**Cover Letter**

**Manuscript no. #**

**General comments for editors/reviewers:**

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| We would like to thank the reviewers and editors for their insightful comments and suggestions. The paper has greatly improved as a result of them. We hope that you would also find this version of the paper satisfactory. In the light of comments and suggestions, we made following revisions to our paper:  We reviewed our introduction section in line with suggestions from reviewer 1 and 2. We believe suggested revisions enabled the section to be more streamlined and theoretically enriched  We added two new sections as recommended by reviewer 1 and reviewer 2. The first section lays the theoretical ground for our analysis and results as well as contextualizing and problematizing our results. The other section focuses entirely on data and indicators and geared towards elaborating on our decisions and choices in the process.  In addition, we have reviewed our results and conclusion sections to be more robust and in line with previous sections. We decided to present technical details and graphs in the online appendix as suggested by reviewers.  Finally we have elaborated about the challenges of studying citizen engagement with European politics on social media, as we experienced them in our research.  We believe our paper has benefited a lot from your revision and hope that it will be satisfactory. |

**Response point-by-point**

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| **Reviewer 1** | **Responses** |
| **Comment/Suggestion 1** |  |
| The authors endeavor to describe why the EU should communicate via social media, but this is a moot point: we already know, among others by virtue of the authors being able to perform their study, that the EU institutions have embraced social media comms full heartedly. Instead of demonstrating that “social media platforms should be promising communication channels for supranational actors” (p2), the authors could make the case about why knowing something about the way in which EU institutions perform their online communication on Twitter is important and relevant. Which are some of the debates about institutional communication that are relevant here? Which are the criteria for good public communication? To which standards should the EU citizens uphold their supranational institutions? | We have revised the introduction to put more emphasis on why it matters to map and document social media communication practices of the supranational EU executives. Similarly, we now have added a new section that extensively discusses necessary and sufficient conditions for the public communication to contribute to the popular legitimacy. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 2** |  |
| While indeed, the EU faces some particular challenges, such as those enumerated on page 1, the introduction should not focus on these alone. The first page of the article should, in my opinion, present the research question driving the paper and argue for its relevance and, not in the least, its goodness of fit with the theme of the special issue, namely citizen engagement. The paper in its current form does not present in a clear-cut way a motivation for its relevance to the special issue. I find the introduction to be optimally suitable to make the case for why this study addresses the concerns of the special issue and connect to the literature on social media, citizen engagement and institutional communication. | Heeding to the reviewer’s recommendation, we have now revised introduction to present our research question in a clearer way and iterated our motivations of asking the question based on the theme of the special issue. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 3** |  |
| The section is transparent but there are still some issues that need to be more justified.  - Why were both personal and institutional accounts included? The institutional accounts have a continuous presence since the establishment of an EU social media presence, whereas personal accounts of EU leaders may have come into existence much later or, if in existence for a while, have content that is not relevant to the European level but to the domestic politics where the account holder had a stake in prior to their becoming active in the EU institutions.  - Why was the UK used as a benchmark? Is the UK government a well-established role model for institutional communication? Is the institutional architecture of the UK most similar to that of the EU? Why not benchmark against Germany, for example, or The Netherlands?  The characteristics in question (volume over time, language clarity, media type) should be theoretically motivated. Why do the authors choose to examine these variables and not others? In the theory section (which the article does not contain), the authors could outline some of the features considered important for good institutional communication, and use this literature to argue for their variable choice. Why is volume of messages important for effective (and engaging – the focus of the SI) institutional communication? Why is language clarity important? Why is media type important? | We now have added a section dedicated to the data and indicators to clarify the questions reviewer posed. The section presents our reasoning and justification regarding our choices such as using the UK government as a national benchmark. In addition we discuss our indicators in detail in this section and present our motivations to use them in relation to previous research and special issue. We believe that the paper has greatly benefited from the questions posed by the reviewer as they prompted us to explicitly address our choices in dedicated sections. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 4** |  |
| Alternatively, the authors could look at some of the existing literature about EU comms and structure their presentation of the variables as answers to expectations/hypotheses. For example, the authors may want to argue that EU comms reorient themselves from traditional to social media, then compare the volumes of the two types over time to demonstrate this point. | We thank the reviewer for suggestion. To the best of our knowledge, most of the extant literature on the EU communication, with the exception of Rauh (2020,2021), focuses information sharing practices of the EU and dynamics between the EU communication officials and the journalists. While our research is motivated by a similar question, we are of the opinion that these works do not provide enough academic guidance to derive hypothesis for two reasons. First of all, these works focus on internal workings of the public communication mechanisms at the EU. Therefore, they offer knowledge institutional factors such as allocation of resources and day-to-day practices. Secondly, and more importantly, these works often tackle the EU communication via traditional communication channels such as print media. As social media platforms have substantial structural differences, we believe prior work on motivations and practices vis-à-vis traditional media channels provide limited guidance. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 5** |  |
| The concept of publicity is not defined anywhere in the paper. The authors write “We approximate the publicity of the messages via user engagement with the messages” (p. 8). If the two concepts are interchangeable, why not use engagement, which is the theme of the SI? And if they are different, why not explain where the two concepts are similar and where they are not? | The newly added theory and indicators section elaborates on the concepts and how they relate to each other. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 6** |  |
| When presenting the results of the statistical analyses, it would be helpful to connect them with some hypotheses regarding their relevance for engagement. On page 10, the authors highlight some variables ,“embedded pictures and frequent use of meta-linguistic communication”, as most significant for engagement. These should have been grounded in some theoretical literature to justify their inclusion in the model. | While there is some previous work on the factors that generate engagement with political communication on social media, most of these works study political parties in national contexts. To the best of our knowledge, the subject of engagement with multi-level governance authorities, specifically executives’ communication, on social media is still under explored and insufficiently theorized to derive hypothesis. This is also the reason why the paper undertakes an exploratory mapping exercise building on linguistics and literature. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 7** |  |
| When calculating the number of followers of accounts over time, the inclusion of personal accounts becomes problematic, since some of the ones with a larger followership (Vestager, Borell, etc) belong to established national politicians. How do the authors distinguish between communication regarding the EU and that regarding domestic politics from those accounts that have a history of both? | As the reviewer rightly pointed out so, some of the personal accounts existed long before owners assumed an EU office. We now have corrected for this in our calculations by tracing the date they assumed the EU office and limit our analysis to their messages for the period while they are in the office and clarified this in the data section. While this did not change the observed patterns, differences now became more pronounced. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 8** |  |
| The authors also highlight the difference between institutional and personal accounts in driving engagement. Is the reason to include both account types to test hypotheses related to personalization? If so, formulate this as a hypothesis backed up by literature and organize the text accordingly | While we had reasons to include personal accounts to participate in the public communication of the EU as now explained in the data section, we did not have any reason to expect them to receive more attention than institutional EU accounts. Previous personalization of politics literature, to the best of our knowledge, documents a difference in the attention paid to individual politicians and the political party communication. However, this nuance does not seem to receive attention in governmental/executive public communication. Since the political communication of political parties are systematically differs from government public communication, we believe the previous evidence is not suitable to extend to a new area of inquiry. |
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| **Reviewer 2** |  |
| **Comment/Suggestion 1** | Write your response here |
| The paper starts out with two related challenges for supranational EU actors: politicization and blame shifting. While I find this starting point convincing, the framing might benefit from more nuance and a theoretical spin. The manuscript might engage with the literature on politicization as well as blame attribution to the EU and supranational EU actors within it (e.g., Vasilopoulou et al. in JCMS; Rittberger et al. 2017 in JCMS; Schlipphak & Treib 2017 in JEPP; Traber et al. 2019 in EJPR; Sommer 2019 in JCMS; Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2020 in PaG). Instead of discussing the obstacles to supranational EU actors’ communication, it could confront a theoretical debate within this literature. Some scholars consider supranational EU actors as less willing and able public communicators as compared to member state governments. These contributions usually emphasize the communicative disadvantages of supranational EU actors as well as their technocratic nature (e.g., Gerhards et al. 2009 in PVS; Schlipphak & Treib 2017 in JEPP). On the contrary, several recent contributions emphasize supranational actors’ willingness and ability to engage in public communication and actively respond to politicization and blame attributions (e.g., Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl 2020 in Governance; Rauh et al. 2020 in EJPR; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl 2021 in PVS; see also JEPP Special Issue ‘EU Actors Under Pressure’ edited by Bressanelli et al. 2020). Yet, these analyses cover so far only news media and public speeches and often focus on specific cases. The manuscript could build on and add to this strand of literature by assessing, first, whether supranational EU actors take advantage of the opportunities posed by social media and, second, how (good) they are employing them. The answer to this question should then be spelled out concisely in the introduction. | We would like to thank the reviewer for this insightful comment and extensive literature list. Our introduction section has benefited greatly from the suggested literature. However, even though our paper draws inspiration from politicization and blame shifting issues, our core aim is not to investigate how the EU executives respond to these phenomena. Our core aim is to map and investigate the state-of-affairs in the supranational executive communication in a novel communication environment. While reviewer’s suggestions provides inspiration and deserves further attention, they would be out of the scope for this paper and we cannot pay due attention due to lack of resources and word limit in this paper. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 2** | Write your response here |
| Embedding the results within existing scholarship and focusing on the most important ones would generally increase accessibility and clarity of the manuscript’s message. Some technical discussions, such as the pre-processing of tweets, could be moved to the appendix | In line with the suggestion, we now have streamlined and compartmentalized our discussion of pre-processing and other technical details of the analysis. However, to the best of our knowledge, most of the extant literature on the public communication of the EU are not related to the supranational executive’s communication in social media platforms. While some of the previous works such as Altides (2009) may offer guidance on the state-of-affairs on social media, they are more related to the internal dynamics of the communicators and their process of creating the communication rather than their communication. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 3** |  |
| (1) The analysis comprises both personal accounts’ and ‘institutional accounts’. I missed a theoretical justification for this choice. Why are personal accounts included but differentiated from institutional accounts? After all, if there is no such difference, why not aggregate them? A short discussion about who exactly is assumed to communicate over these accounts and whether there are different communicative logics involved would help the reader to understand the choice. If there is no important difference, the clarify of the findings might be easily improved by moving the disaggregated analysis to the appendix and discussing only the aggregated values in the manuscript. If there is an important difference between them, addressing it would underline the relevance of the findings. Moreover, I also have some empirically reservations: The authors seem to have used the institutional and personal accounts existing in May 2021 as a starting point for their analysis (p. 3). If this is correct, then there seems to be a problem especially with regards to personal accounts. While the vast majority of EU institutions likely existed in 2009, presumably not all persons in office today worked for the EU for the full period. This implies that the share of personal accounts likely increased over time. The manuscript differentiates between institutional and personal accounts and finds major differences between them, including the average number of tweets per day. If over time the share of personal accounts increased, this likely negatively affected the average number of tweets by supranational EU actors. In addition, when personal accounts were not created after assuming office in the respective institution but already existing before, the analysis would falsely count at this point in time unrelated persons as supranational EU actors. | We would like to thank the reviewer for this insightful comment. We now have established a new section on data and indicators that presents our reasoning and justifications on our choices of collecting data. In addition, we have revised our analysis by limiting the data from personal accounts between the date they assumed their EU office and the collection date while keeping data on institutional communication full length. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 4** |  |
| Regarding the selected samples, I think that, first, the manuscript would benefit from a more explicit discussion what the benchmarks represent in theoretical terms and what we learn from comparing them. Relatedly, with regards to the IO sample, I would suggest listing the selected IOs and justify why exactly they were selected. Why look at IOs that cover a similar number of issues and not issue specific IOs or IOs with fewer delegated authority? Why are IOs’ tweets aggregated and not treated as separately. Finally, I would ask the authors to clarify whether the other three samples also span the full period from 2009-2021. | We now address the questions posed by the reviewer more in detail in a new section on dataset. In short, all datasets cover the full population of messages from these accounts since their creation date. If one of the accounts are created earlier than 2009, data on the account extends before 2009. We ensure comparability by reporting our results by smallest common time unit, i.e per day. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 5** |  |
| There are several analytical choices that are not – or merely implicitly – backed by theoretical considerations. Engaging more explicitly with the relevant literatures and theory might – in my view – help the manuscript to get a conceptual grip on its important empirical findings and thereby demonstrate their relevance. For instance, I was wondering why the analysis covers the period from 2009 to May 3, 2021. Moreover, I wondered why the manuscript focuses on volume, clarity, and media usage of as well as user engagement with supranational EU actors’ tweets. While some of these dimensions seem to be linked with the “two cardinal duties” of communication transparency and publicity (p. 2), the manuscript could be more explicit in explaining its focus on theoretical grounds | We thank the reviewer for guiding our manuscript in this direction. We now have added a theory section that explicitly lays the ground for analytical choices. As for some of the choices regarding dataset, such as the time period, we merely obtain the full population of messages. This covers the time-period between 2009 and 2021. For other accounts that are created prior to 2009, the data on them goes back further. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 6** |  |
| With regards to the chosen measures, I also have some questions and suggestions: The manuscript relies on an impressive array of indicators for clarity (the Flesch reading ease score, a familiarity score, as well as verb-to-noun-ratio), multimedia engagement (pictures, videos, emojis/symbols, and external links – by the way: do emojis and links really count as media?), and user engagement (likes, retweets, quotes, and replies). While the amount of collected information is impressive, the number of indicators renders a clear interpretation difficult. To arrive at a clearer and stronger message, the manuscript could either focus on the most important indicator(s) for each concept or construct an index. | No clue how to respond to this… |
| **Comment/Suggestion 7** |  |
| I was not convinced by the value of the variation within the sample of supranational EU actors as well as the multivariate analysis about the impact of their tweets (p. 10). Regarding the latter, the manuscript could either put more emphasis on the analysis and address the question when supranational EU actors communicate successfully on twitter – or restrict itself to assuming that specific features are particularly successful on twitter and show how often supranational EU actors use them as compared to other types of actors. | We now address the reviewer’s comment in the introduction section more in detail. As our aim is to both to document the state-of-affairs of the communication and understand to what extend the state of communication influence citizen engagement, we believe that refocusing our study to only one of them would reduce the contribution of the paper. We believe this is the case for two reasons. In the extant literature, we are not aware of any studies that extensively documents how the EU executives communicate on social media. By providing this, our aim is to build foundation for future scholarly work. Our second motivation relates to the theme of the special issue and broader “communication deficit” literature. We would like to contribute to the communication deficit literature by showing how state of the communication attracts attention from citizens since this is the theme of the special issue. |
| **Comment/Suggestion 8** |  |
| The manuscript could profit from situating its findings in the literature. | We thank the reviewer for pointing out this weakness in our paper. We now elaborate more on the similarities and differences between our results and previous work such as Rauh (2020) and Rauh (2021) both in results and conclusion section |
| **Comment/Suggestion 9** |  |
| What additional information might be of interest to get a better impression of supranational EU actors’ twitter communication (e.g., sentiment or topic)? What might explain similarities and differences across national executives, IO actors, and supranational EU actors? What might explain similarities and differences across different supranational EU actors or over time? What are the consequences of supranational EU actors’ communication on twitter? Relatedly, the discussion of the results’ normative implications might be more pronounced: Is it overall good or bad news that supranational EU actors embrace twitter? | We are grateful for reviewer’s this comment to explore further research areas. We incorporated reviewer’s suggestions in our conclusion section and elaborated on possible fruitful research venues. However, we refrain from making any normative judgement of the communication quality. Instead we would like to offer our results on the supranational EU executive communication along with benchmarks, thus allow the reader to judge the quality in the light of context provided by these benchmark datasets. |

add more lines if necessary