**The Open Society Initiative for Europe**



Portfolio Review Document

The European Elections 2014 Project

November 4, 2014

**Introduction**

The European Elections 2014 project was the first large body of work fully led by OSIFE, comprising more than 90 grantees (two thirds of which were not OSF grantees before), five grantee meetings, three consultancy contracts, and 6.16 million USD spent in total. The European elections represented a convergence of many open society issues: democratic participation, migration, democratic accountability, grass roots campaigning, combating discrimination, and minority empowerment. Although the circumstances of our engagement weren't ideal, this seemed too great an opportunity for us not to get involved.

However, there were unrealistic expectations within OSF that this project would have an impact on the election results. While the overall assessment of the project is reservedly positive, mainly due to the valuable lessons learned, our efforts mixed success and failure both in terms of our grantees work and our internal challenges linked with managing a large and time-bound project with a fully new team. Rather than providing an ex-post rationalization of the project or discussing the outcome of the elections, this Portfolio Review Document aims to focus on the main lessons learned and to comment on what we might do differently knowing what we know now, but with all other things being equal. Leaving aside practical issues, like not having enough time, staff capacity or buy-in, the aim is to critically assess the choices and actions we consciously made, with the aim of improving and strengthening our performance in general.

1. **Our ambitions**

Several hypotheses and assumptions underpinned the OSIFE elections work. Generally speaking, OSIFE concentrated a large amount of resources and energy to try and bolster the groups and campaigns which could, in some ways, mitigate the feared populist surge in the EP elections. For a political foundation that works for open society values but remains non-partisan, the elections seemed a good opportunity to promote the open society agenda or, at the very least, to limit the damage to the agenda that anti-EU or xenophobic campaign tactics could cause. More specifically, OSIFE looked for projects with three interrelated objectives: 1) to amplify the voice and demands of constituencies that are far from the centers of power, including migrants, minorities, youth, and women; 2) to counter xenophobic speech in the election campaigns and in the European Parliament (EP); and 3) to mobilize EU migrants and other EU citizens living abroad to vote in their countries of residence.

Given the surge in anti-immigration, anti-European discourse, and in particular direct attacks on Eastern European migration in the UK and the Netherlands, this election was seen as an opportunity to mobilize those communities in defense of their rights and their image. We recognized the need for specific mobilization campaigns to target Europeans abroad, because of the general lack of information on how Europeans abroad can vote in the European elections and because of the limited voting procedures that Europeans living abroad are facing, which can make participation in the elections challenging. But bringing voting rights to the attention of Europeans abroad was also supported because this target group was not only relevant because of its sheer size (for instance, 2.5 million Romanians and 1.7 million Polish living residing as EU migrants in other EU countries) and the fact that it is relatively under-represented in the voting registers, but also because we assumed Europeans living abroad would most likely better understand the value and benefits of EU citizenship and thus be motivated to vote. We supported projects of this kind in Italy, Poland, Romania, and the UK, as well as pan-European projects aimed at EU citizens abroad in general.

Furthermore, OSIFE directed resources to voter mobilization projects in the countries in which participation in the 2009 European Parliament elections was under 30% (Croatia, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), hoping not only to boost participation in those specific countries by combating political apathy, but also betting on higher turnout bringing less power to political extremes. Our reasoning was that we might be able to stop the negative trend in voter participation and send the message to both politicians and the general public that if people are unhappy with EU policies it is within their power to change it.

Finally, we had the objective to try and shape the post-election narrative to avoid the interpretation of the results becoming more damaging than the results themselves.

The mix of tools underpinning the European Elections 2014 project comprised first and foremost an open call for projects. OSIFE had opted for an open call in order to detect potential talent and new opportunities across Europe which otherwise might have gone unnoticed, as well as to test whether some of the groups that OSF knew well would be ready and able to engage in politics and campaign to a larger audience than they usually do. This was particularly important given that OSIFE had only recently started to operate in a geographic space which included many countries that have not seen much OSF involvement so far. At the time, casting a wide net and attracting new players seemed like a good way to proceed. The open call was complemented with a joint elections research fund with the Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI) and the Think Tank Fund (TTF) and four actions with more direct involvement by OSIFE: targeted mobilization efforts, including a communications campaign (‘Time to vote’) with the OSF Office for Communications, a video challenge with the European Cultural Foundation and their DocNextNetwork, and a post-election survey by Ipsos Puls.

As will be explained further below, in the section on lessons learned, several of the aforementioned assumptions proved to be wrong and some of the tools chosen were not entirely unproblematic.

1. **Our place**

The European Parliament elections are one of the largest democratic events in the world with over 413 million European citizens having the opportunity to choose the future direction of the EU. The elections, which took place during a period of profound political and economic crises, would shape EU politics for the next five years. More fundamentally, elections presented a unique opportunity in which the citizens of Europe have a direct say on the policy development within the EU. Even though only 43.09% of eligible voters bothered to turn up this was still a slight increase (by 0.09%) in comparison to the 2009 turnout, thus halting the constant negative trend of decreased voter turnout since the first direct EP elections in 1979.

An important element of the operating environment is the nature of EP elections as a hybrid between a transnational democratic moment and 28 separate national elections. These are usually rated second-class and receive little attention by the national media and even by national political parties, who devote limited attention and resources to them, which results in low awareness and low voting figures.

In spite of what much of the media were saying, the EU’s voters did not “send a clear message” to or about the EU on May 25. On the contrary, while some strong new political forces have now emerged at EU level on both fringes of the political spectrum, the fact is that they are pulling Europe in several different directions. Right-wing Eurosceptic protest parties won big in France (Le Pen’s FN) and the UK (Farage’s UKIP), but those two parties cannot get along with each other, and meanwhile several pro-EU government parties won by comfortable margins – for example in Italy (Renzi’s PD) and Germany (Merkel’s CDU). In Greece (the left-wing Syriza won the election), Ireland (Sinn Fein and independents) and Spain (a new party called ‘*Podemos’* meaning ‘We Can’ that is a descendant of the 15-M Indignados protest movement took 5 seats) left wing anti-austerity campaigners scored well.

Before the open call was launched, in summer 2013, a consultant had been hired to get a better understanding of the broader state of play and the environmental trends relevant to our aims, as this could help us better understand the role OSIFE could play. The study identified the significant players, whether institutions or organizations, and made suggestions on those we could support. These were first and foremost MEP candidates themselves and the European and national political parties, followed by EU institutions and the media who were likely to interpret these elections as the “people’s verdict” on the future of Europe and the Euro. Moreover, the study identified a multitude of civil society actors at the European level and several of the suggested key organizations in their respective fields, such as Bite the Ballot, HOPE not Hate, and ILGA-Europe, submitted successful proposals and were provided with funding.

The European Parliament, via its national information offices, was the main actor running (non-political) election information campaigns in all Member States, with the specific aim of encouraging voter turnout. However, when it comes to supporting civil society projects around the elections, OSIFE was the only large donor funding around the European elections, which provided us a lot of visibility among grantees in the field, but also raised expectations.

1. **Our work**

As in any grantmaking program several things worked out differently than we imagined. Looking at the European Elections grant portfolio one can identify both disappointments and successes. Generally speaking, the work that was supported was of a high standard and built key relationships for the future in ways we did not foresee one year ago. In terms of the specific objectives, we can claim some success in amplifying the voice and demands of constituencies such as minorities and youth, especially the voice of youth in French banlieues. Bondy Blog published more than 200 articles (69 on European elections and 128 on local elections) covering information from working-class neighborhoods by 30 bloggers reaching out to an audience of 15,000 readers a day on their own website. A partnership was established with Le Monde, which has allowed them to publish in their blog, amplifying their message to an even wider audience.

Evolving understandings of what constituted success within OSF and among grantees was a challenge, though the evolution itself was a positive thing. For example, within migrant voter mobilization campaigns, none of the grants or activities was at sufficient scale to target potential audiences of millions of people and actually mobilize constituencies large enough to influence election outcomes. Instead, the purpose of this stream of work became to demonstrate that migrants are a political constituency to be taken seriously.

While our initial concept for this project was supposed to be to promote equal and fair voting in the 2014 European Elections, we ended up creating a grant portfolio that was less about voting per se and more about innovative, effective forms of activism that we could support, which could bring a different energy to civil society in Europe than the human rights watchdogs and anti-racism organizations with whom OSF previously cooperated in Europe could bring. The best results in this regard are the successful coalition between anti-racist and LGBT pan-European networks (ENAR and ILGA-Europe), some of the groups working on transparency of lobbying, and the work around exposing the weaknesses of the extreme right, whether it is their Russian connection (as done by Political Capital) or their contradictions (VoteWatch, Counterpoint). Often the grants went beyond the elections themselves, focusing on capacity building and thereby providing useful tools that civil society organizations could also use outside of the election context (Acuerdo, Demos, FactCheckEU).

Grants that surprised us:

One of the grants that surprised us most was the one for a project by Bite the Ballot, a small London-based organization which aims to reverse political apathy amongst young people through direct organizing of students in disadvantaged areas and sophisticated multimedia communications with celebrities like Russell Brand and youth media mogul Jamal Edwards. On February 5, Bite the Ballot organized a National Voter Registration Day (NVRD) in the UK, a first of its kind. With more than 400 NVRD events nation-wide they managed to register 35,000 people to vote, which is almost half of what the UK Electoral Commission Registration campaign achieved in local elections in 2013 with a budget of 1.2 million GBP compared to the NVRD’s 9000 GBP. They reached over 10 million people online, were trending on Twitter for nine hours, and received lots of coverage in the press with a total of 188 pieces of coverage – something which is rather unusual for a topic like voter registration. In addition, they have been able to get voter registration back on the political agenda thanks to over 10 questions being raised on behalf of Bite the Ballot in both the Houses of Parliament and the House of Commons.

Bite the Ballot far exceeded our expectations, particularly thanks to their excellent PR skills. However, as time progressed, cracks started emerging in this positive image. Several internal challenges – from a key staff person suffering burnout and eventually leaving the organization, to quarrels with a sub-grantee, demonstrated the lack of organizational development and focus. To help them overcome these we are planning to provide them with a final grant that would give Bite the Ballot the chance to think through their long-term sustainability and management challenges and make full use of the momentum of next year’s national elections in the UK, which they themselves have identified as a make or break moment for the organization.

Another positive surprise came from an existing OSF grantee VoteWatch. It was particularly their PollWatch that surprised us. This tool, which published detailed predictions of the composition of the new European Parliament, led to widespread media coverage across Europe, which not only boosted the attention for the elections as such, but also for their Voting Advice Application (VAA). While most of the success was related to the hard work of the grantee, it might be worth pointing out that we actively encouraged one of the other grantees in the election portfolio, EUobserver, to regularly publish the results of PollWatch on their website. EUobserver’s excellent online presence (15,000 readers per day, 10,000 Facebook friends, and 13,000 Twitter followers) surely helped in making the tool more visible.

Some grants also surprised us in a negative way. The grant to UNITED, for example, was a clear disappointment. While the proposal was well written and the cooperation with ENAR and HOPE not Hate, two OSF grantees which generally deliver great work, seemed promising, not much was achieved on the ground. The project depended very much on the project coordinator, limiting the contribution of the two strong partner organizations. ENAR expressed its disappointment about this, but only at a very late stage, and while OSIFE brought this up with UNITED’s project coordinator, not much changed over the course of the project. Additionally, two of the four local partners (in Greece and in France) dropped out in a very late stage because their boards did not approve of being engaged in a voter mobilization campaign. The new partners had little time to effectively run their campaigns and were not willing to take on the methodology as was initially foreseen. Arguing that the HOPE not Hate approach could not be applied in other countries due to particular sensitivities, the project ended up with five very different projects on the ground, with little coordination amongst them. OSIFE staff was only informed about the partner changes in April, one month before the elections, and we did not intervene. It was a typical case of a project which looked great on paper, but was an unexpected disappointment in practice.

Developments that surprised us:

There were also several developments that surprised us. In some areas OSIFE was able to recognize the need for quick changes and to adapt its focus as political events evolved. For example, while the original focus countries were France, Greece, Hungary, Italy and the Netherlands, OSIFE added the UK, Poland, and Romania in its priority countries, as these were very important for the work on EU migrant workers. However, in other areas it was difficult to adjust properly due to the very short time-frame of this particularly project.

Some of the key lessons, both positive and negative, were:

*The EP elections were not a ‘make or break’ moment for Europe*

The initial assumption that the elections would be a transcendental moment for Europe seems unjustified. The elections had negative elements, but also elements of stability; they followed the traditional pattern of voters deciding, mostly, because of their views about their national government; and they were not a ‘make or break’ moment for European Integration. In any case, they probably were too large an event for OSIFE to influence beyond the margins.

*Hate speech was not that rampant in the run-up to the elections*

Based on past examples of elections at different levels in Europe, we assumed that hate speech and a xenophobic discourse would dominate the election campaigns in many EU countries. This, however, was not the case. While it is of course positive that hate speech was not visible in the campaigns and that several of our grantees managed to develop the capacity and new methods for monitoring discriminatory speech, it simply was not a factor in the campaigns. Rather, politicians either adopted more politically correct behavior, as happened in Romania, or they became better at communicating with their voters on issues not directly related to openly hateful remarks, as happened in Hungary.

*Mobilizing EU migrant communities was more challenging than expected*

Recognizing that general mobilization would not only be impossible, but also potentially backfire, specific efforts were aimed at mobilizing EU migrant communities in other EU countries. However, we failed to generate large-scale mobilization which could have impacted the overall discourse on intra-EU mobility. The only communities where we managed to find credible partners who understood voter mobilization and had a genuine interest in their political participation were Polish (particularly in the UK and Ireland) and Romanians (in Italy). Their results were modest, but noticeable and proportional to the funding they received. The biggest disappointment was our attempt to reach Hungarians abroad: their migration is very recent and even after investing in a small mapping exercise and identifying a group that was able to reach out to Hungarian students abroad as the most organized group, the impact was minimal. The main lesson is that it takes not just numbers and concentration, but also some period of time of residence, before EU migrant communities are ready to start organizing for political purpose in the city and country where they live.

Given the lack of appropriate organizations to take on this stream of work, the Office of Communications agreed to fill some of this gap and plan and deploy a mobilization campaign. An important element of that work was conducting research and focus groups about what type of messages would work best to motivate Polish and Romanian migrants to vote in their countries of residence. The useful insights and feedback from these were then shared with our grantees.

*Specific mobilization efforts in low-voter turnout countries did not make a real difference*

We aimed at supporting projects in each of the seven Member States which had a voter turnout below 30% in the last EP elections, but it was challenging to find the right partners in such a short timeframe so we opted mainly for existing OSF grantees and former national foundations. This was generally a good bet with the exception of Slovakia were the additional grant we were willing to give never materialized. OSF Bratislava did not submit a proposal in the end due to its internal restructuring and there was no time to find another actor in Slovakia to implement a decent project at such short notice. The impact of these projects was limited, however: whilst turnout increased in Croatia, Lithuania and Romania, it went slightly down in Poland and Slovenia, and massively in Slovakia (with a turn-out of only 13%).

*Young voters are not necessarily pro-EU*

From the post-election survey we learned that when it comes to European identity, you cannot expect that youth identify more with Europe. Also, while this is different regarding LGBT rights, on immigration youth cannot be expected to be more liberal either. In the aftermath of the elections several French media outlets suggested that one in three young voters in France voted for the Front National. In Hungary, youth preferences for the right and radical right have been apparent for some time now, with Jobbik and the extreme right-wing scene offering youth a sense of community and belonging.

*Transparency and accountability issues resonated during the elections*

As mentioned before, some of the best grants were those groups working on accountability and integrity. The most successful pledge campaign came from our grantee ALTER-EU. A total of 1,338 candidates signed up to their Politics for People Pledge, of which 197 were elected, a massive jump from the results in the pervious2009 campaign, where 381 candidates signed a similar petition, of which 75 were elected. This public pressure and direct engagement with MEPs have built strong foundations for implementing meaningful reforms towards more openness on the need for improved transparency and better lobby regulation.

*Data from grantees’ projects could not be used to the influence post-elections debate*

Halfway through the project the idea emerged to try and shape the post-election narrative to avoid the interpretation of the results becoming more damaging than the results themselves. This turned out to be very unrealistic. Our efforts to try and shape the narrative and the consequences of the election did not generate enthusiasm amongst grantees. There were no spontaneous proposals focusing on the aftermath of the vote, and grantees did not see that space as a big opportunity. It should be noted that several grantees, including some of our most interesting ones (like SPIOR in the Netherlands promoting Muslim and migrant community participation in the elections) were very hesitant to speak out in the immediate aftermath of the elections for fear of being perceived as partisan. It also turned out we could not rely much on data provided by grantees, as many found it very difficult to report of results of the projects immediately after the elections. In many cases, they were unable to access or interpret data on the impact of their campaigns at short notice. The details on the results of their campaigns therefore came in too late to influence the post-election debate.

1. **Going forward**

When asked the question if we have achieved the progress towards our goals that we had hoped for at this point, the answer would most likely be ‘no, not really’. All other things being equal, and knowing what we know now, when asked the question if we should have switched tools, partners, or audiences, or whether it was our goals that needed to change, the answer would probably be ‘tools, audiences, as well as goals’. More specifically:

*Elections and time-bound projects are not ideal for advancing OSIFE’s goals*

Elections, or to be precise, trying to influence election outcomes, especially without supporting a particular group, has proven to be a difficult exercise. The scope of the European Elections project was probably beyond reasonable and the body of work was too big to handle (with too many countries, target groups, and topics), particularly given the limited time frame available.

Moreover, we should have paid more attention to clearly communicating our objectives, in order to prevent unrealistic expectations within OSF. Over the course of the elections project it became clear there were internal disagreements and/or lack of clarity about the aims, objectives, approach, and scope of the project, amongst OSF staff, the OSIFE Advisory Board, the legal department, the communications team, and not least George Soros himself, which could have been mitigated through better internal communication.

The zeal to take advantage of such a major political event as the elections and to have OSIFE make a mark on the European stage when it was still in its infancy overrode practical and logistical considerations. Looking back, it is clear that in order to seize opportunities effectively, it is critical that groundwork be laid and that relationships are established with at least some of the key partners needed to take advantage of those opportunities.

*OSIFE will not likely opt for such broad open calls*

The open call, which resulted in over 300 proposals, had mixed results. The open call gave newly-created OSIFE visibility and access to many new players, including very new and small organizations acting locally; it generated transparency and trust from grantees; and it allowed us to identify some very strong projects that needed substantial support to achieve large, pan-European impact. But it also had its downsides: the team was drowned in management from the very start and never had time to be reflective enough about the overall effort; the quality of the proposals greatly influenced our choices, so that we ended up with a collection of good projects rather than with a coherent portfolio with a clear strategy for success; and we lost the agility of a new donor by being bogged down with a rigid process that took, literally, months.

*OSF’s own visibility around elections was a concern*

Due to the strong reservations against being very proactive from OSIFE from OSF colleagues and OSIFE Advisory Board members, we did not undertake any large scale activity of our own, other than conducting a relatively small communications campaign (‘Time to vote’) and a post-election survey that gave us valuable complementary information to analyze the trends behind the vote. Twice in the process we scaled down the ambition of our mobilization efforts following the Board’s advice, and both times it seems, in hindsight, that this was the right decision. The post-election survey on voter behavior and attitudes towards the EU gave us the opportunity to look at data, such as on why people vote, and share this with our grantees. The result is a rich source of understanding, which gives us a sense of how little we understand the shifting landscape of Europe.

**Conclusion**

While some of the challenges faced were significant, it is important to stress that we do not perceive the European elections project to be a total failure – far from it. The project also had many positive elements. We were happy with the work in ways that we had not expected, and it has provided us with a good starting point for our work on European democracy.

As this was a one year project no adjustments to the composition or direction of the portfolio are required, but OSIFE will certainly draw on the experiences of the elections project in many different ways. After all, as one generally learns wisdom from failure much more than from success, the European Elections 2014 project has provided OSIFE with many useful insights.