

TOOLS AND APPROACHES ON INVESTIGATING ABUSE OF STATE RESOURCES

A forward-looking toolkit



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This toolkit introduces the Centre for Monitoring and Research's (CeMI) practical tips and ideas on investigating Abuse of State Resources (ASR) through social media.

This toolkit has been developed as a continuation of CeMI's pilot investigation in 2021 in the lead up to the Montenegrin 2020 Parliamentary Elections. As part of this pilot initiative, CeMI developed the original methodology and leveraged this approach to identify potential Abuses of State Resources, Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior, and Campaign Violations during the electoral period.

Monitors will get an insight on how social media can help in investigating potential abuses of state resources in digital space, whether as a mean of ASR or as an evidence of ASR. Toolkit also includes useful tips on how to document and report research findings, as well as tools and other practical tips that may facilitate investigation efforts.



IN THIS TOOLKIT YOU WILL FIND:

- » Ideas to investigate abuse of state resources on social media
 - » Ideas to use social media as an evidences of abuse of state resources
 - » Useful tips how to document and report on findings
 - » Practical tools that monitors may use
-

INTRODUCTION

To better understand what abuse of state resources (ASR) is, it is necessary to first define what state resources are. There is no universally accepted definition of ASR either in domestic legislation or international law. However, numerous countries, as well as international institutions and organizations recognize the importance of this subject matter, which is why the ASR has been addressed in numerous foreign national and international documents.



DEFINITION

One possible definition of abuse of state resources, that will be used for further reference, is „ any use of state resources to support or undermine any political actor (such as a political party or coalition or a candidate for public office)“¹.

It can be concluded that ASR is a form of political corruption dominantly present during the electoral campaigns, characterized by an increased degree of an unfair electoral advantage the ruling majority political parties drag out through unlawful use of state resources. ASR is recognized as the unethical, and sometimes even unlawful behavior of civil servants, incumbent political candidates and parties to use their official positions or connections to government institutions aimed at influencing the outcome of elections. In its essence, the ASR alters power balances amongst political actors, which may have a decisive impact on the overall integrity of the electoral process as well as on the trust of the citizens in fair and free elections, its legitimacy and outcomes.

As social media has become an increasingly important tool during election campaigning, it can be used to investigate ASR in two ways. First, social media as a mean of ASR, where abusive behavior refers in particular to the abuse of institutional resources and its communication tools, such as official state social media accounts. Second, social media as an evidence of ASR, in other words tool for documenting abusive behavior like use of state cars or government offices during campaigns.

By monitoring social media and providing e-evidence on documented cases of abuse of state resources, organizations shall advocate for the establishment or adjusting of existing legal framework and coordinated institutional response mechanisms to prevent and combat abusive behavior online and offline during the electoral period.

With this in mind, advocating for the improvement of domestic anti-corruption strategies and tactics could play a crucial role in preventing deceptive political behavior on social media and abuse of state resources, as political actors worldwide are increasingly adopting new methods to manufacture and artificially amplify social media content.

¹ Magnus Ohman, The Abuse of State Resources, Washington, D.C., IFES, 2011



1. ABUSES OF STATE RESOURCES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Ideas and tips presented in this toolkit build on social media monitoring methodology previously developed and implemented by the Centre for Monitoring and Research (CeMI) in collaboration with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

Abuse of state resources monitoring effort focuses on observing the activity of state institutions and employees on social media during electoral period, identifying abuses of state resources as defined by domestic legislation and regulatory frameworks, as well as raising concerns about new ways social media may facilitate violations.

Ideas presented in this toolkit focus on monitoring for violations via CrowdTangle, an online listening tool owned by Meta. While the toolkit will focus specifically on tracking publicly available data on Facebook, CrowdTangle additionally has some ability to monitor Instagram, Reddit, and to a lesser extent, Twitter.

Abuse of state resources monitoring tips outlined in this toolkit focus on monitoring potential ASR on social media and how to provide e-evidence on documented cases of ASR.

1.1 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MEAN OF ASR

Social media may be a place where abuses of state resources can occur. Many refer to this phenomena as an online ASR. This may include, but not be limited to:

- » misuse of official state account on social media for the purposes of electoral campaign;
- » use of private account of state employees for the campaigning and their participation in the online campaign during working hours;
- » other types of behavior that can be manifested online and are recognized as violation in domestic legislation.

As a first step in monitoring online ASR, CeMI determined the list of actors to monitor through CrowdTangle platform, composed of state institutions, public companies, political parties, politicians, and media. In this way, data gathering during the campaigning period was assured. Exact steps on setting up lists are described in the ANNEX 1.

CeMI's focus was on evaluating management of state accounts in terms of its compliance with national rulebooks and codes, and whether any kind of abuse was noted during the monitoring period. Engagement in coordinated behavior and sharing posts with political messages, was also assessed in light of potential online abuse of state resources.

Monitors may seek to identify any cases of state employees and officials' involvement in online campaigning, which are often linked to use of their official role for political promotion, and evaluate if their behavior is in compliance with the national state employees code of conduct and electoral code. However, this approach still needs to be developed as countries have different rules and procedure regarding the participation of state employees in the campaigning. It is important to have in mind also the privacy concerns regarding civil servants campaigning on social media, i.e. impossibility to monitor private accounts and respect of privacy policies on social media.

Table 1: Stakeholders to monitor

Stakeholders	Key points
Elections participants (political parties, candidates, politicians)	When monitoring for online ASR, it is important to focus on accounts of ruling party or coalition, national and local branches, its candidates and representatives, national and local, and activists. This is because incumbent party or coalition has the access to the state resources, thus, is more likely to use them during campaigning and obtain advantage.
State Institutions (official social media accounts of state institutions, government, ministry, etc.)	Monitors should consider following the online activities of state institutions and management of their social media accounts, including public profiles of state officials and employees, as well as public companies.
Media, journalists	These actors may have additional information or source of information as they work a lot in field, are in direct contact with citizens and other interlocutors who can provide them with proves or additional information regarding abuse of state resources during elections.

1.2 SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN EVIDENCE OF ASR

Monitors may use social media also as a source of evidence of offline ASR. One of the potential approaches is to conduct keyword searches, including terms that are thought or expected to be important topics in the campaign, in particular regarding the investments (e.g. opening of the schools, hospitals, road works, green areas, parks, public lightening, etc.). This method consist of identifying certain phrases, words, and hashtags, commonly used in conjunction with the subject matter, and counting the frequency of appearance of the predetermined keywords.

For example, ruling parties, on a national or local level, usually use different type of government investments for campaigning to promote what have been done so far and to promise/start new projects during the electoral run. For monitors, it can be useful to count number of post refering to investments by setting up keyword search, including words such as: hospital opening, school opening, road works, park (green area) opening, as well as social benefits, electricity, gas, water bills, etc. It is important to note that additional verification is needed in this case as number of posts is actually referencing something that could be considered ASR.

When identifying keywords, CeMI monitors first analyzed legal documents related to the campaign and elections, in particular sections and articles related to the public funds spending that are not allowed during electoral period. From there, monitors took words that would be useful to track online. In the countries where such regulations do not exist, monitors should pay attention to the media articles and government official statement to identify keywords related to investments and public money spending during campaigning.

CeMI combined its online monitoring effort with the mobile and web application “Fer Izbori” through which users can report electoral irregularities and upload photos, screenshots, or other types of evidence proving abuses or irregularities during elections. Similar tools, e.g. ASR reporting application, that could allow users to upload social media posts as evidence to support the report, may be a useful approach as well.

Monitors may use Tool 2 to determine keywords when looking for ASR, Tool 3 on how to set up keyword search, and Tool 4 on how to set up alerts through CrowdTangle, i.e. reception of all posts in your inbox via electronic email. These tools may be found in the appendix of this toolkit.

Besides keyword search related to investment, monitors may use social media to track other offline ASR such as images of a rally or media articles where there are photos of usage of state cars, use of state premises for campaigning, election material distribution in the state owned premises or other location where it is not allowed by domestic legislation. Open Source Investigation techniques to corroborate reports of offline abuses, like searching on Twitter may be handy in this case.



2. DOCUMENTING AND REPORTING

Data documenting should be in organized manner and in digital format, e.g. screenshots, Excel table, etc. Excel sheet may contain data such as: type of abuse, prove of abuse (photo, link, screenshot), who abused the law, date, and all other relevant data for different types of abuses, online or offline. For the better and more organized data recording, it is advisable to create separate folders in the inbox and desktop.

It is important to mention that, regarding the keyword search, a lot of the posts that include selected keywords, have nothing to do with the ASR actually. However, they will arrive in your inbox, thus it is important to mark those that suggest potential ASR.

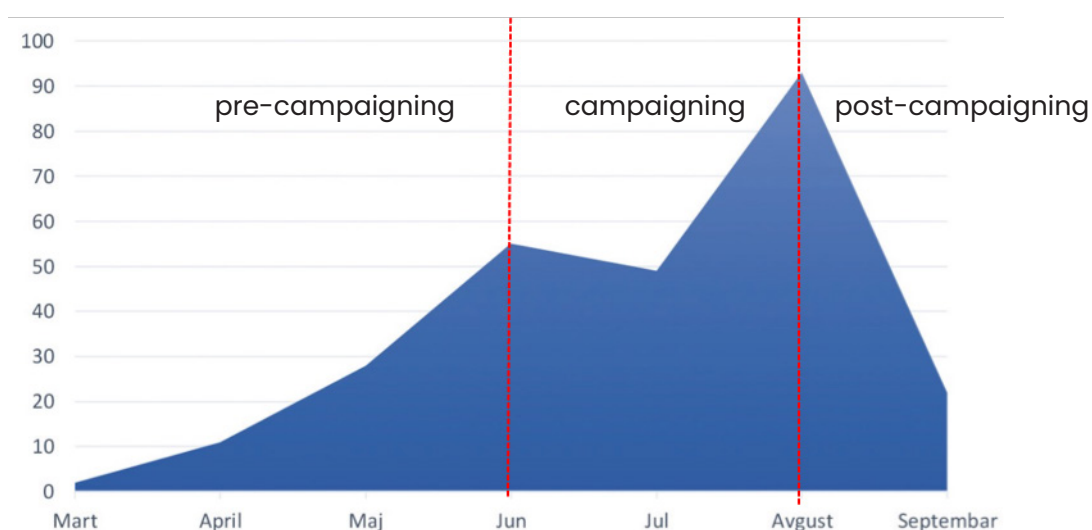
Once the data for the monitoring period is collected and stored, the analytical part of the monitoring starts. Therefore, last but not least important step is reporting which implies analyzing and presenting data and findings collected through monitoring period, as well as estimates of the impact it could have on the overall electoral proces and voters' rights.

2.1 DATA VIZUALIZATION

Presenting data in a simple and understandable way is the best option when dealing with the abuse of state resources. It is advisable and useful for monitors to document cases of ASR in form of screenshots, which could afterwards be easily inserted in the reports and visualized to the public. For example, screenshots of: coordinated post sharing with political messages among state institutions, use of state cars, or other abuses noted on social media, statistics on number of investments, etc.

Here below we present a graphic that CeMI prepared based on the keyword search and number of collected post references to government investments during pre-campaigning, campaigning and post-campaigning period.

Graph: Number of references to government investments during pre-campaigning, campaigning and post-campaigning period



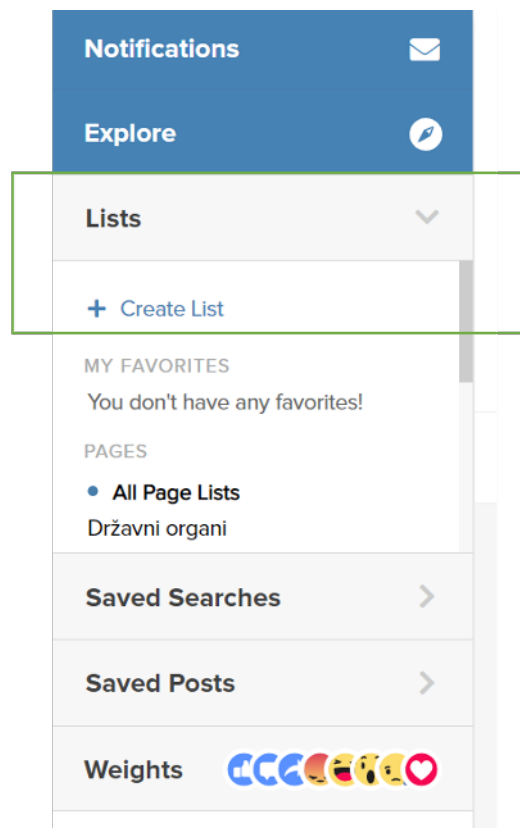


3. TOOLS

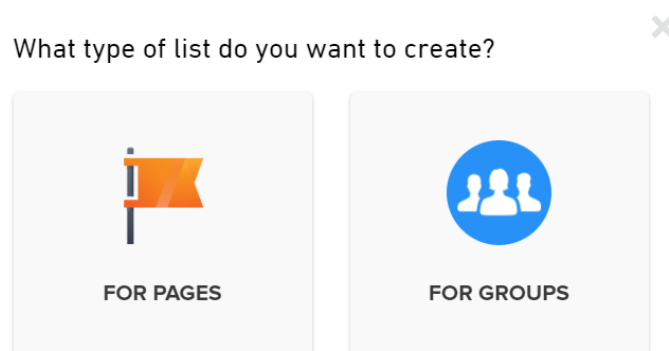
TOOL 1

CREATING LISTS

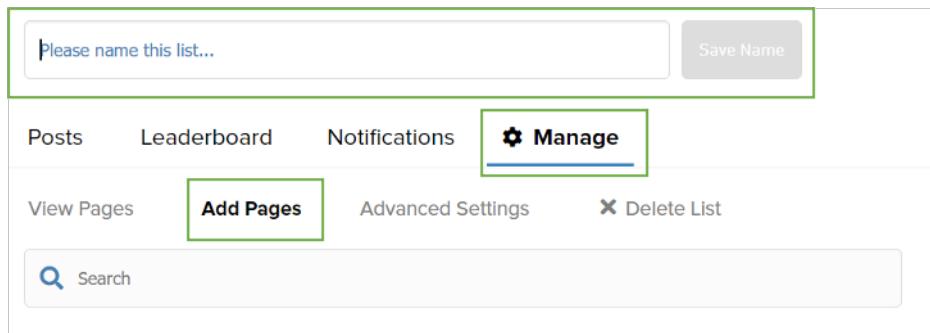
1. Open the dashboard created for the specific election monitoring.
2. From the left-side menu, select "Lists" option and then "+ Create List".



3. Choose the type of list you want to create.

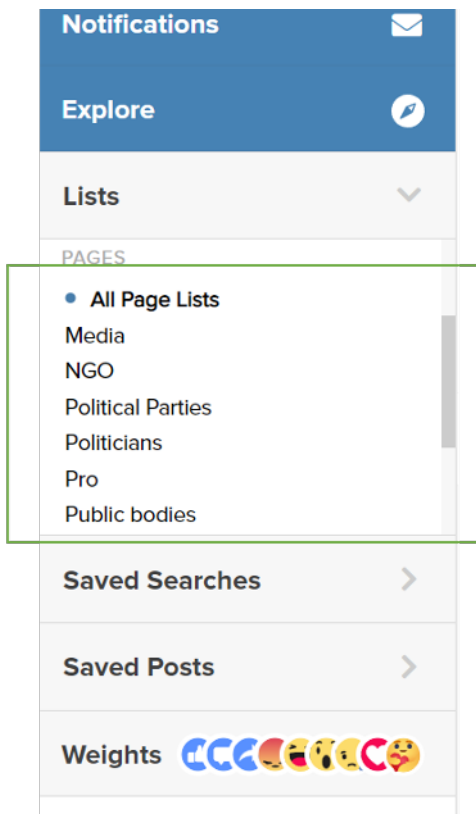


4. Name the list and Save Name.
5. Add accounts. Entities can be added by typing the name or copy/paste Facebook account URL.



The screenshot shows the Facebook list management interface. At the top, there is a text input field with the placeholder text "Please name this list..." and a "Save Name" button to its right. Below this, there is a horizontal menu with four items: "Posts", "Leaderboard", "Notifications", and "Manage". The "Manage" item is highlighted with a green box. Below the menu, there is a row of four buttons: "View Pages", "Add Pages", "Advanced Settings", and "Delete List". The "Add Pages" button is highlighted with a green box. At the bottom, there is a search bar with a magnifying glass icon and the text "Search".

6. All created list will show up in the left-side menu.



TOOL 2

TABLE OF KEYWORDS

Keywords to consider when developing a lexicon for ASR monitoring:

- » **Infrastructure (capital investments of public interest with high budget, e.g. transportation or touristic infrastructure)**
 - » Infrastructure project
 - » Infrastructure
-

- » **Write-off of debts (eased conditions for the depth repayment)**
 - » Write-off of debt
 - » Subsidies
 - » One-time subsidies
 - » Electricity
 - » Water
 - » Bill
 - » Utilities
 - » Companies
 - » Tax forgiveness
 - » Write-off of responsibilities
 - » Write-off of all debts
-

- » **Opening (of the schools, hospitals, kindergarten)**
-

- » **Works (road works, green areas works, public lightening)**
-

- » **Reconstruction/reconstructions (of highways, public buildings)**
-

- » **Assembly (of political entities in state premises where it is not allowed)**
 - » Assemblies
 - » Gathering/gatherings
 - » Meetings
-

- » **Social Benefits (granting non-repayable loans, financial resources)**
 - » One-time social assistance
 - » Socially vulnerable population
-

- » **Use (state cars, public premises)**
 - » State resources
 - » Prohibition of use
 - » Restriction of use
 - » Transparency
 - » Budget expenditures
-

- » **Employment (open vacancies in the public institutions during elections)**
 - » Political employment
-

Depending on the language of the country where monitoring takes place, monitors should pay attention to use various forms of the words to capture as much content as possible relates to the potential ASR.

In continuation is presented CeMI's dashboard of saved keywords and variations of word that were used for the monitoring.

The screenshot displays the CeMI dashboard interface. On the left, a sidebar contains navigation links: Notifications, Explore, Lists, Saved Searches, Saved Posts, and Weights. The 'Saved Searches' section is expanded, showing a list of saved searches under 'PAGES', with 'državna sredstva' selected. The main content area shows the 'Edit Search' interface for the selected search. The search query is 'državna sredstva, državnih sredstava, zabrana upotrebe, ogranič'. The interface includes options to 'Edit Search' or 'Delete Saved Search', and a 'Save' button. A '+ ADD SEARCH QUERY' button is at the bottom.

Notifications

Explore

Lists

Saved Searches

MY FAVORITES

You don't have any favorites!

PAGES

- državna sredstva
- infrastruktura
- otpis dugova
- otvaranje
- radovi
- rekonstrukcija
- skup
- socijalna davanja
- zapošljavanje
- žiro račun
- zloupotreba

Saved Posts

Weights

CeMI's dashboard > Saved Search >

državna sredstva

Posts Leaderboard Notifications Edit Search

Edit Search X Delete Saved Search

Search Query

Any of these words državna sredstva, državnih sredstava, zabrana upotrebe, ogranič

All of these words

None of these words

Remove Pages whose name includes this word or phrase

Save

+ ADD SEARCH QUERY

TOOL 3

SAVING SEARCHES

1. From left-side menu, click on "Saved Searches" > "New Search".
2. Select list of entities whose posts will be monitored for specific keywords.
3. Type words/keywords that post should include.
4. Click "Save Search".
5. All saved searched will appear in the left-side menu under "Saved Searches" section.

The screenshot displays the CeMI dashboard interface. On the left sidebar, the 'Saved Searches' section is highlighted with a green box, showing a 'New Search' button. Below it, the 'PAGES' section is also highlighted with a green box, listing several entities: državna sredstva, infrastruktura, otpis dugova, otvaranje, and radovi. The main content area shows the 'New Search' form, which includes a search bar, a dropdown for 'Pages', and a list of search criteria: 'All of these words', 'None of these words', and 'Remove Page(s) whose name includes this word or phrase'. The 'Search Within' section includes a checkbox for 'Include URLs' and a list of search criteria: 'Only these lists', 'Only these Page(s)', 'None of these lists', and 'None of these Page(s)'. At the bottom right, there are buttons for 'Hide additional options', 'Save Search', and 'Search'.

Notifications

Explore

Lists

Saved Searches

New Search

MY FAVORITES

You don't have any favorites!

PAGES

državna sredstva

infrastruktura

otpis dugova

otvaranje

radovi

Saved Posts

Weights

CeMI's dashboard

Pages

Search for any of these words or phrases

All of these words

None of these words

Remove Page(s) whose name includes this word or phrase

Search Within

Include URLs What does this mean?

Only these lists

Only these Page(s)

None of these lists

None of these Page(s)

Hide additional options

Save Search

Search

TOOL 4

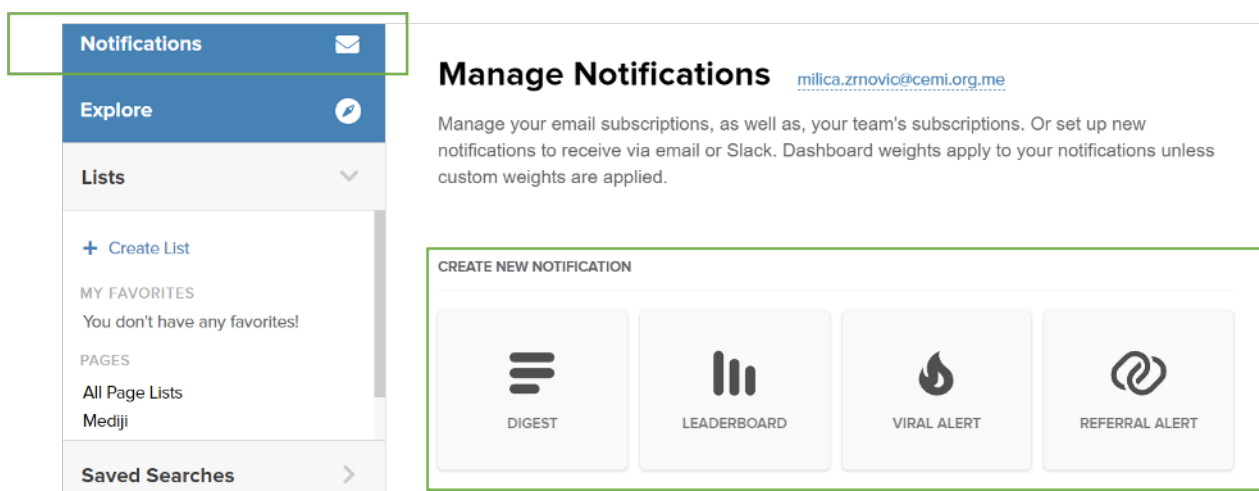
SETTING UP ALERTS

1. From the left-side menu click on "Notification".
2. Choose from type of alert you want to set up. Viral or Referral alerts are recommended for ASR monitoring.

Viral Alert – A real-time alert when a post starts to overperform on social media.

Referral Alert – A real-time alert for a saved search match.

3. Fill in required sections. When setting up Viral Alerts you can choose from lists or saved searches, while Referral Alerts you can choose only saved searches.
4. After filling out sections, click "Create and Subscribe".
5. Alerts will start arriving at the designated email address.



6. How an alert looks like in the email inbox:



