Revised conclusion:

# Manuscript:

In the face of public politicization, popular legitimacy challenges, and notable communication deficits, social media promise to be an attractive additional communication channel for the detached executive supranational actors of the European Union. Thus far, however, an aggregate picture on how these actors use social media has been lacking. This bird’s eye perspective of the full population of the more than one million messages from 115 Twitter accounts in the 2009-2021 period underlines that supranational EU actors put considerable effort in public communication via social media.

Firstly, our encompassing description shows that the volume of supranational social media communication has grown markedly since 2010, having reached or even exceeding the number of social media messaging that national executives or international organizations with comparable policy scopes provide. Second, several of the observed patterns suggest a growing professionalization of supranational social media usage. Supranational actors make extensive use of Twitter’s multi-media features, engage in cross-posting social media content, and try to garner attention to their own online resources outside of Twitter. Supranational EU actors are in no way inferior but often better than domestic and international executives on Twitter in this regard. Third, this communicative investment seems to pay off in terms of publicity. The number of users subscribing to supranational EU accounts has been growing on average, and in dramatic ways for some actors. Direct user engagement with supranational messages on the platform is not particularly high in absolute terms, but by and large corresponds to the engagement rates one can observe for executive messages form national and international actors.

Yet, our encompassing description also contains warning signs regarding the possible transparency and publicity effects of supranational communication. As has been found for other communication channels, the textual content of supranational communication is characterised by comparatively high syntactical complexity, less familiar vocabulary, and a rather nominal style that may obfuscate political agency. On this dimension, social media communication from domestic executive actors in the UK provides much clearer messaging in comparison. We also must note that the follower numbers and the engagement rates are hardly equally distributed across supranational communicators. They rather concentrate on a few selected institutional, and especially high-profile individual accounts of supranational actors. Generally, on most of our indicators, marked variation within the sample of supranational communicators and messages can be observed.

Our bird’s eye view indicates that social media are becoming increasingly relevant for supranational public communication, yet this is hardly the final step to understand the nexus of public communication, social media platforms and popular legitimacy. Whether and how the communication we describe affects the precarious societal legitimacy of supranational decision-making requires further analyses. For scholars willing to dig deeper into this type of data, the patterns we show provide four informative points. First, the sobering findings on textual understandability highlight the need to dissect supranational messages further in terms of the claims that supranational actors make, including their relation to actual political activity. Whether these public messages are mere propaganda or genuine, transparent political accountability reporting would help us understand to what extent public communication contributes to or possibly undermines the popular legitimacy of supranational actors. Second, our qualitative examples for the most engaging tweets highlight variation across externally politicized topics and suggests that topical contents of messages may provide valuable hints on the publicity that supranational messages generate. Third, our findings highlight that especially visual content is part and parcel of supranational public communication, requiring additional forms of content analyses. Fourth and finally, the clearer communication and higher engagement rates that accounts of individual supranational actors generate highlight that the personalization of EU politics can be meaningfully observed on Twitter.

Finally, we would like to draw attention to several notable challenges pertaining to studying citizen engagement with European politics on social as we encountered in our study. Cardinal among these challenges is perhaps the volume and variation the data entails. The volume is a Janus-faced characteristics of social media data. On the one hand, access to such vast amount of data, especially from transparent platforms such as Twitter, allows researchers to study full population of unit of analysis. In our case, this is all the tweets issued by selected accounts. Concomitantly, this allows researchers to obtain a less biased picture of the phenomena of interest. On the other hand, managing such large volumes of data entails major logistical problems. As the volume increases, storing, sharing and analysing the data becomes much more challenging. In our case, this reflected as waiting for several hours, if not a couple of days, to obtain descriptive information from our dataset. There are many convenient and free-to-use services with regards to storage and sharing the data. However, such free-of-charge services are not intended for large amounts of data and may take some creativity and ingenuity from the researchers. In our case, we have circumvented these problems by locally saving our dataset and sharing our analysis scripts via Github. Another attending problem of the volume relates to processing. Platforms offer such large datasets in formats that are unconventional in political science and similar fields such as JSON. Working with such formats often requires the researcher to be well-versed in data structures and storage techniques. As we are not trained computer scientists, this proved to be a learning moment for us. Finally, as the European politics transcends national boundaries so does the engagement with it on social media. This manifested itself as linguistic diversity in our study. Like in any other text data, most analysis methods have limited capacity to handle multi-lingual corpus, even more so when the corpus includes meta-linguistic features such as hashtags and emojis. Studying political phenomena in resource rich languages such as English, German and French is rather easy. Unfortunately, doing the same thing with resource scarce languages such as Slavic languages is extremely challenging as available techniques and methods are very limited and comparable. We hope that in the near future these challenges will be eliminated by the future generation of scholars.