Measuring the far-right in Europe: comparative analysis of the xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in Germany, Poland and Russia

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Abstract

The rising significance of the far-right as political actors is one of the most noticeable political trends in Europe within the recent decades. It causes constant research activity aimed at the analysis of the nature of public support of right-wing forces. However, the researchers, dealing with the issues of assessing the public support of the far-right in different European countries frequently have confront the problem of lack of relevant measurement tools, as well as efficient methodology for valid cross-country analysis. This stems not only from different "political background" and "political environment", connected with political traditions and political practices, but also from the nature of public support of the far-right, having not only "overt", but also "covert" component. Whereas "overt" component is on the surface and is good measurable (mainly by conventional tools such as polling), the "covert" one, encompassing the in-depth social sentiments, is hardly measurable. This pose real problem for assessing the genuine amount of public support far-right forces taking into account the fact, that "covert" component is to be crucial in achieving that goal. In October 2020 to tackle this problem by the international group of researchers there was initiated the research project, aiming at the development of the specific research methodology on the combination of traditional and "digital" research methods such as comparative analysis, expert interviews and "social media

listening" (SML) for analysing the xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in three European societies – in Germany, Poland and Russia - as a "covert" component.

The accomplishment of the research project is expected to provide not only the insights into specifics of the public support of the far-right in different European countries by assessing the "covert" component, but also help to assess its genuine (gross) scale as well as to single out the factors influencing the public support of the far-right by putting emphasis on the ongoing political, economic and social processes. The research project is expected to deliver the information for elaboration of the gauges (indicators) for valid cross-country analysis of the far-right politics in different countries allowing to overcome some research "weak points" – ranging from huge differences in political traditions to scarcity of relevant data.

The aim of this article is to present and discuss the elaborated methodological approach.

Keywords: far-right, right-wing parties, nationalism, xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments, Russia, Germany, Poland, cross-country analysis, comparative analysis, methodology SML (social media listening)

Ocena skrajnej prawicy w Europie: analiza porównawcza nastrojów ksenofobicznych i anty-imigranckich w Niemczech, Polsce i Rosji

Streszczenie

Rosnące znaczenie skrajnej prawicy jako aktorów politycznych jest jednym z najbardziej zauważalnych trendów politycznych ostatnich dziesięcioleci w Europie. pPowoduje to aktywną działalność badawczą, której celem jest analiza charakteru poparcia społecznego sił prawicowych. Jednak badacze zajmujący się zagadnieniami oceny poparcia społecznego skrajnej prawicy w różnych krajach europejskich często borykają się z problemem braku odpowiednich narzędzi badawczych, a także skutecznej metodologii rzetelnej analizy przekrojowej. Wynika to nie tylko z odmiennego „tła politycznego" i „środowiska politycznego", związanego z tradycjami i kulturą polityczną, ale także z natury poparcia społecznego skrajnej prawicy, mającego nie tylko „jawny", ale i „ukryty" komponent. Podczas gdy „jawny" jest na powierzchni i dobrze mierzalny (głównie za pomocą konwencjonalnych narzędzi, takich jak sondaże), „ukryty", obejmujący głębokie nastroje społeczne, jest trudno mierzalny. Tworzy to poważne problemy w ocenie rzeczywistego poparcia publicznego sił skrajnie prawicowych, biorąc pod uwagę fakt, że „ukryty" komponent ma być kluczowy dla osiągnięcia tego celu.

Aby rozwiązać powyższy problem, w październiku 2020 r. miedzynarodowa grupa badaczy zainicjowała projekt, którego celem jest opracowanie specyficznej metodologii badawczej dotyczącej połączenia tradycyjnych i „cyfrowych" metod, takich jak analiza porównawcza, wywiady z ekspertami i monitoring mediów społecznościowych (metoda SML) dla właściwej analizy nastrojów ksenofobicznych i anty-imigranckich w trzech społeczeństwach europejskich – w Niemczech, Polsce i Rosji – jako komponentu „ukrytego". Oczekuje się, że realizacja tego projektu badawczego nie tylko dostarczy wglądu w specyfikę powszechnego poparcia skrajnej prawicy w różnych państwach europejskich poprzez ocenę „ukrytego" komponentu, ale także pomoże ocenić jego rzeczywistą skalę, wyodrębnić czynniki wpływające na poparcie społeczne skrajnej prawicy, kładąc nacisk na toczące się procesy polityczne i społeczne. Co ważniejsze, przygotowany projekt badawczy ma

dostarczyć informacji potrzebnych do opracowania wskaźników do ważnej, przekrojowej analizy skrajnie prawicowej polityki w różnych państwach. Pozwoli to przezwyciężyć problemy w niektórych „słabych punktach" badań – począwszy od ogromnych różnic politycznych aż po niewystarczalne odpowiednie dane.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie i poddanie dyskusji wypracowanego podejścia metodologicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: siły skrajnie prawicowe, partie prawicowe, nacjonalizm, ksenofobia, nastroje anty-imigranckie, Rosja, Niemcy, Polska, analiza przekrojowa, analiza porównawcza, metodologia SML

The surge of nationalism and right-wing populism is one of the most noticeable contemporary global political trends. Its practical implementation is the growing public support of far-right political forces worldwide. From the United States to the Philippines the politicians/political parties, promoting far-right ideas – nationalist, xenophobic, nativist – are getting more popular. The best evidence is the results of elections running on different levels – national, regional, local and even supranational.

The strengthening positions of the far-right in different countries anticipates spreading the nationalist, chauvinist and xenophobic sentiments globally. This enabled some experts to proclaim the emergence of the new political era – "the era of nationalism" and the shift to the new "post-liberal reality" (Pabst 2017).

However, closer observation of the electorate exposure of the far-right from the practical viewpoint demonstrates, that the rise of public support is stipulated by variety of factors, which can be classified within four categories - economic, social, political and socio-cultural.

To the economic and social factors can be ascribed the emergence of economic and financial crises, having the severe repercussions for economic and social spheres of many countries such as demise of welfare state, deterioration of living standards and erosion of middle class (Byun 2018).

In respect of political factors one can emphasize not only the indigenous such as deterioration of the good governance model, but also exogenous – the intense surge of number of conflicts as well as surge of geopolitical risks paving the way to the turbulent processes and hardly predictable outcomes. The most visible is the uncontrolled migration from conflict zones and regions, which became one of the most significant global challenges within the recent years.

The combination of these factors contributed not only to strengthening of populist rhetoric, but also its transformation into one of the major political discourses. And, that is more important, it contributed to emergence of the far-right political forces as conventional political actors.

The most apparent in this respect is Europe, where the action of all these factors was enhanced by long-standing and deep-rooted nationalist tradition, taking into account the specifics of historical and political development of many European countries (long-standing prevalence of the «nation state» model).

Over the last decades the European far-right became one of the most significant political forces, attracting more and more public support and having double-digits results.

The average-weighted result of far-right political forces within the parliamentary elections held in different European countries in 2019 was 17,2%, whereas in 2015 it slightly exceeded the 9-percentage threshold (average weighted result was 9,2%).[1] (BBC 2019, BBC 2016).

It is worth noting, that the election results of the European far-right, which differ from country to country, only partly depend on such factors as type of political regime.[2]

For instance, the result of the Italian right-wing party "The League" (ital. *Lega Nord*) shown within the last national parliamentary elections is comparable to the one, obtained by the Hungarian far-right party Jobbik (17,4% vs. 19%). However, Italy is the long-standing and entrenched democracy whereas Hungary, which within recent years demonstrates authoritarian tendencies, cannot boast about it.

However, more disturbing point is, that growing public support and subsequent strong performance of the European far-right within the national parliamentary elections demonstrate the enhancement of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments in European societies, which, according to the expertise, has the solid potential (Kende, Krekó 2020).

It can be explained not only by the action of economic and political, but also socio-cultural factors.

For the long period of time many European nations (even those, which had the "colonial background") had relatively homogenous ethnic structure without significant amount of non-indigenous population (Golder 2016). After the end of the World War II and with the start of decolonisation processes in 1950-1960s, stipulating the liberalisation of refugee and migration policies in 1970-1980s, many European countries had to confront the huge "inward" migration, having the strong impact on ethnic and speaking more general on social structure (de Haas et al. 2019).

This fact provided the fertile soil for anti-immigrant sentiments growth in many European societies, which within the time tended to accelerate due to the stable and rising influx of non-indigenous population (immigrants) being enhanced by the economic and social factors (Lazaridis et al. 2016).

The special boost of the anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe got within the recent decade, taking into account the emergence of European migration crisis (2015–2016), ignited by the surge of geopolitical turbulence and military conflicts in a raw of countries within the Middle East and Northern Africa regions - such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya (Greenhill 2016).

The huge influx of immigrants (more than 2 million people), leading to the enlargement of already large share of non-indigenous population in Europe,[3] enhanced the fears among many Europeans, that further fostering of migration processes can have serious

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[1]   Average-weighted result in 2019 is calculated on the results of parliamentary elections in 19 European countries, whereas average-weighted result in 2015 is calculated on the results of parliamentary elections in 20 European countries.

[2]   See more: European Election Studies / GESIS (https://www.gesis.org/en/services/finding-and-accessing-data/international-survey-programs/european-election-studies)

[3]   See more: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs' and IOM's data (https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/wmr_2020.pdf)

negative social impacts such as losing national identity and dismantling the welfare state (Pew Research Center 2018).

It is noticed, that the European migration crisis reinforced the perception of migration process as one of the major challenges for the national state. For instance, according to the survey, conducted by Pew Research Center in 2020, more than 37% of Germans perceive refugee and migration policy as a challenge for national foreign policy for the time being (Körber Stiftung 2020).[4]

Due to the prevalence of the above mentioned sentiments within the European societies, it is not surprising that the far-right and populist ideas are getting more attractive and the right-wing political forces are enjoying more public support, gradually transforming themselves from marginal political forces into well-established and conventional political actors.

The best practice in this sense is the German far-right political party "Alternative for Germany" (germ. *Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD). Created in 2013 by the group of former members of conservative Christian Democratic Union – one of the major "peoples'" German political parties, it managed to capture 12,6% of votes within the parliamentary elections in 2017 on the wave of anti-immigrant sentiments boosted by European migration crisis, establishing itself as the third largest faction in German parliament – the Bundestag and "dumping" the status of political marginals practically overnight (Holscher et al. 2017).

Entering national parliaments and more generally speaking getting the power is the major goal of the European far-right political actors. It provides not only the opportunities for partaking in the decision-making process, but it is the prerequisite for demarginalisation and legitimation of the far-right as conventional political forces.

For achieving this goal, the European far-right use different forms and mechanisms. One of the most efficient is coalition-building – creation of the far-right political blocs for running in the parliamentary elections.

The most significant case in this regard on the national level is the Polish "Confederation for Freedom and Independence" (pl. *Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość*), or "Confederation" – the coalition of six far-right political parties, which managed to capture 6,8% of votes within the parliamentary elections in 2019, showing the fourth result among all the political forces (Business Insider Polska 2019).

However, the coalition-building for partaking in the general elections as well as other forms of conventional political activity for the far-right are available only in case of formal institutionalisation and official registration.

Not all the European countries (especially in Eastern Europe) could be proud of it. In some of them the right-wing political forces are unregistered and forbidden to take part in electoral campaigns on different levels or exert any other form of political activity due to existing legislative limitations.

For instance, in accordance with the Russian legislation, the far-right political organisations are officially regarded as extremist and, therefore, could not be provided with the status of officially registered, what closes the door of exerting the political activity.

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[4]   the share of people, supporting such opinion in 2019 was 26%. It demonstrates stable growth.

Despite the official ban on far-right organisations aimed at preventing any expression of dangerous nationalism in multi-ethnic country, the right-wing sentiments in Russia not only exist but are rather high.

According to the survey conducted in 2017 by Levada-Center, about 10% of Russian population openly expressed their sympathy to nationalists (Levada-Center 2020). In the survey, conducted in 2020 by the same pollster, about 19% of respondents confessed of being sympathizers of the nationalist idea of "Russia for Russians" (Gudkov et al. 2020).

Although these results demonstrate the solid potential of the far-right political forces in Russia, which under certain circumstances (not only lifting the ban) could be realised they should be treated with caution. It is mainly connected with the lack of relevant data (electorate statistics), taking into account the scarce experience of partaking of the far-right political forces within Russian parliamentary elections. One of the rare examples is the "Homeland" (rus. *"Родина", "Rodina"*) political bloc, which took part in parliamentary election in 2003 and managed to capture 9,03% of votes by openly exploiting nationalist rhetoric (Verkhovsky 2012).

In this case the methodological clause also plays an important role. The opinion polls are largely used as a tool of fixation of dominate social trends not providing in-depth analysis of social structure and sentiments. In other words, polls could not provide the precise measurement of public support due to the fact that they concentrate mainly on the "overt" component (articulated support), not revealing the "covert" (unarticulated support), which is more significant and revealing the genuine position of affairs.

Such limitations are especially evident within the research activity aimed at exploring far-right sentiments by applying the cross-county analysis. The lack of effective measurement frequently provides not only the incomplete, but misleading results, which can distort the performance.

All the above mentioned issues confirm the need to select the relevant tools as well as elaboration of the specific research methodology, enabling effective measurement of the far-right public support by analysing both "overt" and "covert" components.

It is the effective solution for not only assessing the genuine potential of public support of the far-right, but also the tool for analysing the factors influencing the far-right support with special emphasis on the ongoing contemporary processes in the social structure (including the COVID-19 pandemic) as well as the instrument of prognosis (scenario designing).

The research project description

The research project, initiated in October 2020 by the group of scholars and researchers representing research centers and higher education institutions from Germany, Russia and Poland, anticipates achieving the goal of elaboration the specific research methodology and selection of relevant tools for measurement.[5]

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[5]   The research group comprises the researchers from University of Potsdam, Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), Financial University under Government of the Russian Federation (Moscow),

Some members of the research group have already obtained the relevant experience of making research of the far-right in Europe and Russia by applying the comparative methodology based on development of specific set of criteria (Ivanova et al. 2019). However, taking into account the huge amount of data on the far-right in different European countries, as well as methodological limitations, connected not only with political background (huge differences in political traditions and practices), but also the large number of cases, the previous research (although it had a significant heuristic potential) proved to be insufficient and partly provided the relevant in-depth analysis of the European and Russian right-wing organisations, which were the main subject of scientific consideration.

The above mentioned issues determined not only the search of the new methodology for consideration of the European (including Russian) far-right on the basis of comparative analysis, but also contributed to the changes of the research approach in general. The latter concerns mainly the following aspects:

- reduction of the number of cases (countries) for the analysis in order to make more in-depth comparison of the far-right politics by applying the cross-country analysis methodology,
- elaboration of more precise research methodology, enabling the effective (comprehensive) measurement of public support of the far-right political forces in different European societies,
- development of the empirically based approach, envisaging the use of new sources of data as well as increasing the amount of data (from social media).

All the above mentioned changes were implemented in the research design of the current research project, which contains the specifically developed research methodology, and were applied to the selected cases (countries) – Germany, Poland, and Russia.

The selection of cases was induced not only by nationality of the researchers, taking part in the project, but also by aspiration to make comparative analysis based on the principle of the "most difference" (*most different method*, MSS), taking into account the huge differences in political background – political traditions and current political practices in the selected counties.

The most significant in this respect is the situation with official registration of the far-right organisations in Germany, Poland and Russia, which provides important insights for understanding the peculiarities of political activity of the right-wing political forces as well as demonstrates different practices of handling the political organisations in different states.

The research question of the project is formulated as follows: taking into account the fact that public support of the far-right comprises not only "overt" (articulated support), but also "covert" (unarticulated support) component and the latter plays a significant role in formation of public support, could the measurement of the xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments by applying the special elaborated methodology aimed at uncovering the «covert» component contribute to the assessment of the real scale of public support of the far-right in selected European societies?

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The proposed research question leads to investigation of the following hypotheses:

1) The public support of the far-right political forces has "two-layer" character - "overt" component (articulated support) and "covert" (unarticulated support) component. Whereas the scale of the first one tends to be stable, the scale of the latter is conditional due to the dynamics of different factors (political, economic, social and socio-cultural).

2) The "covert" component, despite its substantial and changeable character, frequently plays the decisive role in formation of real public support of the far-right political forces in European societies.

3) The rising of xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in European societies leading to the change of political discourse and enhancing the amount of public support of the far-right is signaling the surging risks of social radicalisation endangering the sustainable political development in the mid- and long-term perspectives.

The verification of these hypotheses by accomplishing the research project can provide significant insights into the issues of possible transformation of political values in European countries ("the shift to the right") as well as perspectives of the far-right political forces within different European societies in the upcoming years.

The theoretical framework of the research project encompasses the works, dedicated to different aspects of the far-right politics. They provide in-depth analysis of not only specifics of far-right as political actors (Mudde 2016a,b, 2018; Art 2011; Carter 2005), but also peculiarities of the action of right-right organisations (Greven 2016; Holt 2019) as well as country analysis – case-studies of the far-right political forces in various countries. The special emphasis in this respect for obvious reasons was put on the analysis of the far right in the selected cases (countries) – Germany, Poland and Russia (Zimmermann 2003;Wagemann 2005; Vorländer et al. 2016; Salzborn 2016; Lees 2016; Berning 2017; Pankowski 2012; Lázár 2015; Szelewa, Polakowski 2017; Kajta, Mrozowicki 2018; Herbert 2019; Verhkovsky, Kozhevnikova 2009; Rotmistrov et al. 2015; Enstad 2019).

The accomplishment of the research project, which was deemed to be carried out within nine months (from October 2020 to May 2021) could contribute and trigger the further research activity concerning the far-right politics, providing not only large amount of empirical data, but also important insights for formulating the new theoretical or conceptual foundations.

Therefore, the project can bring the "added-value" effects both – theoretically and practically.

The research methodology

Taking into account the specific goals, the methodology, elaborated within the research project envisages combination of different methods, differentiated into two categories - traditional and modern ones.

To the traditional we can attribute cross-country analysis based on the collection of empirical (statistical, sociological) data and elaboration of specific and relevant set of cri-

teria for comparison, as well as conducting a series of expert face-to-face interviews with different groups of experts - decision-makers, executives, researchers – from Germany, Poland and Russia.

In case of the modern ("digital") methods, the special focus is placed on the *social media listening* (SML) method, which leads to the analysis of a large amount of data collected in social media (see more: Schweidel et al. 2011; Felt 2016; Boyang, Vos 2014; Moe et al. 2017).

The importance of applying the SML-method can be explained by not only the rising role of social media as a source of the plausible data, but also by the fact, that it has already proved itself as being the effective tool of assessing the social sentiments within research activity, namely collecting and analysing the data (Öyturk, Ayvay 2018; Zagheni et al. 2014).

The major premises of use of the SML-method as the major research tool within the research project are the following:

1) The selection of social media platform for data collecting;
2) The development and application of special instrumentarium (tools) for data collecting and analysis within the selected social media platform;
3) The creation of necessary research infrastructure for analysis of the collected data.

Twitter was chosen as the platform for data (xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments) collecting within the research project. This choice was conditioned by the following advantages, which the social media platform provides:

▪ Cumulative data collecting. Unlike other social media, *Twitter* platform is more appropriate for cumulative and to some extent standardised data collection due to its imbedded specifics – limited capacity of text units (no more than 280 symbols in message). On the one hand, it enables to collect more data (messages/texts), on the other hand – it enables to minimise the infogluts.

▪ "UX factor". Unlike other social media platforms, having some restrictions for data collecting *Twitter* provides more opportunities not only for data search, but also for data storage. This is especially important for the research project, taking into account the availability of large amount of different accounts as well as multilingualism.[6]

The latter is key precondition for the "field work" (collecting data by analysing messages in *Twitter*) within the research project by applying the specially elaborated instrumentarium. It is designated to collect the data with the use of special search inquiries – lexical forms (words/combination of words in German, Polish and Russian) on different issues of the far-right, which are differentiated into three categories (research lines) – "right-wing", "immigration" and "xenophobia".

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[6] The popularity of *Twitter* as social media platform and communication tool within the selected countries is different. Whereas in Germany and Poland it is rather popular among public institutions (many of them have *Twitter* accounts), in Russia *Twitter* is rarely used by public institutions, and they are not inclined to use it as a tool of communication.

Furthermore, the thesaurus, containing more than 30 lexical forms, is divided into three categories – "official language", "media language", "vernacular language" (everyday speech).

This was made due not only to the need to evaluate the difference in attitudes/ sentiments towards the problematics of the far-right within different social groups and by different social actors, but also to examine the frequency of emergence of messages concerning the far-right politics in the national *Twitter's* segments of the selected cases/ countries – Germany, Poland and Russia.

The data collecting on the basis of analysis of messages in *Twitter* within German, Polish and Russian segments was being made with the use of special script (parser) developed in programming language Python.

Parser has the multiple functions: searching tweets, preprocessing, and text data analysing. The collecting of data (content) is exerted on the weekly basis. Such frequency of measurement is not only more expedient for assessment of sentiments in social media, but also helps to monitor the dynamics of social interest towards the issues of the far-right politics in national *Twitter*'s segments (selected countries) as well as to track the reaction in case of changing of event-driven context (for instance, elections on different levels).

The collected data within the process of parsing ("field work") further was being processed into the conceptual blocks, which would be subsequently verified within expert face-to-face interviews.

The series of the face-to-face interviews is the second phase of research activity, providing the opportunities for not only examining the quality of data, but also to elaborate the set of indicators, which will be subsequently used as relevant criteria for cross-country analysis and measuring and the genuine overall public support of the far-right in Germany, Russia and Poland. Its formation is the third and eventual phase of research activity within the research project aimed at delivering the eventual outcomes.

The successful accomplishment of the research project anticipates also making prognosis of the further development of the far-right in the selected countries in the mid- and long-term perspectives.

Conclusion and discussion

The issues of the far-right politics are gaining more and more scientific interest stipulated by emergence of nationalism and populism as new global political trends worldwide, as well as rasing significance of right-wing forces as political actors in various countries.

Conducting the research activity on the far-right, especially on the basis of cross-country analysis could be a complicated issue due to the existing limitations and obstacles, taking into account the lack of effective methodology. It comes out not only from the problems of "political background" and "political environment" – differences in political traditions and political practices, – but also from the sophisticated nature of the public support of the far right, having not only "overt" but also "covert" component. The latter is hardly measurable with the conventional tools and assumes application of the specific tools and more importantly – elaboration of the specific methodology.

In this respect the proposed in the research project specific research methodology, based on the the combination of traditional and modern ("digital") research methods for measurement of the xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments on the national (country) level is meant to be an effective decision. The application of this research methodology could help to assess not only the amount of "covert" component, but also to adequately measure the genuine scale of public support for the right-wing organisations by comparing it with the "overt" one (it is relatively good measurable taking into account the availability of electoral statistics and results opinion polls). The project provides some significant insights and prognosis of the prospects of the far-right forces in the mid-term and long-term perspectives amidst the contemporary global ("shift to the right", COVID-19 pandemic) and national (upcoming parliamentary election in autumn 2021 in Germany and Russia) political and social processes. This underlines the importance of initiating the discussion, which, from our perspective, has four major lines:

1) The expediency of the application of such data-driven research approach towards measuring the public support of the far-right political forces (including the selection of cases/countries).
2) The correctness of the elaborated methodology and application of the research methods for measuring the "covert" component (on the basis of assessing the xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments).
3) The validity of the achieved results by applying the elaborated methodology and use of the research methods.
4) The correctness of interpretation of the achieved results and the ability of making the prognosis on its basis.

Due to the fact, that the research project by the moment of submitting of this paper was in progress (within the first phase) and only provisional insufficient for publication results were achieved, the discussion is to be postponed to the moment of appearance and assessment of the eventual results of the project.

Notwithstanding, the research group appreciate getting some feedback and commenting on the details of the research project providing useful tips for further implementation of the research activity and possible improvements within the project.

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