

Presidential portfolio review
European Elections 2014 Project

PUBLIC SUMMARY

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Participants

Presenters: Peter Matjasic (lead staffer)

Discussant: Chris Stone

Moderator: Jordi Vaquer

Other participants: Diana Guerrero, Debora Guidetti, Eleanor Kelly, Gyorgy Lissauer, Donal Mac Fhearraigh, Francisco Malavassi, Belen Marin, Roxanne Nazir, Peter Nizak, Léonie van Tongeren (rapporteur), and Susan Treadwell.

Introductory presentation

In his introductory presentation Peter Matjasic, lead staffer, shared some of the lessons learned from the elections project. After reflecting on the different tools used and how they worked out in practice, he pointed out how on many occasions there was a mismatch between expectations and reality. For example, while Greece was one of the priority countries in the open call, the proposals coming from Greece were of very low quality and due to time limitations the team was not able to explore other potential initiatives in that country. Additionally, based on past examples of elections at different levels in Europe, OSIFE assumed that hate speech and xenophobic discourse would dominate the election campaigns in many EU countries, while this was not the case. Peter also stressed the importance of better defining what success looks like before embarking on major time-bound projects, as well as that merely amplifying voices might not be a sufficient objective when trying to advance a particular agenda.

Next, Eleanor Kelly, senior international communications officer for OSF in Europe, commented on the collaboration between OSIFE and the communications department on the elections project. Reflecting on how the approach taken by OSF towards communication evolved over the course of the project, she pointed out that the divergent understandings on what success would look like, as well as the very tight timeframe, made the undertaking challenging. Other key issues she highlighted were the highly diverging skill sets of the grantees in this grant portfolio (very few were able to effectively combine online and offline campaigning tools) and the difficulties they faced when trying to reverse path dependency in terms of the messaging used in their campaigns. While many grantees seemed to approach this as a pro-EU campaign, focussing on the EU was not necessarily the best tactic.

Key questions and comments

Chris Stone stressed how both the elections project and this portfolio review are very useful for other parts of the network which are starting up new bodies of work and introducing themselves to new constituencies. He asked about what worked well, what surprised OSIFE most, what the team - knowing what it knows now, and all other things being equal - would do the same or differently. Additionally, struck by the huge variance in the size of the grants, he asked about the level of collaboration with the grantees that were given large grants, as well as the expectations OSIFE had of the many small grants that formed part of this grants portfolio. In this regard, Chris suggested that, rather than providing a list of alphabetized grants, presentation of the grant data arranged from largest to smallest may have been more meaningful, as it would provide a better opportunity to tell a story with that data.

While stressing that he was very enthusiastic about the Elections project as such, Chris was critical of OSIFE's post-election efforts, pointing out that it was a missed opportunity to influence the narrative in the aftermath of the elections - both inside and outside the OSF network. He therefore asked what went wrong in that regard.

Furthermore, Chris was curious to know about the individual and organizational talent that OSIFE had discovered and stressed that at the start of projects it is often necessary to be fully committed and over optimistic in order to mobilize people around a specific cause. Commenting on the difficulties involved with the large open call, he reflected on how different parts of the OSF network have different reputations on how to "get grantees through the door," encouraging OSIFE to think about how it wants to position itself.

Responses

In relation to the failed attempt to influence the post-elections narrative, Peter confessed it had been a big frustration for him not having done this differently. He felt disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm by the grantees to be active around the post-election moment, as well as frustrated by the internal hurdles in relation to the way in which OSF could communicate on the issue of elections. Léonie van Tongeren, who had also worked on the election project, pointed out that, as it was clear from the beginning that the post-election moment would be important, the post-election efforts should have started much earlier and followed up more actively. Eleanor added that, while the post-election moment provided a window

of opportunity, it is very difficult to shape narratives around elections. She also raised the question what OSF's license and mandate is to talk about this in the public sphere and stressed the importance of keeping a bird's eye view.

In relation to the question about the largest grants within the portfolio and the level of collaboration involved, Peter discussed the grant to the Stefan Batory Foundation, saying that the level of collaboration was rather limited, as they already had a lot of expertise in this specific area. Léonie mentioned the grant to Demos which had a higher level of collaboration. In this case the grantee, which was used to working with OSF on a consultancy basis, actively sought collaboration in relation to the trainings it gave in the five priority countries set by OSIFE. Many of the election grantees had identified a need for help with communication and the training offered by Demos, which was not limited to OSIFE grantees but also available for other civil society actors, exposed people to the ways in which social media advertising can be used for more effective campaigning. While as a general rule grantees should take the initiative and responsibility for building their own capacity, when it comes to new opportunities or tactics that groups are unaware of, we can play an important role in igniting interest in practices to which they have not yet been exposed.

Concerning talent discovered within the elections portfolio, Peter pointed to Bite the Ballot, a small organization which had far exceeded OSIFE's expectations despite facing organizational difficulties, and Political Capital, which experienced unexpected success with their reporting on the Russian link to the European elections.

Following up on the comments related to OSF's ability to openly communicate on the elections, Chris pointed out that, while it is always difficult to campaign around elections, our network of foundations has more ability to operate in the political sphere than other foundations. He explained the degree political activity varied tremendously throughout the network, with some parts of the network supporting particular parties, thereby stressing the importance of laying the groundwork.

Lastly, Jordi Vaquer, Director of OSIFE, briefly touched upon the role of the OSIFE Advisory Board, saying he regretted not having pushed back. In the two board meetings that took place over the course of the elections project there seemed to be a lack of confidence in the work being undertaken, which had a negative impact on the team and the project as such. Recognizing the challenges associated with managing a board, Chris pointed out it is incumbent upon programs to help ensure that board members find their service fulfilling.

In closing, Jordi thanked all staff involved for their hard work, emphasising that this is a body of work which OSIFE can be proud of, and that this project had brought the team together in a way which normally would have taken years.

Next steps and proposed follow-up

The elections team will add short comments on all involved organizations in Foundation Connect, in order to make the lessons learned more visible, also for others within the network.

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, the European Elections 2014 project has provided OSIFE with many useful insights.

Outcome summary

The European elections project was a great tool for OSIFE to introduce itself to new constituencies and to spot talent across Europe, while also providing the team with many useful insights, including about the type of grant making body OSIFE strives to be. The outcome of the elections cannot and should not be used to measure the success of the body of work at hand, and while the approach to the post-election efforts could have been better, the general evaluation of this new body of work was very positive.