**Social Media Monitoring - Presidential Election Campaign
Poland, 10 May 2020**

Preliminary Report

1. **Introduction**

On February 5, 2020 the Speaker of the *Sejm* (lower house of Parliament) ordered the election of President of the Republic of Poland to be scheduled for May 10, marking the beginning of the election campaign. A month later, on March 4, the first case of SARS-CoV-2 was reported in Poland and on March 14 the government introduced a state of epidemic emergency followed by the announcement of the state of epidemic on March 20. Despite the fact that the Constitution provides a possibility to introduce a state of emergency in such situations and, causing the adjournment of an election, such solution has not been implemented by the authorities and the date of voting remained unchanged. This decision has been heavily criticised by opposition candidates and media not-related to the government. Nevertheless, along with the state of epidemic a large scope of restrictions of civil rights was imposed serving as a particular background for the then-ongoing election process, impacting, among others, the possibility to carry out the election campaign. In particular, restrictions to freedom of assembly – limiting mass gatherings initially to 50 then to just 2 people, meant that nearly all campaign activities have had to be moved to the media, especially social media.

In addition to the above mentioned restrictions, legislative changes to the electoral law, introduced ahead of the election day caused uncertainty with regards to the way and time of voting. The changes were related to, among others, the introduction of voting solely by mail, and transferring some of the responsibility for the preparation of the election from the National Election Commission to state ministries. In the end voting did not take place on election day as ballot papers were not distributed and election commissions were not established.

Monitoring of the election campaign on Facebook has been conducted between March 26, the candidate registration deadline, and May 10 – election day and focused on three different groups totalling 42 accounts: all 10 presidential candidates, 17 media outlets and 15 potential disinformation outlets. The selected accounts reflect a wide spectrum of opinions present in Poland, while creating an opportunity to identify what kind of content is promoted by the so called 'fringe' outlets, that have been known to be potential sources of disinformation or *fake news*.

2. **Highlights**
✓ Restrictions imposed on freedom of movements and freedom of assembly forced presidential candidates to run their campaign mostly via social media.
✓ The pandemic dominated the campaign, especially in the media, leaving limited space for other issues. However, candidates have, on average, shared more election-related content.
✓ Some candidates, especially S. Hołownia and K. Bosak who had the highest number of posts, managed to significantly increase their group of followers on Facebook during the campaign period, even twofold. However the example of R. Biedroń - high number of posts, low increase in the number of followers; and W. Kosiniak-Kamysz - low number of posts, high increase in the number of followers, show that activity is not the only important factor.
✓ In general, candidates' relatively limited ability to reach wider audiences, even during the peak of an election campaign, shows that to succeed, candidates will have to diversify their channels of communication beyond Facebook in order to reach other voters.
✓ No significant presence of hate speech or black PR has been noticed. Findings show that posts that could be labelled as '*discreditation of political opponents'* were present in less than 6% of total posts, and in only 1% of posts from candidates.
✓ Some 'fringe' outlets, such as Racjonalna Polska, Sputnik Polska or Kresy.pl, intensified their activity during the election campaign.

3. Key Findings and Figures

During 46 days of observation the total number of 36.980 posts from 42 profiles have been analysed statistically and 14.776 posts have been selected for qualitative assessment. Qualitative analysis in this report is based on data collected until April 28.[1] The unexpectedly high total number of posts could be related to the pandemic and the need to inform the public about the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Nearly 35% of all analysed posts were about coronavirus and only 14% about elections (Figure 1).
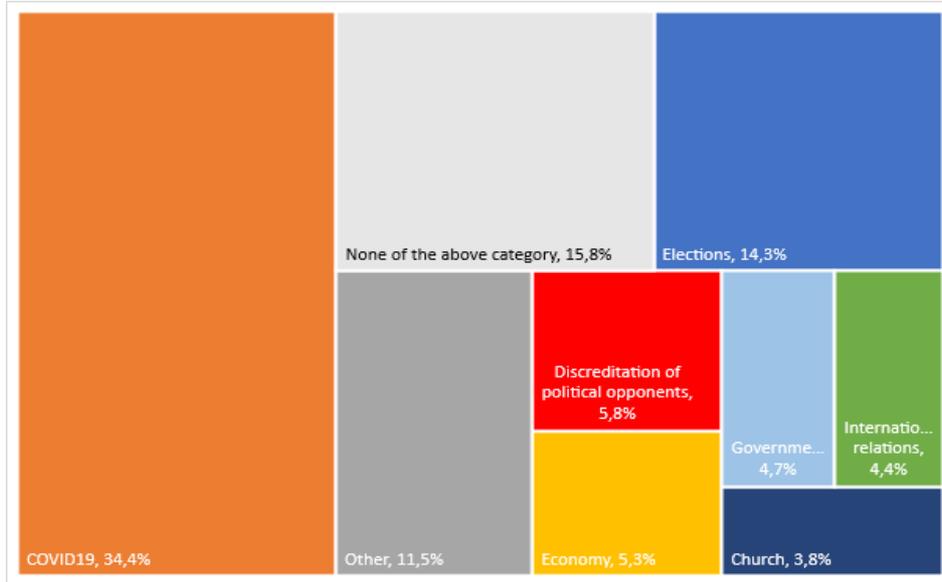

Figure 1: share of meta-narratives among all groups (26.03-28.04)[2]

In the media subgroup, which represents nearly 60% of the total number of posts, coronavirus was the main issue in almost 40% of posts overall. However, with time the significance of the coronavirus issue decreased to 29% at the end of April, giving way to 'other' issues[3] (over 24%). Election matters remained stable at the level of 13% of posts in the media subgroup.
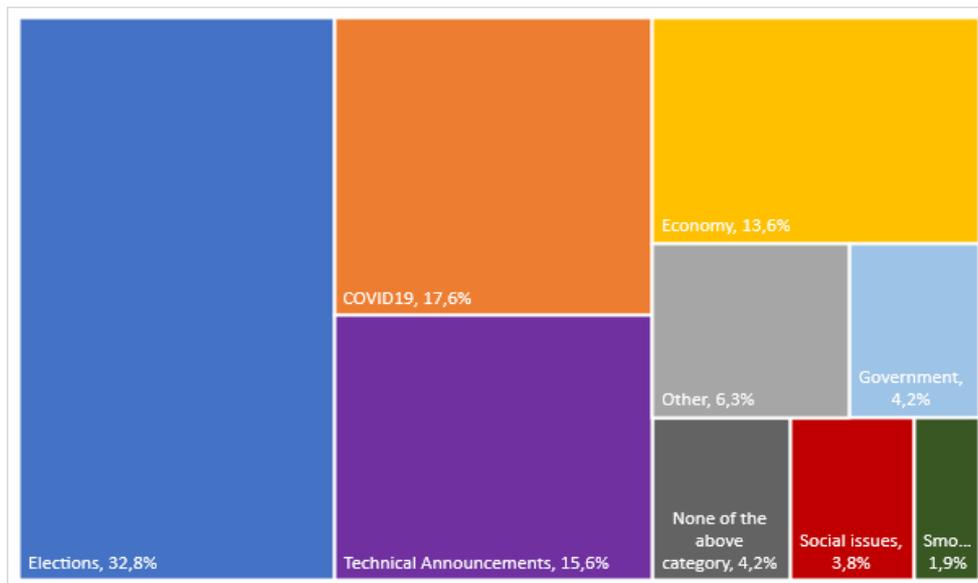

Figure 2: The share of meta-narratives among posts from candidates (26.03-28.04)

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[1] See Chapter 4, *Methodology*, for more detailed information

[2] The 'Other' subgroup consists of narratives not listed individually on the graph (there were 15 meta-narratives altogether).

[3] Issues not related to any predefined category of meta-narrative.

The candidates subgroup has been much more focused on election issues – these were the main subject of almost 33% of all their posts (Figure 2) and the share of posts with election matters grew from 30% in the first days of April to over 42% in the end of that month.

The 'fringe' outlets subgroup focused predominantly on coronavirus and 'other' issues in the beginning of monitoring (20% each), discussing election matters in only 14% of posts. The dominance of coronavirus and 'other' issues grew with time - by the end of April, the former was the focus of nearly 29% of posts and the latter of over 32%, while elections were at the centre of less than 9% of posts.

Interestingly, there was one event which was reflected in posts of all groups of accounts over one short period of time – the 10th anniversary of the Smoleńsk catastrophe (April 10). Between April 9 to 12, the Smoleńsk narrative was present in 10% of total posts, however, among candidates it featured in almost 19% of posts. Before and after this period, the Smoleńsk narrative was almost invisible – it has been mentioned in approximately 1% of posts.[4] The way the ruling party celebrated the anniversary, disregarding most mandatory restrictions, provoked the majority of analysed reactions.

Candidates

Differences between the number of posts from candidates and the spreading factor[5] show for which candidates Facebook was an efficient tool of communication with their supporters. The most active candidates, K. Bosak[6] *(30% of candidate posts)* and S. Hołownia *(23% of candidate posts)* were also the two candidates who have increased their number of followers the most - by over 60% and 90% respectively (Figure 3). At the same time, A. Duda, the incumbent president, increased this number by only 4,5%. In real numbers it shows that A. Duda increased his number of followers from over 670.000 in the beginning of observation to over 700.000 on May 11. At the same time, S. Hołownia's circle of followers grew from 288.000 to 548.000 and K. Bosak's from 160.000 to almost 250.000.
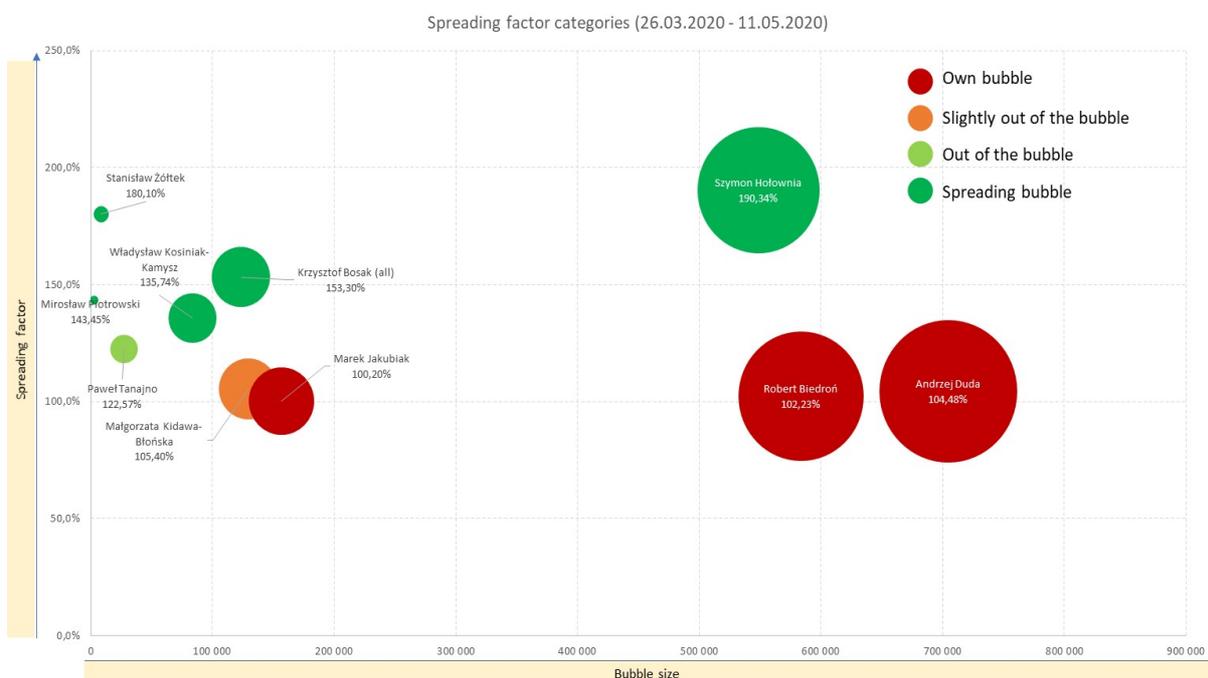

Figure 3: Spreading factors per candidate (in %)

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[4] In general, more and more posts on Facebook are becoming 'empty' posts – refer to other posts or are simply links, without any structured or informative content.

[5] Spreading factor reflects changes in number of likes at posting at the beginning and at the end of observation period.

[6] K. Bosak is the only candidate who has two separate but independently active Facebook accounts: private one and one of his election campaign - we've analysed them separately, however you will see them combined in some charts.

This data, in combination with each candidate's total number of post (Figure 4), reflect the candidate's campaign strategy but it may also suggest their level of access to public media, especially TVP. All main competitors of the incumbent president (with exception of W. Kosiniak-Kamysz) published at least 3 times more posts and increased their group of followers on Facebook more than the president himself. R. Biedroń's spread was lower than the one of A. Duda despite the high number of posts, but W. Kosiniak-Kamysz's spread was relatively high despite a low number of posts. A. Duda's limited activity and the fact that he merely preserved his number of followers on Facebook may indicate that his electorate stays, in general, outside of social media and he can reach them via different channels. Other candidates' activity on Facebook shows that they have identified this social media platform as one of the most efficient channels of communication with their target groups.[7]
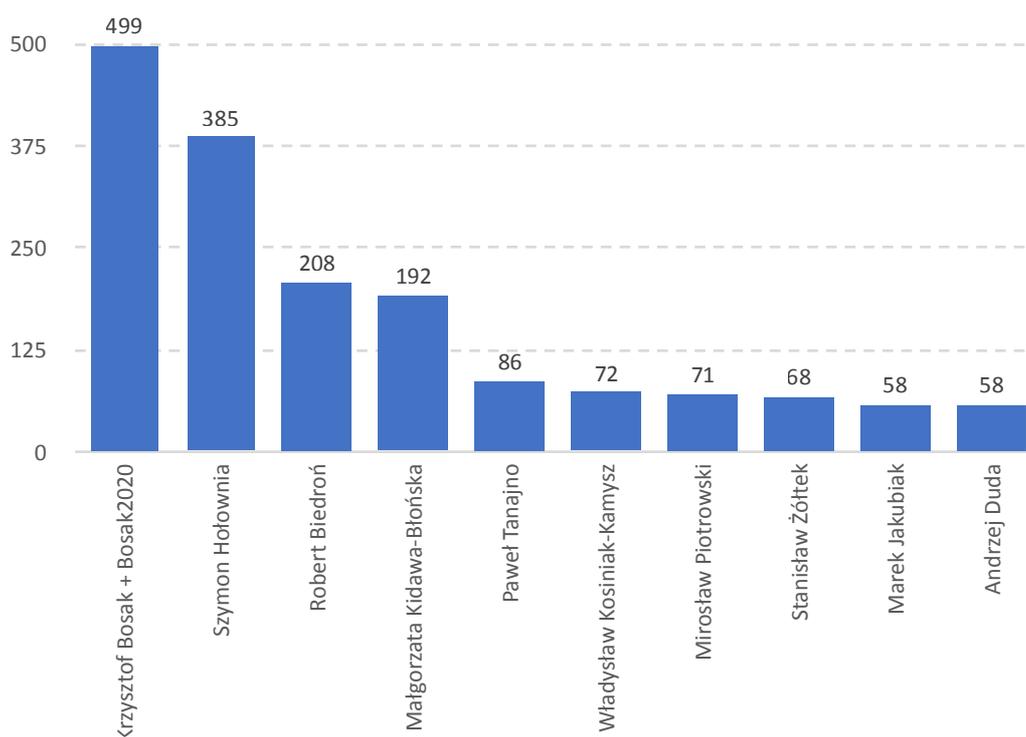

Figure 4: Total number of posts (candidates)

Nevertheless, even such a significant advantage gained by some candidates during their campaign on Facebook - increasing the number of their followers twofold - does not necessarily reflect their popularity among voters, as shown in election poll results so far. According to polling data from May 10, A. Duda is in the lead with 45% support, followed by S. Hołownia 19,2%, W. Kosiniak-Kamysz - 16,6%, K. Bosak - 9%, M. Kidawa-Błońska - 4,5% and R. Biedroń 2,6%.[8]

The tone of candidates' posts was predominantly neutral or positive (Figure 5). The tone of posts of only two candidates, R. Biedroń and P. Tanajno, was assessed as negative in more than 1/5 of their total posting. S. Żółtek had no positive posts whatsoever, while the incumbent president was only neutral or positive in his messages.

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[7] In order to have a more comprehensive analysis it would be necessary to monitor simultaneously other social media, like Twitter or even TikTok, as well as traditional media.

[8] CATI polling conducted by IBRIS for Rzeczpospolita between May 8-9: https://www.rp.pl/Wybory-prezydenckie-2020/200519954-Sondaz-10-maja-Andrzej-Duda-nie-zostalby-wybrany-w-I-turze.html
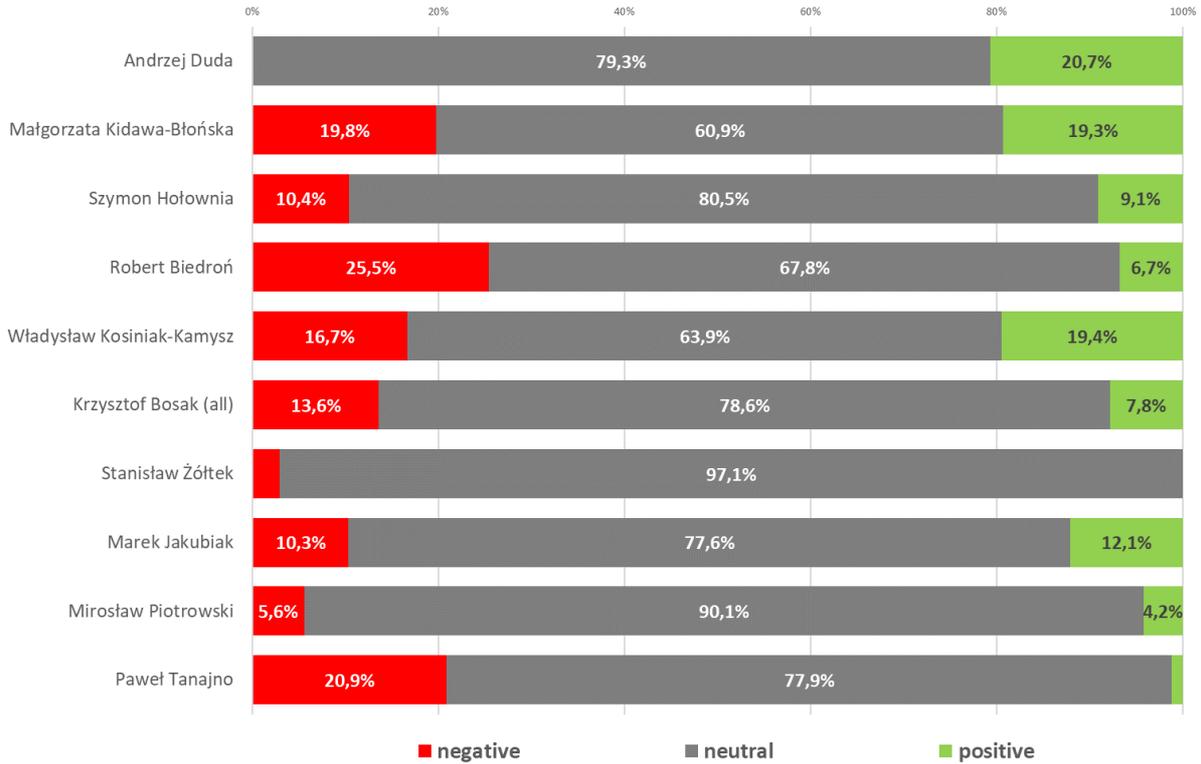
Figure 5: tone of candidates' posts

'Fringe' outlets

Outlets from this subgroup have been the most active among all accounts monitored during the project, with leaders, like *Sok z buraka* or *Racjonalna Polska*, presenting 3.491 and 2.627 posts respectively. Some outlets, like *Racjonalna Polska*, *Kresy24* or *Sputnik Polska*, intensified their activity significantly in the period under observation in anticipation of election day.[9] (Figure 6)
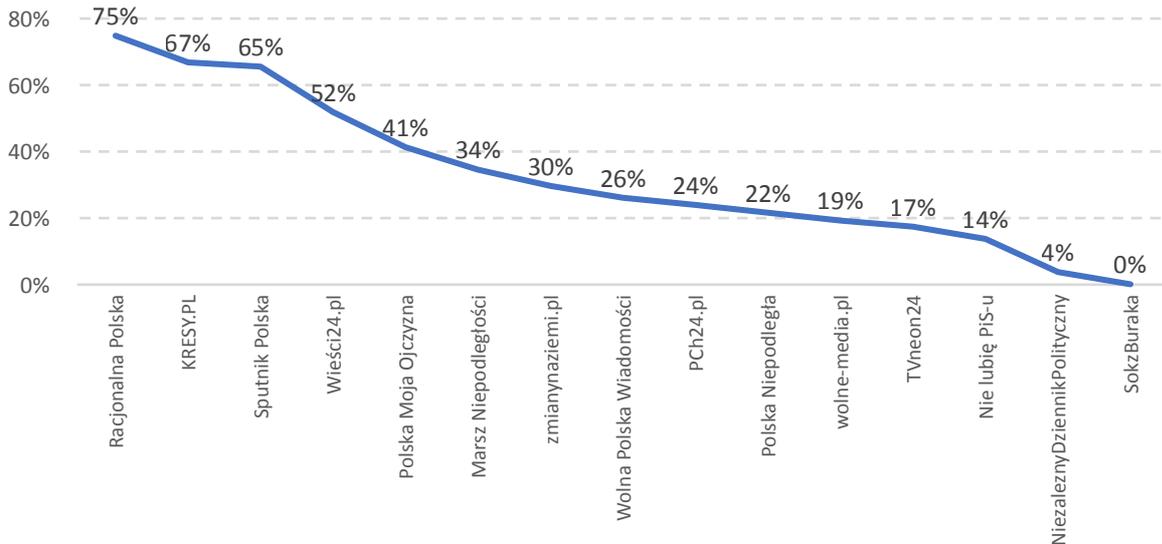

Figure 6: Slope Index – 'Fringe' outlets subgroup

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[9] Slope Index (with min = 0 and max = 100) informs if the number of posts are going up or down over time. Slope Index is comparative: bigger Slope Index for the account means that this account published more posts over time than other accounts

The fringe group has also had the highest share of posts we labelled as '*discreditation of political opponents*' – almost 10%, compared to 1% of candidate posts, and 6 % of all posts (Figure 7).
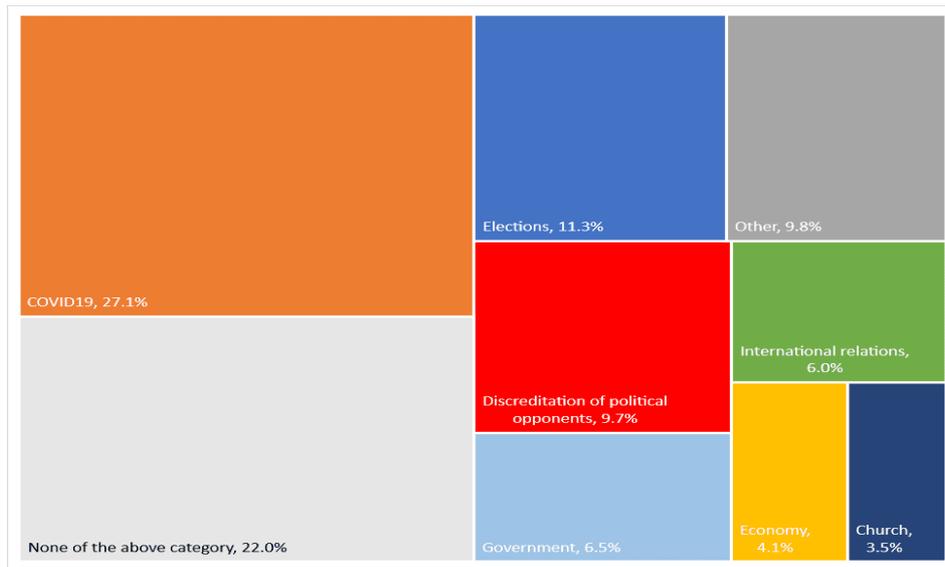

COVID19, 27.1%

Elections, 11.3%

Other, 9.8%

International relations, 6.0%

Discreditation of political opponents, 9.7%

None of the above category, 22.0%

Government, 6.5%

Economy, 4.1%

Church, 3.5%

Figure 7: share of meta-narratives among all groups (26.03-28.04)

4. **Methodology**

The monitoring has been conducted between March 26, the candidate registration deadline and May 10, the election day and it has covered Facebook activity on profiles of all 10 presidential candidates, 17 mainstream media outlets and 15 outlets identified as potentially disseminating disinformation and/or fake news. The latter 15 outlets have been identified basing on the knowledge of local experts and data from publicly available sources.

All posts have been analysed according to (i) quantitative factors – the time of posting, likes, shares, comments, reactions and other forms of engagement, in order to create a general data about each profile showing its activity and its potential impact on social media users, and (ii) qualitative assessment – analysing the actual content of each post and coding it according to a list of most significant and most important narratives and topics present in the public discourse in Poland during the campaign period (15 meta-narratives and 68 topics) and allocating a tone (positive, neutral, negative) to each post. Both, quantitative and qualitative, aspects have been analysed taking into account the advancement of the campaign, giving us an opportunity to monitor fluctuations in the presence and importance of different narratives and topics across the time of campaign and for different profiles.

Given the high volume of posts - 36 980, we have applied a statistical sampling of posts of a given account. For this preliminary report, qualitative analysis was completed with data as of April 28, and quantitative analysis for the whole period of observation.