Revised Introduction:

# Original:

The European Union (EU) has an increasingly precarious relationship with the citizens it governs. The politicization of European integration in public debates has markedly increased in recent years: incidences such as the failure of constitutional referenda in 2005, the raging debates about supranational authority during the Euro- and Schengen crises after 2009 and 2015, the infamous Brexit decision of 2016, and more generally, the rise of Eurosceptic mobilization in national and European election campaigns clearly illustrate that the EU can no longer rely on a permissive consensus among the wider citizenry (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Rauh, 2021a). In such controversial debates, the EU’s rather detached supranational institutions are frequently addressed, often as targets of blame-shifting (Gerhards et al., 2009; Harteveld et al., 2018).

Supranational actors, however, are not only at the receiving end of such controversial debates. In principle, they can try to defend themselves in public, possibly nurturing popular EU legitimacy by giving an account of how and why they exercise their political authority. Therefore, when faced with public politicization, political institutions beyond the nation state have incentives to invest in public communication (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018, 2020).

Yet, supranational EU institutions face notable obstacles in communicating with the wider European citizenry. Part of these obstacles are internal; public communication is often subject to internal conflicts and competition over limited resources (Altides, 2009; Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Hartlapp et al., 2014: ch. 9). In institutions with delegated powers that often involve high levels of expertise, consensus-orientation, and diplomatic restraint, public outreach has traditionally not been a primary concern (Brüggemann, 2010; Meyer, 1999). When facing controversial public debates, moreover, supranational institutions may have incentives to avoid clear communication in their strategic efforts to calm controversial debates (Biegoń, 2013; Bressanelli et al., 2020; De Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Schimmelfennig, 2020). In effect, supranational communication efforts are often illegible for the wider public (Rauh, 2021b; Rauh et al., 2020).

Supranational institutions also face notable communication obstacles in the broader communication environment. Although supranational institutions are tasked with defending the European interest in their policy areas, mass-mediated public spheres tend to be fractured along national borders, languages, and media systems, thus forcing supranational institutions to communicate via national media (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2014; H.-J. Trenz, 2004; Walter, 2015). National media are, however, rather selective in covering EU affairs, as traditional journalistic selection logics are often partial to national interests, domestic executives, and their challengers (De Vreese, 2001; De Vreese et al., 2006; H. Trenz, 2008). Media coverage of the EU is then primarily driven by controversial and contested events such as summits of the heads of state and government, European Parliament (EP) elections, and scandals on the European level (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Thus, supranational institutions have a hard time getting their message across via traditional media channels.

Given these limitations, social media platforms should be promising communication channels for supranational actors. With a view to external constraints, social media allow citizens to engage with content beyond national boundaries (Bossetta et al., 2017), thus potentially ameliorating adverse effects of fractured public spheres. Furthermore, social media imbue users with a degree of gatekeeping power (Wallace, 2018). The decentralized structure of these platforms, where users themselves can choose which messages will be allowed and amplified in the information environment, gives supranational EU actors some freedom to determine which issues to highlight and how to best generate engagement. This allows them to partially circumvent traditional media selection logics, generate attention on their preferred topics, and reach out to European citizens more directly. Moreover, social media platforms, specifically Twitter, can act as a ‘double-barrelled gun’ for reaching out to the citizenry: recent research shows that journalists tend to pick up tweets from political actors (especially highly engaging tweets) and incorporate them in news articles (Cage et al., 2020; Oschatz et al., 2021), boosting their communication potential further.

Social media’s attractiveness to supranational communicators extends beyond the potential to reach a wider audience and includes time, cost, and scope efficiencies. Firstly, It takes mere minutes to set up an account and they are rather easy to maintain, thus partially mitigating the effect of internal competition over limited resources. In addition, platforms usually reward clear and concise messaging which are arguably cheaper to produce than press releases. Secondly, the platforms usually reward clear and concise messaging which are arguably cheaper to produce than press releases. Thirdly, social media allow multimedia features that are also beneficial for accessible and engaging communication. Lastly, social media provide a low-hurdle and continuous information source for users. Unlike official webpages, social media do not require the user to consciously search for information about supranational activity in the EU. Users may encounter EU messages in their timelines from their connections on social media or they could simply follow respective accounts by a simple click.

Realistically, social media are hardly the panacea to all the public communication ailments of the EU. Nevertheless, their key features should make them an attractive additional communication channel for supranational institutions willing to defend themselves in a politicized climate. Naturally, there are many confounders in realizing the full potential of social media platforms for nurturing popular legitimacy, but there are two cardinal duties that fall on the communicator for this purpose: creating *transparency* and *publicity* (Curtin & Meijer, 2006; Hüller, 2007). *Transparency* means that public communication makes political decisions, processes, issues, and responsibilities visible to the wider audience. Via transparency, public communication provides the addressees of political authority with the necessary information to make an informed decision in democratic feed-back processes. Yet putting such information into the ether is not enough, citizenry must consume and engage with the information and integrate them into their political knowledge structure. In other words, communication needs to generate *publicity*. In this constellation, publicity refers to the degree to which the audience engages with the issues, acts and processes of the political system. Extant research shows that the key precondition for publicity is the understandability of the political messages (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Tolochko et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, we ask: to what extent and how do supranational EU actors communicate on social media?

While insightful theoretical analyses and cases studies of the EU on social media exist (e.g. Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Zaiotti, 2020), large-scale systematic evidence on the *actual social media behaviour of supranational actors* is rare. Extant studies focus on EU actors with direct electoral accountability, such as governmental representatives in the Council or EP members (European Parliament. Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services., 2021; Fazekas et al., 2021; Haßler et al., 2021; Nulty et al., 2016; Umit, 2017). This article, in contrast, studies the public communication of executive supranational institutions and the individuals heading them. We focus on Twitter, a leading social media platform that has become an integral part of the political communication environment for mobilization and campaigning in the last decade (Jungherr, 2016; Segesten & Bossetta, 2017; Stier et al., 2018). We analyze the executive supranational communication on Twitter in terms of its volume, readability, and publicity with automated content analysis. Our corpus consists of the full population of public messages (tweets) issued by 115 supranational executive accounts in the 2009-2021 period. To put this supranational Twitter activity into perspective, we then benchmark our respective indicators against random tweets as well as full population of tweets from the United Kingdom (UK) executive branch and international institutions such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

This hitherto under-researched area is addressed in this encompassing description of supranational EU activity on a key communication medium; we show that a drastically increasing volume of supranational messaging often outperforms domestic and international organizations. While the text of supranational messages is comparatively hard to access for average citizens, supranational actors champion non-textual communication, enriching their messages with visual content, external links, and meta-linguistic elements such as emojis much more often than other executives do. In terms of publicity, while the number of followers has been strongly increasing for some supranational EU actors, the rates of direct user engagement remain low in absolute terms. They stay within the range observed for domestic and international actors. Against the backdrop of public politicization and communication deficits, our results hint that supranational EU executives try to use the communication potential of social media, yet important fruitful avenues for further research remain.

## Revised:

The European Union (EU) has an increasingly precarious relationship with the citizens it governs. The politicization of European integration in public debates has markedly increased in recent years: incidences such as the failure of constitutional referenda in 2005, the raging debates about supranational authority during the Euro- and Schengen crises after 2009 and 2015, the infamous Brexit decision of 2016, and more generally, the rise of Eurosceptic mobilization in national and European election campaigns clearly illustrate that the EU can no longer rely on a permissive consensus among the wider citizenry (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Rauh, 2021a). In such controversial debates, the EU’s rather detached supranational institutions are frequently addressed in national debates by members state politicians, often as the scape-goat for unfavourable policies in an attempt to shift the blame (Gerhards et al., 2009; Harteveld et al., 2018; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2020; Rittberger et al., 2017; Schlipphak & Treib, 2017; Traber et al., 2020; Vasilopoulou et al., 2014)

Previous research shows that supranational authorities are not only on the receiving end of these debates. They are often rather responsive and enthusiastic about engaging in public communication in the face of politicization by professionalizing their communication and adopting new channels such as social media platforms(Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018, 2020). Despite their enthusiasm, however, the EU authorities face major internal and external obstacles in public communication. Internally, the EU public communication is often subject to conflicts and competition over limited resources (Altides, 2009; Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Hartlapp et al., 2014: ch. 9). In institutions with delegated powers that often involve high levels of expertise, consensus-orientation, and diplomatic restraint, public outreach has traditionally not been a primary concern (Brüggemann, 2010; Meyer, 1999). When facing controversial public debates, moreover, supranational institutions may have incentives to avoid clear communication in their strategic efforts to calm controversial debates (Biegoń, 2013; Bressanelli et al., 2020; De Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Moschella et al., 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2020). In effect, supranational communication efforts are often illegible for the wider public (Rauh, 2021b; Rauh et al., 2020).

Externally, previous research shows that the EU public communication has hard time delivering their message to the wider public via traditional mass media. Although supranational institutions are tasked with defending the European interest in their policy areas, mass-mediated public spheres tend to be fractured along national borders, languages, and media systems, thus forcing supranational institutions to communicate via national media (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2014; H.-J. Trenz, 2004; Walter, 2015). National media are, however, rather selective in covering EU affairs, as traditional journalistic selection logics are often partial to national interests, domestic executives, and their challengers (De Vreese, 2001; De Vreese et al., 2006; H. Trenz, 2008). Media coverage of the EU is then primarily driven by controversial and contested events such as summits of the heads of state and government, European Parliament (EP) elections, and scandals on the European level (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Thus, supranational institutions have a hard time getting their message across via traditional media channels.

Against this backdrop, we pose two questions. First, we ask how and to what extent do supranational EU actors communicate on social media and focus on comprehensibility and linguistic style of their communication on Twitter. Then we turn our attention to the influence of these factors on the individuals’ engagement with EU politics on the platform. While insightful theoretical analyses and cases studies of the EU on social media exist (e.g. Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Zaiotti, 2020), we know considerable little about the quality of the actual communication by the supranational authorities of the EU on social media and its potential relationship with citizen engagement with the EU politics on these platforms. Extant studies focus on EU actors with direct electoral accountability, such as governmental representatives in the Council or EP members (European Parliament. Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services., 2021; Fazekas et al., 2021; Haßler et al., 2021; Nulty et al., 2016; Umit, 2017). Our study aims to contribute to this literature in two ways. First of all, we aim to gain insights into current state of affairs on the EU public communication on a novel platforms with an comprehensive description. Such a description enables us to learn more about how and to what extent the EU’s communication ailments are persistent in a new communication environment.Secondly, examining the association between communication style and engagement with the EU public communication can help us public communication’s potential to assist with the EU’s legitimacy problems.

To these ends, we analyse the executive supranational communication on Twitter in terms of its volume, readability, and publicity with automated content analysis by utilizing full population of their messages on Twitter. We then proceed to benchmark their communication to their peers; national governments and other regional organizations such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This hitherto under-researched area is addressed in this encompassing description of supranational EU activity on a key communication medium; we show that a drastically increasing volume of supranational messaging often outperforms domestic and international organizations. While the text of supranational messages is comparatively hard to access for average citizens, supranational actors champion non-textual communication, enriching their messages with visual content, external links, and meta-linguistic elements such as emojis much more often than other executives do. In terms of publicity, while the number of followers has been strongly increasing for some supranational EU actors, the rates of direct user engagement remain low in absolute terms. They stay within the range observed for domestic and international actors. Against the backdrop of public politicization and communication deficits, our results hint that supranational EU executives try to use the communication potential of social media, yet important fruitful avenues for further research remain.

The article structured in 6 sections. The next section elaborates on the theoretical foundations of the study and how public communication can be expected to contribute the management of politicization and legitimacy. The third section lays down our choice of platform, accounts, data, method and rationale behind them. The fourth section focuses on the results of our analysis and their discussion. The final section offers insights into advantages and challenges of studying the EU public communication and citizen engagement with the EU politics on social media platforms as well as limitations of this study and identifies further fruitful research avenues.