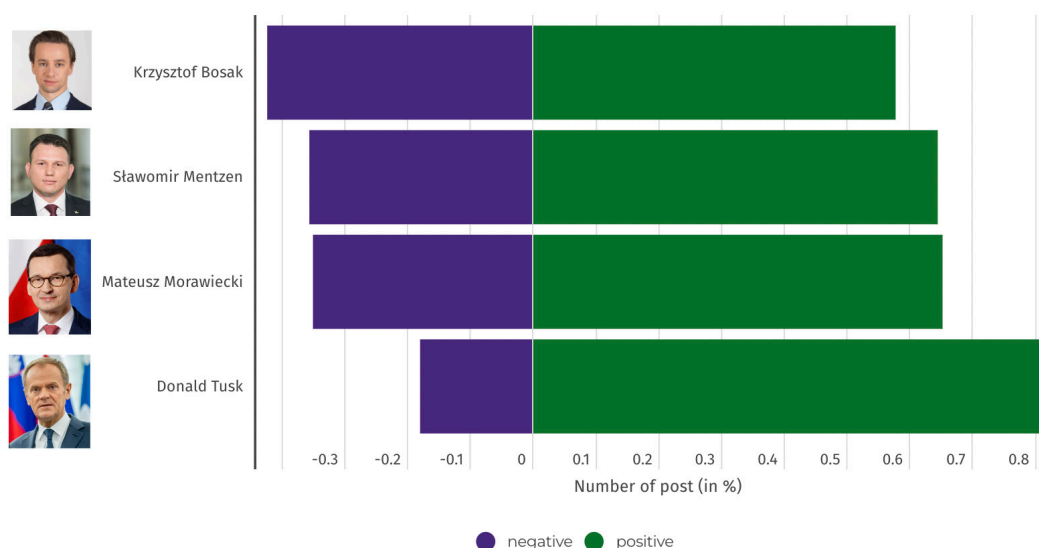
In the highly [polarised](#) context of the Polish elections, with the incumbent PiS and the opposition framing the event as a battle for the nation's future, the tone and delivery of political messages were key. In the following, we examine the communication strategies of and sentiments conveyed by prominent leaders like Tusk, Morawiecki, Bosak, and Mentzen.

After the election, many have argued that Tusk stood out, and potentially gained an advantage over his rivals, with his [positive portrayal of Poland's future](#). His campaign was characterised by [optimistic symbols](#), most notably a heart in Poland's white and red national colours, symbolising unity and national love. This positive imagery was consistent across his digital communications.

Utilising sentiment analysis, a computational method that interprets the emotional tone within texts to categorise the author's attitude as positive, negative, or neutral, we observed distinct trends in the online communication of political figures. Tusk's posts on Facebook and X predominantly carried a positive tone. Meanwhile, Bosak's messages emerged as the most negative, with a notable portion falling into this category. Morawiecki and Mentzen also tended towards negative sentiments in their posts, although their negativity was not as pronounced as Bosak's.

Positive and negative sentiment proportions

Sentiment proportions per politician on Facebook and X



Graph 7

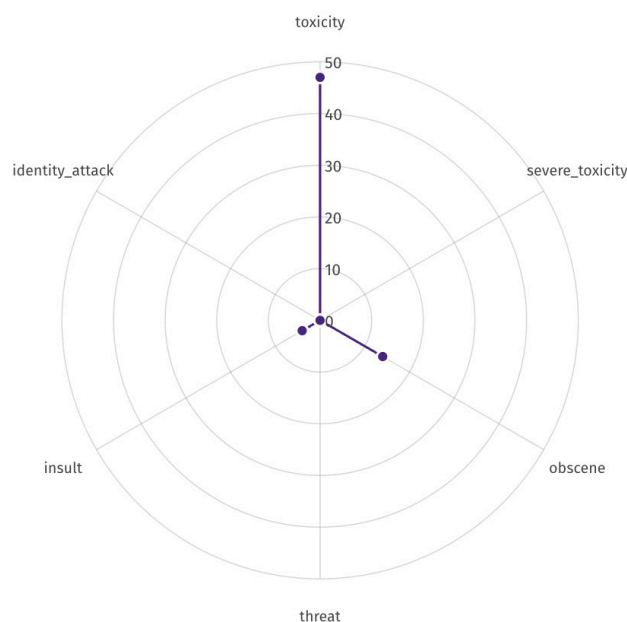
Tone and Toxicity: Negative but Not Toxic

It is crucial to note that negative sentiment in posts did not automatically equate to toxicity. To distinguish these two aspects, we utilised an AI-powered tool to classify posts as either toxic or non-toxic. In this context, toxicity refers to offensive, excessively rude, or intentionally hurtful content that could potentially discourage active participation in a discussion. Our analysis revealed that only a small percentage of posts were considered toxic (see graph 8). This suggests that, while some messages may have had a negative tone, they seldom escalated to outright toxicity.

Our findings regarding toxic content have significant limitations, however. We limited our examination to official social media accounts, excluding private or unofficial accounts, which might have been used for more aggressive or toxic messaging. Moreover, due to constraints on data access, our analysis did not encompass comment sections or replies, which are often hotspots for toxic interactions. These limitations imply that our results may not comprehensively reflect the extent of negativity or toxicity within the broader online campaign environment.

Number of toxic posts

Total number of toxic counts; overall sum and sub-groups (different types of toxicity)



Graph 8

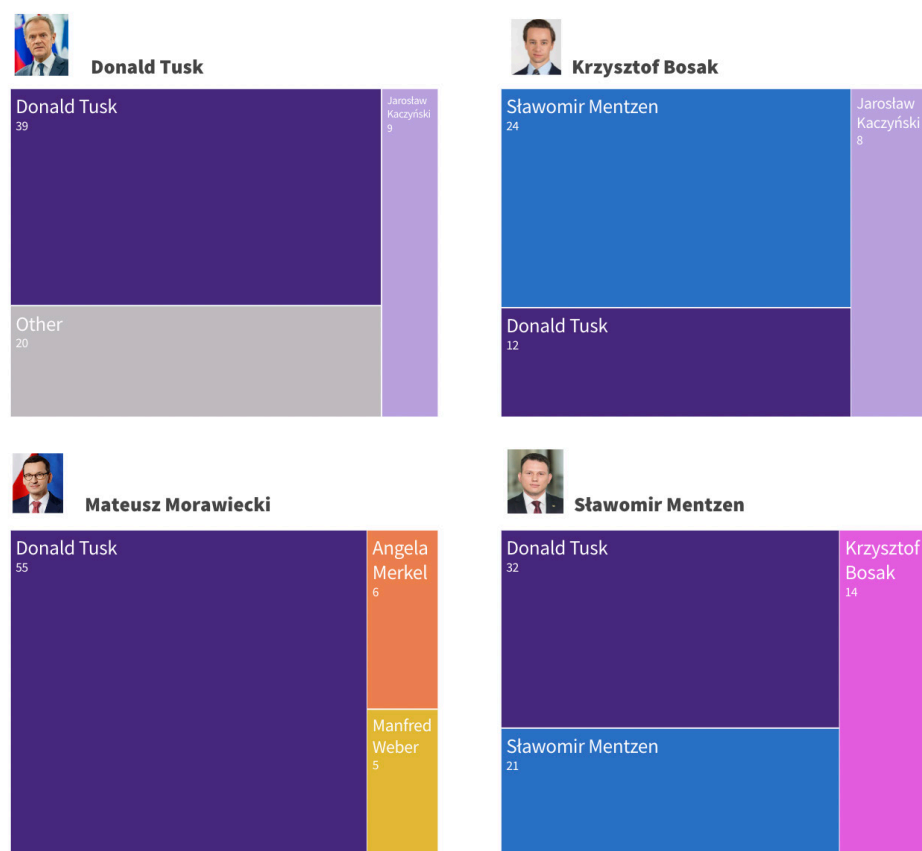
Personalisation: Personality versus Issue Focused Campaigns

To supplement our sentiment and toxicity analysis, we investigated the extent to which candidates concentrated on their own campaigns, as opposed to those of their rivals. This focus on opponents often signals another facet of negative campaigning strategy, highlighting opponents' shortcomings rather than advocating one's own programmes or ideas. Such an approach is particularly relevant given the highly [personalised](#) nature of the Polish elections, as noted by many observers.

Using named entity recognition, we analysed how frequently candidates' names featured in campaign discourse. The results revealed distinct patterns among the leading candidates. For instance, Morawiecki appeared predominantly focused on his main adversary, Tusk, mentioning him more frequently than members of Morawiecki's own party. In contrast, Tusk's posts mostly referred to himself, especially in the context of promoting his own campaign events and promises.

Name mentions per politician

Absolute number of names mentioned on Facebook and X



Graph 9

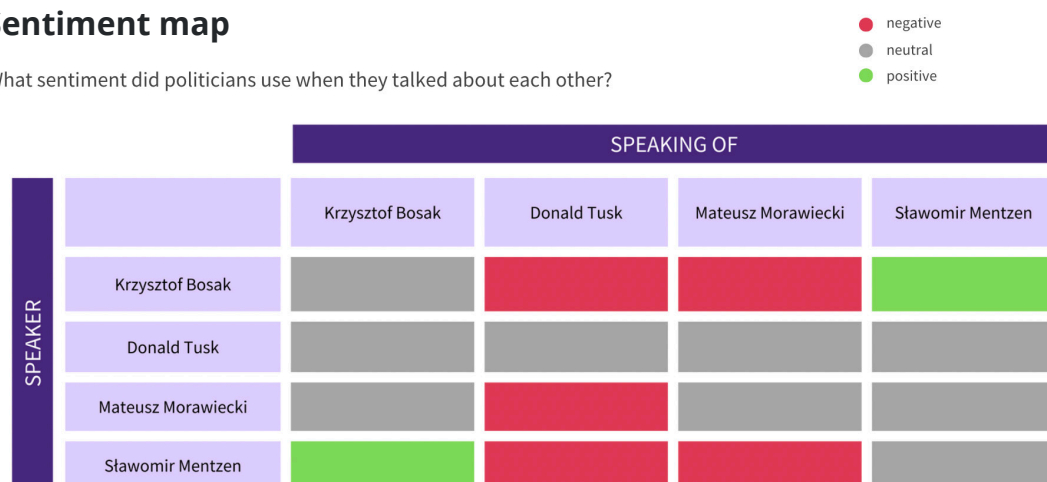
Personalisation: Personality versus Issue Focused Campaigns

To further investigate whether the patterns we observed were indicative of negative campaigning, we analysed the tone used by politicians when referencing their competitors. This analysis highlighted varying approaches among the candidates.

Tusk generally maintained a neutral tone in his mentions of competitors like Morawiecki, Bosak, and Mentzen. On the other hand, these three politicians often employed a more negative tone when referencing their opponents, and particularly Tusk. These findings suggest a link between the focus of a campaign (whether it is inward, concentrating on one's own campaign, or outward, targeting opponents) and the tone of the communications. It seems that campaigns with an outward focus on opponents are more inclined to use a negative tone.

Sentiment map

What sentiment did politicians use when they talked about each other?





Graph 10

To get a better grasp of the specific nature of personalised messages, we carried out a qualitative analysis of individual posts. The findings further underpin the idea that outward-focused personalised messages were aimed at negative campaign strategies. Individual posts showed how PiS was trying to combine anti-Tusk with anti-German rhetoric.

The idea PiS propagated was that Germany is trying not only to dominate Poland and the EU, but is also striving for global leadership, and that Tusk has functioned as a vassal for German interests. This narrative could be found throughout PiS's campaign, in which [Germany is to blame for many of Poland's major challenges today](#). The idea of Tusk as a "German puppet" is not new. It already appeared with Tusk's appointment as European Council president, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel showed strong support for his presidency, and PiS began to denounce him.

Personalisation: Personality versus Issue Focused Campaigns

Tweet

 **Mateusz Morawiecki**  · 12 October · 🌐



⚠️ Platforma Obywatelska = nielegalna imigracja ⚠️

O tym mówią ich liderzy i posłowie!
O tym mówi Donald Tusk i jego szef Manfred Weber!
O tym świadczą ich głosowania w Parlamencie Europejskim!
I to potwierdziły ostatnio polskie sądy w procesie, który wygraliśmy.

Dziś, gdy przywódcy Hamasu wzywają do świętej wojny, a kolejny konflikt na Bliskim Wschodzie grozi następnymi falami migracji - musimy bronić naszych granic!

Tylko **Prawo i Sprawiedliwość** jest gwarantem postawienia VETA🚫 nielegalnym imigrantom!

Za kilka dni wybierzemy - czy chcemy zgody na nielegalną imigrację, przymusową relokację i 🚫 chaosu PO - czy stabilności, skuteczności i bezpieczeństwa 🟢 rządu Prawa i Sprawiedliwości!

  [#TylkoPiS](#)



⚠️ Civic Platform = illegal immigration ⚠️

This is what their leaders and MPs are talking about!
This is what Donald Tusk and his boss Manfred Weber are talking about!
This is what their votes in the European Parliament testify!
And this was recently confirmed by the Polish courts in the trial that we won.



Today, as Hamas leaders call for a holy war and another conflict in the Middle East threatens another wave of migration - we must defend our borders!

Only **Prawo i Sprawiedliwość** guarantees a VETA🚫 for illegal immigrants!

In a few days we will choose - whether we want approval for illegal immigration, forced relocation and 🚫 PO chaos - or stability, effectiveness and security 🟢 of the Law and Justice government!

  [#TylkoPiS](#)

Tweet

 **Zbigniew Ziobro | SP**
@ZiobroPL  ...

Szczery plakat marzeń niemieckiej lewicy: „Zjednoczenie Niemiec dokonało się, ale jeszcze nie całkowicie. Pracujemy nad tym razem”. Po to potrzebują Herr [@donalduktusk](#), z którymi planują zdeptać suwerenność nie godzących się na to państw jak Polska. Wielkie Niemcy w drodze... wpolityce.pl/polityka/66525...

Translated from Polish by [Google](#)

A sincere poster of the dreams of the German left: “The unification of Germany has been achieved, but not yet completely. We’re working on this together.” That’s why they need Herr [@donalduktusk](#), with whom they plan to trample on the sovereignty of countries that do not agree to it, such as Poland. Greater Germany on the way...

11:22 am · 8 Oct 2023 · **45.2K** Views

In addition to playing on such [growing anti-German sentiments](#), PiS exploited fears of a Russian invasion among the Polish population, in another attempt to undermine Tusk. Two weeks after independent media reports surfaced of the “bribes for visas” scandal, [PiS published a video](#) in which Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak accused Tusk’s 2007-2014 government of having created a plan to give up “half of the country” if Russia attacked Poland.

Tweet



Trying to mobilise voters in Poland's traditionally PiS-friendly east, the party made public what was until then an internal defence plan Tusk's government prepared in 2011. High-ranking generals who served under the Tusk administration strongly criticised the publication of the document and explained that such plans fall under common military strategy and are necessary in order to be prepared for any possible scenario. In addition, they reminded the public that the plans originated under the late former-President Lech Kaczyński, twin brother of PiS's leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, and were based on documents created during the latter's time as prime minister.

Topical Analyses: Women, Ukraine, and Migration

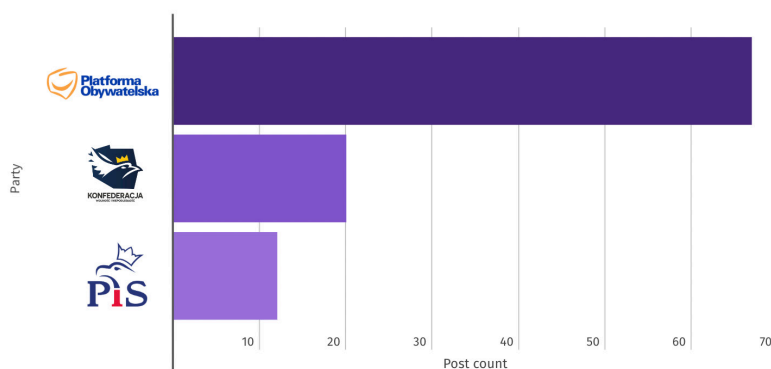
Initially, our research centred on the frequency and tone of social media messages, but now we pivot to a thorough examination of the content of these messages. To achieve this, we integrate diverse methodologies, including keyword searches, to identify and track the occurrence of specific topics in social media conversations. We also employ topic modelling, a sophisticated AI technique that groups similar texts, enabling us to organically identify and scrutinize emerging topics. This multifaceted approach is crucial for a holistic understanding of the predominant themes during the campaign.

Women's Engagement in Tusk's Campaign

Our content analysis investigates the widely made claim that Tusk's electoral strategy resonated effectively with [young and women voters](#). This strategy, by focusing on the unique interests and concerns of these groups, played a significant role in the campaign's impact and success. Our keyword analysis supports this claim, revealing that Tusk's social media communications mentioned women more frequently than those of his competitors, as shown in Graph 11.

Total mention of the word woman/women per party

Considering the three selected parties' posts on Facebook and X



Graph 11

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democracy

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Furthermore, our qualitative review of social media content highlights strategic aspects of Tusk's campaign, especially concerning women's rights. A considerable portion of his party's messaging challenged the PiS government's restrictions on abortion, engaging voters in a conversation about the erosion of reproductive rights.

Topical Analyses: Women, Ukraine, and Migration

Tweet



Examining specific topics, such as women's mobilisation, provides insights into their significance in election discourse. This approach requires prior topic knowledge. To uncover trending topics without preconceptions, we used topic modelling. This revealed a spectrum of central themes, including campaign events and election announcements (see Graph 12).

Topic Modeling

Most mentioned topics on Facebook and X



Graph 12

Notably, our analysis identified a significant focus on general election-related posts and Confederation party activities, aligning with our observations of its leaders' active social media engagement. Infrastructure investment also emerged as a key topic, indicating the emphasis candidates placed on development and public works.

Russia's War against Ukraine as a Theme

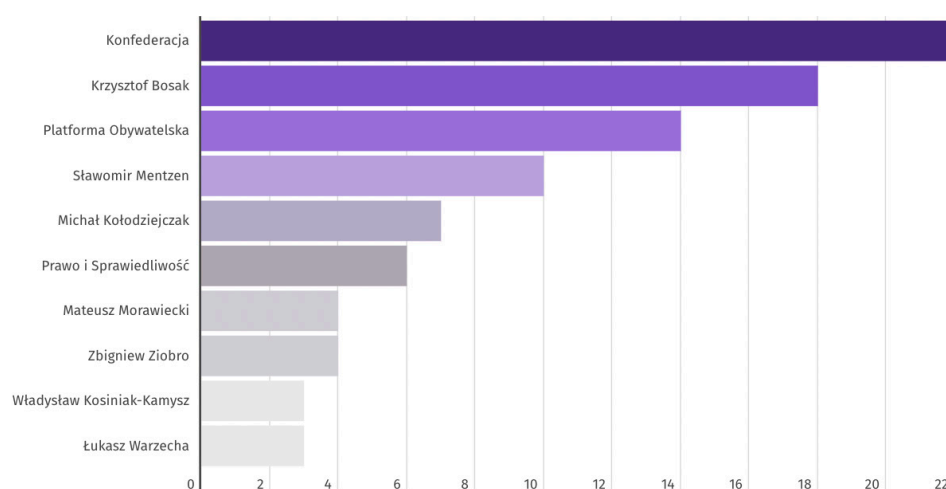
A pivotal topic was the Russian war against Ukraine, reflecting its profound impact on Polish politics and the election narrative. The analysis delves deeper into how the Ukraine issue influenced the Polish elections, examining the varying stances of political parties and candidates, their expressed sentiments, and the potential sway of these discussions on public opinion and broader societal concerns.

During the election campaign, we observed strategic manoeuvres by all major political parties seeking to leverage Poland's support for Ukraine to garner votes. But it was particularly the [Confederation](#) and [PiS](#) who tried to mobilize voters around these issues.

Graph 13 shows the absolute number of posts per party and politician related to the issue of Ukraine. Confederation's strategy to use the topic for campaigning was visible in the social media activities of Bosak and Mentzen, and in fact the party's account was among the most vocal.

Number of posts per politician and party

Considering Ukraine-related posts on Facebook and X



Graph 13

The leaders of Confederation voiced criticism of Poland's support for Ukraine, expressing discontent with what they perceive as a lack of appreciation for Poland's efforts in sending weapons to Ukraine and aiding Ukrainian refugees. Initially being the only party outspokenly sceptical about [Poland's support for Ukraine](#), Confederation and its leaders stood out with strong anti-Ukrainian posts, painting a picture of Ukrainians robbing Poland and seeking influence in Polish politics.

Tweet



Rzecznik Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych przyznał: „Jesteśmy sługami Ukrainy!”

Oto efekty polityków jaką prowadzą „słudzy Ukrainy”: łupią Polaków podatkami i rozdaje miliardy złotych Ukraińcom, którzy w rewanżu nas pozywają i wprowadzają sankcje na nasze owoce i warzywa. Skończmy z tym!

Wystawiliśmy Ukrainie rachunek za wszelką pomoc udzieloną przez Polskę, która opiewa na ponad 100 miliardów złotych i wzywamy do zniesienia socjału dla Ukraińców!

Pieniądze polskich podatników powinny iść w pierwszej kolejności na polskie potrzeby! Jeśli się zgadzasz, UDOSTĘPNIJ!

Translated from Polish by Google

A spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted: “We are servants of Ukraine.”

These are the effects of politicians led by the “servants of Ukraine”: they rob Poles with taxes and give away billions of zlotys to Ukrainians, who in return sue us and introduce sanctions on our fruit and vegetables. Let's end this!

We have billed Ukraine for all the aid provided by Poland, which amounts to over PLN 100 billion, and we are calling for the abolition of social security for Ukrainians!

Polish taxpayers' money should go to Polish needs first! If you agree, SHARE!



7:32 pm · 27 Sep 2023 · 16.1K Views

Yet, it was not only Confederation that mobilised anti-Ukrainian sentiments. A notable instance in this context was an interview with PiS' Morawiecki towards the end of September. In the interview, [Morawiecki](#) made ambiguous statements regarding Poland's continued supply of weapons to Ukraine. This stance marked a significant departure from Poland's previously established policy towards Ukraine. Political observers interpreted Morawiecki's comments as an attempt to attract voters from the traditionally Ukraine-hostile Confederation party. Such views were increasingly represented in social media posts.

Tweet



Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 
@pisorgpl

Follow



Premier [@MorawieckiM](#) w Kraśniku: Apeluje do Prezydenta Ukrainy, aby nie obrażał Polaków. Polacy będą pomagać i sprzeciwiają się agresji rosyjskiej, ale na pierwszym miejscu stawiamy przede wszystkim nasz interes narodowy. [#BezpiecznaPrzyszłośćPolaków](#)

Translated from Polish by [Google](#)

Prime Minister [@MorawieckiM](#) in Kraśnik: I appeal to the President of Ukraine not to offend Poles. Poles will help and oppose Russian aggression, but we put our national interest first. [#BezpiecznaPrzyszłośćPolaków](#)

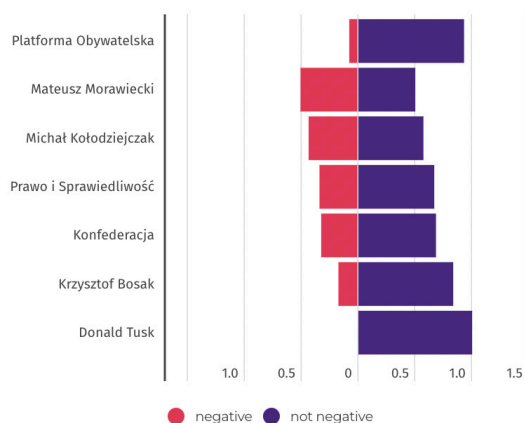
5:45 pm · 25 Sep 2023 · 4,006 Views

This move by Morawiecki and PiS represented a tactical shift in their election campaign, suggesting a willingness to modify their foreign policy stance to attract votes from a segment of the Polish electorate opposed to continuing support for Ukraine in the war with Russia, including those with negative sentiments towards Ukraine more generally. It underscores how the war against Ukraine, while an external geopolitical issue, had become deeply intertwined with internal Polish politics.

The anti-Ukrainian sentiment can also be seen in the social media data. Running a sentiment analysis on the Ukraine-specific posts shows that politicians like Morawiecki, Bosak, and Mentzen displayed a predominantly negative tone when discussing Ukraine, while Politicians like Tusk remained neutral, or even positive.

Sentiment map

How major account treats Ukrainian-specific issues on social media (X and Facebook)



Graph 14

access democracy

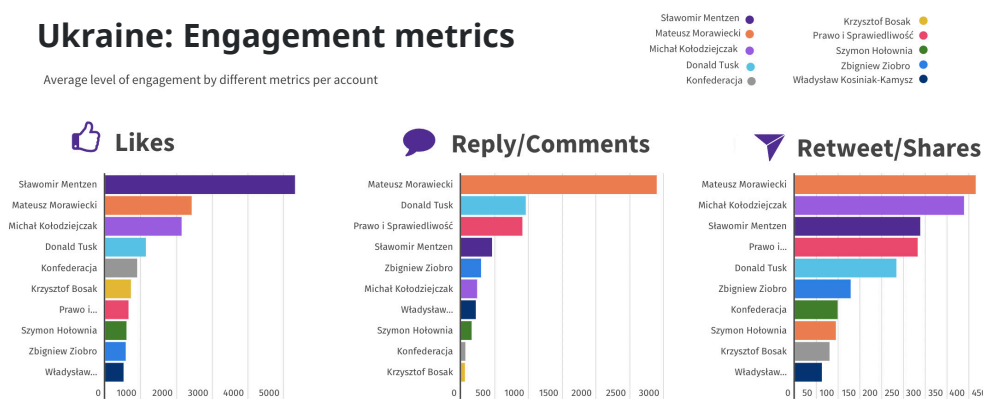
DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

An analysis of user engagement on posts related to Ukraine reveals distinct patterns. Authors with a large volume of posts containing anti-Ukrainian messages, particularly Morawiecki, generated significant engagement, leading in metrics such as retweets/shares and comments/replies. Meanwhile, Mentzen's posts garnered the most likes. Engagement was not solely driven by anti-Ukrainian sentiment, however.

For instance, retweets and shares of messages show that Morawiecki was closely trailed by Michael Kołodziejczak. Kołodziejczak, known for his criticism of the government's use of the Ukraine war in their political campaign, has been vocal in defending the [interests of farmers](#) amid the Polish-Ukrainian [grain dispute](#).

Ukraine: Engagement metrics

Average level of engagement by different metrics per account



Graph 15

access democracy

DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

The Referendum and the Debate on Migration

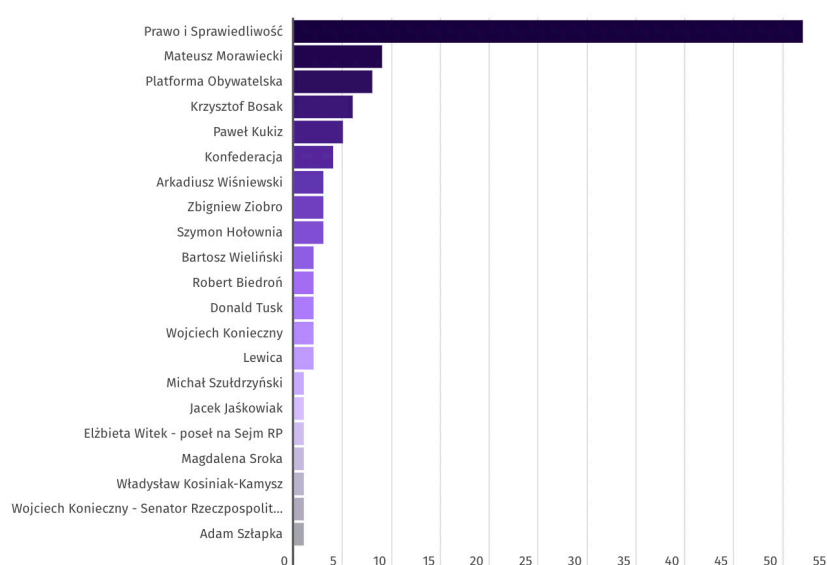
The topic-modelling analysis also highlighted the issue of the referendum, a topic deserving closer examination. On 15 June, Jarosław Kaczyński announced what he called a [migration referendum](#), scheduled for the same day as the parliamentary elections. Focussing on migration, PiS tried to mobilise its voters. When submitted to parliament, on August 14, the referendum comprised four questions, only two of which pertained to migration; the others addressed alleged foreign economic influence and the country's retirement age. With citizens ranking socio-economic issues such as inflation as more important than immigration in a [pre-election Eurobarometer survey](#), PiS's move to turn the latter into one of its central campaign topics [came as a surprise](#).

The opposition's strategy to disregard the referendum and advise voters to abstain from taking part was successful, as the referendum failed to attain the necessary [threshold of 50 per cent of voters](#) to be valid. Given, however, that the referendum significantly shaped the election discourse, we discuss it in more detail.

To further analyse the discourse concerning the referendum, we looked at who engaged with the topic the most. Graph 16 demonstrates that, among politicians, Morawiecki was the most active in directly mentioning the referendum in his posts. In contrast, Tusk shared fewer posts on the topic.

Referendum: total number of posts

The account who posted most on Facebook and X about the topic

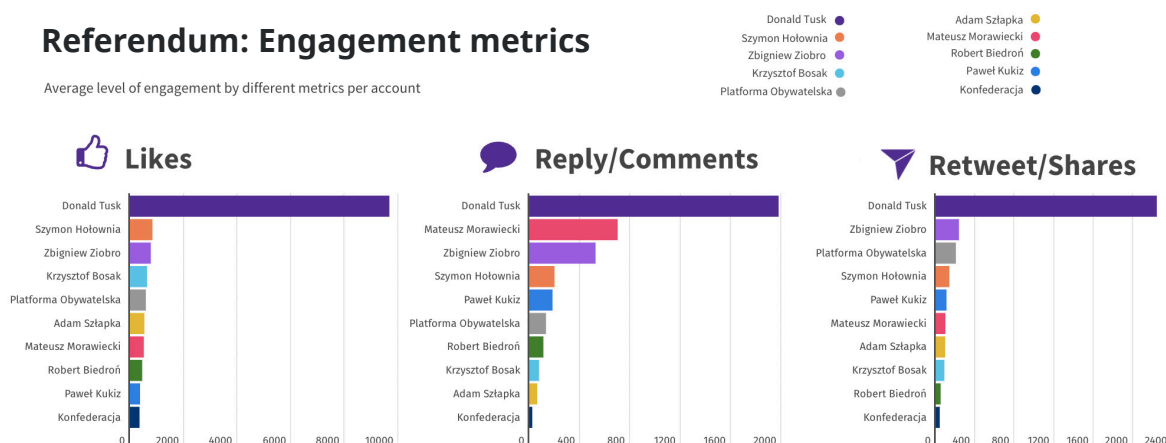


Graph 16

Interestingly, Tusk leads again when it comes to the average engagement per post, as can be seen in graph 17.

Referendum: Engagement metrics

Average level of engagement by different metrics per account



Graph 17

access democracy

DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL


Focusing on some of Tusk and Morawiecki's posts reveals the former's potential strategy behind this. He may not have posted much, but posted at the right moment – his posts on the referendum commented ironically that PiS's referendum to limit migration came at the same time the party was alleged to have been behind the "bribes for visas" scheme.


Tweet



Tweet 



Donald Tusk 


6 September · 

Rozpętać antymigrancką histerię, ściągnąć rekordową ilość migrantów, zarobić miliony na wizach, a na koniec rozpisać referendum w sprawie migracji.

Łukaszenka to przy nich amator.

Untangle anti-immigrant hysteria, download a record number of migrants, earn millions on visas, and finally call a referendum on migration.

Lukashenka is an amateur around them.

 · [Hide Original](#) · [Rate this translation](#)

Hence, PO sought to portray the government as hypocritical regarding the referendum. Despite this, the anti-immigrant narrative remained a central theme for both PiS and Confederation.

Emotional appeals by PiS, the incumbent Justice Minister, Zbigniew Ziobro, or Morawiecki exemplify the party's ambition to use the topic to mobilise voters for PiS and against PO. However, [already in July](#), and especially in September, with the visa scandal unfolding and the election day coming closer, PO tried to turn the tables and use the immigration topic against PiS, facing criticism of playing with similar provocative tones as PiS.

Amidst such heated discussions about migration and the visa scandal came the release of the movie ["Green Border"](#) by Polish director and screenwriter Agnieszka Holland. According to Holland, the release was not purposely timed to coincide with the elections, but was motivated by her anger over how the government handled the border situation with Belarus. In the movie, she depicted the fates of refugees at the Polish-Belarusian border, which triggered an outcry from PiS members, who branded the movie as "propaganda", comparable to films Nazi Germany produced during Second World War.

Tweet

**Zbigniew Ziobro | SP**
@ZiobroPL

Follow ...

W III Rzeszy Niemcy produkowali propagandowe filmy pokazujące Polaków jako bandytów i morderców. Dziś mają od tego Agnieszkę Holland...

Translated from Polish by Google

In the Third Reich, the Germans produced propaganda films showing Poles as bandits and murderers. Today they have Agnieszka Holland for that...





onet.pl
Agnieszka Holland o PiS: po tych słowach władze skreśliły m – Miałam świadomość, że to film bardzo ryzykowny dla moich współpracowników – o sobie nie mówię, trudniej ...

9:35 am · 4 Sep 2023 · 239.8K Views

Lastly, despite being seen as a [potential kingmaker](#) throughout the election campaign, Confederation fell short of holding back criticism on both PO's and PiS's immigration policies. In particular, Bosak, the party's co-leader, used strongly negative language, mixing fear with appeals to forcefully stop migration to Poland.

Tweet

**Krzysztof Bosak** 
@krzysztofbosak

...



Albo będziemy stosować siłę na granicach by powstrzymać ten najazd albo siła będzie stosowana wobec nas, w naszych miastach, przez populację z innych cywilizacji.

Spółeczeństwa zbyt miękkie placą własnym bezpieczeństwem i majątkiem za tymczasowy spokój źle uformowanych sumień.

Translated from Polish by Google

Either we will use force at the borders to stop this invasion, or force will be used against us, in our cities, by populations from other civilizations.

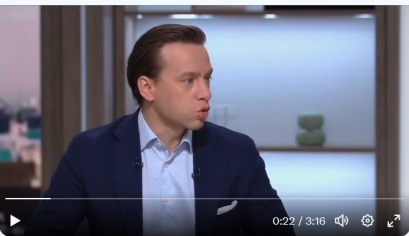
Too soft societies pay with their own security and property for the temporary peace of ill-formed consciences.

**Wolność Słowa** 
@WolnoscO · 19 Sep

Media na tropie kontrowersji

Tylko jak sama redaktor przyznała, wystarczy wejść w komentarze pod filmikami z wypowiedzią @krzysztofbosak, by samemu przeczytać, czy ludzie uważają jego słowa za kontrowersyjne...

Show more



0:22 / 3:16

9:57 pm · 20 Sep 2023 · 63.6K Views

Policy Recommendations

For Policymakers:

1. **Robust Implementation and Enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA):** Ensure the effective application of the Digital Services Act, against online disinformation and misinformation, to help safeguard the integrity of the electoral process. The current Polish social media landscape is subject to significant challenges, highlighting the need for robust enforcement.
2. **Lobby for Broad Data Access:** Policymakers should ensure that platforms' commitments under the DSA and the 2022 strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation to provide public data are comprehensive. This is vital, as social media monitoring results cannot fully reflect the nature of election discourse if specific data points, such as comments or large, closed groups on platforms like Facebook, remain inaccessible. In particular, toxic and deceptive content tends to proliferate in these domains.
3. **Code of Conduct for Political Figures:** Establish a voluntary code of conduct for members of political parties and government institutions, to prevent the amplification of disinformation. This should include clear behavioural rules, in order to prevent hate speech and disinformation.
4. **Integration of Expert Opinions in Decision-Making:** Actively seek out and incorporate advice from academic and civil society experts, especially on strategies to address disinformation campaigns. This is crucial, as Polish politicians often engage in what can be described as “lawful but awful” communication, issuing statements that, while not illegal, contain divisive and inflammatory content. A permanent cooperation body among state authorities, social media platforms, traditional media outlets, and civil society organisations should be created to identify information threats.
5. **Equip Electoral Bodies with Investigative Tools:** Electoral bodies, especially the National Electoral Commission, should be provided with tools to investigate online political activities. This includes scrutinizing the use of electoral resources, particularly during election campaigns, for purposes such as spreading disinformation online.
6. **Financial Support for Civil Society Organizations:** The state should ensure financial resources to civil society organizations. This funding is crucial to enable them to engage effectively in activities like online monitoring and watchdog tasks.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Public and Electoral Literacy Campaigns:** Invest in comprehensive campaigns to educate citizens in media literacy, focusing on understanding and critically assessing online content. Digital literacy campaigns could help pre-empt such deceptive discursive strategies by explaining their deceiving nature (pre-bunking).

For Tech Platforms:

1. **Active Policy Enforcement:** Tech platforms should ensure that they effectively enforce their disinformation policies during elections.
2. **Give Priority to Data Access:** Platforms should empower researchers to conduct social media monitoring to reflect the true nature of the election discourse. This can only be achieved if platforms provide access to all relevant data points, such as comments or large but closed groups (e.g., on Facebook), especially since toxic and deceptive content tends to proliferate in these domains.
3. **Responsibility of High-Influence Accounts:** Enforce community guidelines on content posted by major political figures more rigorously, particularly considering their amplified influence during election periods. In the Polish context, actors with the highest frequency of messages often spread disinformation.
4. **Continuous Monitoring Efforts:** Recognise that occurrences of mis- and disinformation often take a long time to establish.

For Polish Civil Society Organisations:

- 1. Collaboration and Networking:** Enhance collaboration between different organisations and research entities to share best practices and resources in fighting disinformation. In light of some platforms limiting access to data, it should be considered whether special provisions or agreements can be made during election campaigns to ensure more comprehensive data access for these collaborations.
- 2. Active Engagement and Advocacy:** Maintain a watchdog role over online platforms and political entities, while also engaging in dialogues and partnerships that serve the public interest. This role involves not only monitoring and reporting, but also actively advocating for transparency and accountability in the dissemination of information.
- 3. Public Engagement and Trust-Building:** Develop innovative ways to engage with the public, promoting awareness about disinformation and fostering a culture of critical media consumption. This involves creating and disseminating educational content, organising workshops or forums, and using various media channels to reach a wide audience.

Recommendations for practice: Monitoring the next election

- 1. Data Collection and Retention Enhancement:** Emphasise the importance of consistent data collection and retention across different election cycles, as highlighted in this report. Establish standardised protocols for data collection and preservation to enable effective cross-election analysis and identify trends in social media's role in political processes. This would address the gap in comparative analysis arising from the lack of data from previous elections, such as those in 2019, to better understand shifts in the social media landscape.
- 2. Enlarge Platform Reach:** Expand monitoring efforts beyond Facebook and X, to include emerging platforms like TikTok, which have significant influence on younger voters. This expansion is necessary to achieve a comprehensive overview of social media's impact across diverse user demographics.

- 1. Implementation of Automatic Screenshot Saving:** Consider the development of a virtual, agent-based screenshot scraper to automatically save screenshots of social media posts. This approach is critical for qualitative research, as posts often get deleted or edited, leading to a loss of valuable data. Such a tool would ensure that data can be retained even when original posts are no longer available.
- 2. Data-Exchange Considerations:** Address the limitations induced by restricted data access, particularly concerning historical data on platforms like X. If current data access regimes persist, consider collective data collection efforts between multiple organisations to mitigate these limitations and represent longer campaign periods more effectively.
- 3. Developing Standards for Model Selection:** Harmonise the use of various language models for computer-based research (such as sentiment analysis and topic modelling). This involves developing ex-ante standards for model selection to resolve discrepancies and ensure consistency and reliability in research methodologies.
- 4. Standards and Critical Assessment in Social Media Monitoring:** Acknowledge the growing importance of social media monitoring in media analysis, as evidenced in the case of the Polish elections. Establish quality standards and best practices in social media monitoring to ensure accurate and responsible dissemination of findings. Promote media literacy and critical assessment of research methodologies to support this goal.

Annex 1: Methodology

For the analysis presented in this election brief, DRI used a comprehensive dataset comprising a total of 16,794 posts. These posts were sourced from two major social media platforms, Facebook and X, spanning from 16 August to 17 October 2023. The sample included diverse categories of accounts, including messages by leading national politicians, key party leaders, and the accounts of major political parties. We also incorporated posts from mayors of the capital cities of 16 voivodships (regions) in Poland to provide a balanced perspective on the elections.

In our methodology, we employed several advanced techniques to analyse the data. Keyword searches were used to filter and focus on specific topics relevant to our research, such as migration and the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Sentiment analysis, leveraging natural language processing, helped in identifying and categorising the opinions expressed in the posts, thus gauging public mood and opinions. Topic modelling, an algorithmic approach, was utilised to discover hidden thematic structures in the data, revealing the most discussed subjects. Timestamp analysis was crucial in examining the timing and frequency of posts, which helped identify patterns indicating inauthentic behaviour or automated posting, a critical aspect in spotting misinformation campaigns.

Additionally, named entity recognition (NER) was used to identify and classify named entities in the texts, such as people, organisations, and locations, which provided insights into the key players and entities involved in the election-related discussions. Lastly, self-trained classifiers, using support vector machines, efficiently categorised posts, particularly those focusing on migration and the Ukraine-Russia conflict, migration, and other topics, allowing for a targeted analysis of the social media discourse.

