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Article

**A bird’s eye view: How supranational EU actors use Twitter.**

Sina F. Özdemir1,\* and Christian Rauh2

1 Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology Trondheim; E-Mail: [sina.ozdemir@ntnu.no](mailto:sina.ozdemir@ntnu.no)

2 Research Unit Global Governance, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany; E-Mail: [christian.rauh@wzb.eu](mailto:christian.rauh@wzb.eu); Web: [www.christian-rauh.eu](http://www.christian-rauh.eu)

\* Corresponding author

**Abstract**

Against the politicization of European integration, public communication of the European Union matters. Especially for usually rather detached supranational executives, social media platforms offer unique opportunities to communicate to and to engage European citizens. Yet, how do these actors actually use social media? This article provides a bird’s eye view and quantitatively describes more than one million tweets from 115 supranational EU accounts in the 2009-2021 period, benchmarking key message characteristics against large samples of tweets from national executives, international organizations, and random twitter users. We show that supranational Twitter activity has grown markedly, relies strongly on the multimedia features the platform offers, and go beyond the messages of other political executives on many dimensions. However, we also find that interaction with other Twitter users comparatively rare and somewhat concentrated, while the high complexity of the supranational messages’ textual content limits engagement of other users. We discuss these findings in the light of the legitimacy and public accountability challenges that supranational decision-making in the EU faces.

**Keywords**

European Union; social media; political communication; politicization; text analysis; ...

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**1. Introduction: Why we should care about supranational Twitter activity**

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. This indicates that the EU has a veritable popular legitimacy problem. 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 partially successful 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 and Zürn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Rauh 2021a). In such controversial debates, especially the EU’s rather detached supranational institutions are frequently addressed and become targets of blame-shifting (Gerhards *et al.* 2009).

Supranational actors, however, are not only at the receiving end of such controversial debates. In principle, they can try to defend themselves in public, trying to nurture popular legitimacy of the EU by giving account of how they exercise their political authority. Faced with public politicization, thus, also political institutions beyond the level of the nation state have discovered the need for more attention to public communication (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2020).

Yet, supranational EU institutions face notable obstacles in effectively communicating with the wider European citizenry. Part of these obstacles are internal. Designed as institutions with delegated powers that often involve high levels of expertise, consensus-orientation, and diplomatic restraint, supranational institutions traditionally did not give much priority to public outreach (Brüggemann 2010; Meyer 1999). When facing controversial public debates supranational institutions may also have incentives to avoid clear communication in their strategic efforts to calm controversial debates (Biegoń 2013; Bressanelli *et al.* 2020; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Schimmelfennig 2020). In effect, supranational communication efforts are thus often rather inaccessible to the wider public as they use highly-codified, complex technocratic language ladened with jargon (Rauh *et al.* 2019; Rauh 2021b). Moreover, public communication efforts is often subject to internal conflicts and competition over limited resources inside these institutions (Altides 2009; Bijsmans and Altides 2007; Hartlapp *et al.* 2014: ch. 9).

Beyond internal constraints, supranational institutions face notable communication obstacles in their environment as well. While supranational institutions are tasked to defend the European interest in their policy areas, mass-mediated public spheres tend to be fractured along national borders, languages, and media systems (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Risse 2014; Trenz 2004; Walter 2015). National media are rather selective in covering EU affairs where traditional journalistic selection logics are often biased to national interests, as well as domestic executives and their challengers (De Vreese 2001; De Vreese *et al.* 2006; Trenz 2008). Media coverage of the EU is also primarily driven by controversial and contested events such as summits of the heads of state and government, EP elections, and scandals on the European level (Boomgaarden *et al.* 2013). In the environment of traditional media systems, thus, supranational institutions have a hard time to get their message across.

While they are not the panacea to all the public communication ailments of the EU, social media platforms offer opportunities for reproduction of popular legitimacy via public communication for the EU. First, social media have the potential to transcend national boundaries by enabling the citizens to engage a diverse set of content beyond nationally generated ones (Bossetta et al., 2017). This, in turn, creates an opportunity for the EU to reach out to the citizenry without the limitations of traditional communication channels. Secondly, social media platforms imbue users with a degree of gatekeeping power (Wallace, 2018). The decentralized gatekeeping structure in social media platforms, where users themselves can choose which topic will be allowed to the information environment, permits the EU to determine which issues to inject into the information environment, thus enabling the EU to circumvent the editorial selection of journalists to a certain extent. Thirdly, social media platforms are very cost-efficient tools of communication for communicators. It takes mere minutes to set up an account and they are often very easy to maintain. Lastly, social media provide low hurdle and continuous information source for the users. Unlike static webpages of web 2.0, social media does not require the user to consciously and actively go to a website to learn about the EU. Users only need to follow the relevant social media accounts to stay in contact.

Against this backdrop, we set out to investigate the EU supranational actors[[1]](#footnote-1) on social media platforms, specifically Twitter. The goal of this article is two folds. The first aim is to establish necessary and sufficient conditions for the different public communication practices to reproduce the popular legitimacy. The second aim is to investigate how and to what extend the EU supranational public communication meets these criteria. To this end, building on extant public accountability and communication deficit literatures, we focus on three sets of indicators. First, citizen engagement requires understandability, and we quantify reading ease and word familiarity of EU tweets. Second, engagement requires clarification of political action, and we exploit part-of-speech structures to see whether the tweets clarify who does what. Third, engagement requires responsiveness, and we quantify the amount of two-way communication by the EU accounts utilizing retweets and replies by these accounts. These indicators, their variation across different EU accounts, and benchmarks from random tweet samples by national citizens, tweets from various international organizations and the UK government, provide a novel empirical perspective on the quality of the EU public communication on Twitter.

This article is organized in six sections. In the next section, we review the extant literature on legitimacy of the EU and sketch out how different modes of public communication on social media can help with the popular legitimacy. In the third, section we turn our attention to the necessary and sufficient conditions for this goal. The fourth section presents our research design, data and methods. In the fifth section, we demonstrate our results and evaluate our findings vis-à-vis necessary and sufficient conditions. The last section concludes the article with a discussion of possible ways to improve public communication on social media in the light of our findings and offer further research venues.

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Use an ampersand (&) for citations inside parentheses and the word “and” for citations outside of parentheses, as shown in the examples below:

* After the intervention, children increased in the number of books read per week (Smith & Wexwood, 2010).
* Smith and Wexwood (2010) reported that after the intervention, children increased in the number of books read per week.

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1. We refer to the individuals and institutions by supranational actors. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)