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Complex language and attitudes towards the European Union

Communicating European Commission Infringement Proceedings

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Abstract

The European Union is not only the supranational institution with the most influence on national politics, but it is also one of the most publicly criticised. Faced with this increasing pressure, the EU needs to legitimise its' actions to the general public. However, one crucial barrier to these attempts is the inherent difficulty of communicating the often highly technical decisions of the European Commission. As a result, communication attempts of the European Commission are exceedingly complex. What are the effects of this complex messaging on attitudes towards decisions of the European Commission?

Public opinion research has shown a large gap of understanding of the EU between highly educated and less educated citizens. This knowledge gap is further increased by the complex language used by the European Commission. This state of affairs is troubling for the EU. Possibly, complex messaging could increase aversion towards the EU and strengthen perceptions of the technocratic nature of the institution. In a preregistered survey experiment in Germany (N = 1200), I investigate the effects of complex messaging on attitudes towards two infringement procedures against Germany instigated by the European Commission related to two directives: The Habitats Directive and the Electricity and Gas Directive.

I show that more accessible language could markedly improve support for the infringement procedures. This effect is especially strong for supporters of the EU and political sophisticates. This study's results could help understand the conditions under which self-legitimation strategies of EU institutional actors are likely to be effective.

1. Introduction

The European Commission (EUC), as the executive branch of the European Union, has the responsibility to ensure that member states comply with European Law. Enforcement and monitoring strategies to enforce compliance include the possibility to file an infringement procedure against a member state with the European Court of Justice (ECJ). In practice, this possibility is an especially important and powerful tool to ensure member states' compliance (Börzel, 2003), which the EUC almost exclusively uses. However, through the process of politicisation of the EU in general, these infringement procedures are increasingly discussed in domestic public spheres. Especially politicised examples are infringement procedures meant to target democratic backsliding in member states. Even infringement procedures in less central areas can become politicised when domestic resistance occurs (Schlipphak & Treib, 2017). Faced with these new challenges to its legitimacy from domestic political elites, the EUC might need to explain its decisions and actions.

Recent research shows that the EU and other Global Governance Institutions (GGIs) engage in self-legitimation (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018). However, the EUC only explains infringement procedures in highly complicated and technical ways since the general communication style of the EUC is highly technocratic (Pansardi & Tortola, 2021; Rauh, 2021). In this paper, I investigate the consequences of this communication style using a population-based survey experiment in Germany. Through an experimental manipulation of the language complexity of EUC press statements, I investigate the effects of simplifying language on attitudes towards infringement procedures against Germany initiated by the EUC. Based on theories from social psychology and inspired by recent advancements in text analysis in political science, I argue that such a change of communication styles could improve attitudes even when the content of the message stays identical. I also test for heterogeneous effects of this intervention.

Overall, I observe two important patterns. First, infringement procedures receive more support when they are communicated in an easy fashion. Such easier language also does not lead to a polarisation of opinions on the issue. Second, I find some evidence that easier language could contribute to closing the "education gap" in EU attitudes on this topic by markedly increasing support

for the infringement procedures among respondents with low levels of formal education. Through additional tests, I argue that this change occurs because it makes the topic of the infringement procedures more accessible to respondents by reducing the negative reaction that people experience when encountering complex language in texts.

This project contributes to the literature on the politicisation and self-legitimation of GGIs and research on political sophistication interested in the ways of communicating complex political subjects. Deviating from past research on framing and cue effects, this project focuses on the communication style over the content of the communication itself. To my knowledge, this topic has not been studied in the area of EU research. Additionally, this project also speaks directly to the practical topic of EU communication. Given that the EU and its institutions are distant and not well understood by most citizens, I argue that effective and simple direct communication by the EU is essential. It is especially important in the case of infringement procedures due to the high potential for political conflict inherent in such interventions into member states' domestic politics.

2. Communication by the European Commission

Over the last two decades, the EU has experienced what researchers call *politicisation*. As the public visibility and the impact of the EUC has increased substantively, it has become clear that the EUC is not just a technical agent of member state interests that enacts joint decisions but a political actor in its own right. As the scope of EU treaties increases, so does the reach of the EUC, especially in cases where member states go against the stipulations of the treaties. The monitoring and enforcement of the EU treaties can put EU member states in direct conflict with the EUC as member states will publicly oppose the initiation of infringement proceedings. These compliance-enforcement mechanisms, therefore, create opportunities for domestic political elites to mobilise the public against the EU institutions. As Schlipphak and Treib (2017) describe, governmental actors seek to avoid responsibility for the problem, which started the infringement procedure by casting doubt on the legitimacy of the EU intervention. This allows domestic actors to claim that the EU is responsible for domestic problems or to claim that

rules were made without their approval to profit from eurosceptic voters. This problem is exemplified by the Polish and the Hungarian governments' recent reactions to their respective infringement proceedings.

These responses to compliance enforcement by the EUC show that governmental actors can shift the blame for a domestic problem to the EU, which is particularly effective in the case of external interventions (Heinkelmann-Wild & Jankauskas, 2020)). Blame shifting in response to EUC interventions is possible because most citizens know very little about the EU institutions, the content of the treaties or the compliance procedures (Clark, 2014). Although this might also be the case for national political institutions, knowledge about the EU is much lower than knowledge about domestic politics. Many people lack even a minimal understanding of EU politics (Rapeli, 2014). In 2018, for example, shortly after the European migrant crisis, only 35% of German respondents knew that the Dublin Process determines the EU member state responsible for processing incoming refugees (GESIS-Leibniz-Institut Für Sozialwissenschaften, 2019). In this situation, domestic national actors can successfully shift the blame for the migrant crisis to the EU (Heinkelmann-Wild & Jankauskas, 2020).

This example illustrates that the high institutional complexity of the EU, the low levels of knowledge about the EU among citizens and the active blame-shifting strategies by some domestic actors severely threaten the public legitimacy of the EUC infringement procedures. A low public legitimacy of EU infringement procedures means that member states have fewer incentives to comply with the EUC decisions. As with all other GGIs, the effectiveness of the EUC rests not only on its material power or its resources, which are generally very low but on the perceived legitimacy of its decisions. Without high levels of legitimacy, the EUC will be unable to function because the EUC can no longer rely on a permissive consensus among citizens. Therefore, some argue that the EUC is increasingly pressured to explain its decisions to the general public (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018). The EUC, therefore, needs to engage in self-legitimation to counterbalance communicative acts that aim to de-legitimize its compliance procedures.

However, the EUC does not seem to think it needs to defend its decisions to the general public. As several investigations have revealed, the EUC did not focus on communicating its actions in the past (Rauh et al., 2020). Even today, direct communication with citizens is often an afterthought. The cause of this

position could be that the EUC does not see itself as a political actor but rather as a technocratic, expertise-oriented agency whose decisions and actions are simply the direct consequence of member states' collective bargaining outcomes (Rauh & Zürn, 2019). The EUC then only seeks to create the best outcome for all member states in accordance with the EU treaties. The EUC, in that sense, relies on a technocratic narrative to legitimate its actions. This narrative is meant to communicate that an optimal solution for any political problem can be found through the use of expertise.

Some researchers argue that this output legitimization is the most important source of legitimization for the EU and, in turn, for the EUC. Therefore, this narrative would achieve its goal as long as citizens perceive the EUC to benefit them and their country. Following this logic, infringement procedures by the EUC are accepted when they are necessary to achieve the most efficient outcome for all member states. However, the low level of knowledge about the issues relevant to EUC infringement procedures means, that the topic is very abstract to most citizens. For that reason, domestic actors could easily react and de-legitimise such an infringement procedure by claiming that the infringement procedures are unnecessary and go against the citizens' interests. Blaming the EUC and creating public opposition to an infringement procedure can result in a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the EUC. Historically, the EUC has answered such challenges to its' existence by putting forward its technocratic narratives to the public.

What is the consequence of this communication strategy and the perceived role that the EUC employs? One key mode of communication used by the EUC is the press statement. As Rauh shows, the EUC uses highly complex language in its press statements (2021). These press statements use very unfamiliar words, are difficult to read and frequently use indirect speech. Compared to press statements from domestic political actors, those published by the EUC are much more complex and difficult. Pansardi and Tortola come to a similar conclusion using different methods (2021). Using a qualitative set of indicators to measure technocratic language, they also find that the EUC uses highly technocratic language. Additionally, they show that the complexity of EUC press statements has been rising over the last decade. This last finding is especially surprising because the politicisation literature would expect a renewed effort to communicate effectively using less complex language to counterbalance the de-legitimisation

efforts prevalent in the European public sphere. It seems as if the EUC does not adapt its communication style to the changing political environment. Instead, the EUC only communicates the decision to start an infringement procedure in a very complex and technocratic way, even though these decisions have a particularly high potential for politicising effects.

However, it is equally possible that the EUC uses this communication style strategically. Instead of simplifying its direct messaging, the EUC could opt to communicate in even more complex and technical ways. The EUC then hopes that complex language leads to de-politicisation and de-polarisation. By portraying itself as a body of experts through terminology-heavy and complicated language, the EUC could signal that it is not a political actor. Consequently, its actions, such as starting an infringement procedure, should not be judged as appropriate or inappropriate because they are simply an expert judgement and, therefore, not part of any political discussion. However, it could be possible that this strategy backfires severely. Because the complex and technocratic language obfuscates the reasons for an infringement procedure, it allows domestic political actors to "fill in the blanks". The level of knowledge among the public about the infringement procedure in question is already very low. Complex communication will not improve this situation but only worsen it by allowing domestic actors to play the "blame game" without repercussions. Clearly, such assumptions about the EUCs goals and priorities are based on speculation. Nevertheless, these two conflicting strategies –communicating to the public in easy ways to explain the position of the EUC and communicating in complex ways to de-politicise the EUC– are equally plausible, and they could both be effective.

What is the effect of the complex language used by the EUC on citizens' attitudes? Could the highly complex communication of decisions with a high politicisation potential lead to a strong public backlash? Or does this communication style lead to less politicisation and less opposition to infringement procedures by the EUC? To answer this question, I will refer to research from the disciplines of political communication and social psychology.

3. Complex language

Most research on the effects of complex language is trying to measure how complex political texts are, how that complexity evolved over time (Benoit et al., 2019) or why political actors modify their language to be either less or more complex (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Schoonvelde et al., 2019). These approaches focus on the inherent difficulty of defining abstract concepts such as *difficulty* or *sophistication*. By investigating different aspects of written texts, such as the number of total words, the length of words, domain-specific jargon or sentence structure, researchers have realised that the potential causes and consequences of complex language are very context-dependent (Tolochko et al., 2019). Even more, aspects of text complexity (semantic and syntactic complexity) have different effects on relevant outcomes, such as political knowledge (Tolochko & Boomgaarden, 2019).

To answer my research question, I focus on the effect of *perceived* complex language since I only want to investigate the effects of the complex communication by the EUC on citizens. By focussing on perceptions of complexity, I engage more directly with research from social psychology on the processing of information. I argue that the complexity of communication by the EUC changes how individuals process information about the infringement procedure. Here, the Meta-Cognitive Model (MCM) of attitudes and persuasion is central (Petty et al., 2007). The term "meta-cognitive" concerning information processing refers to the impact of individuals' perception of their thought processes on attitudes following that thought process. The central advancement of this branch of research is the realisation that the conscious feelings individuals have during information processing can change individuals' attitudes or decisions in itself (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Ratneshwar & Chaiken, 1991). Therefore, the same information packaged differently can have different effects on attitudes only because it is associated with either a feeling of ease or difficulty in processing.

The metacognitive factor that describes the feeling individuals experience during information processing is referred to as processing fluency (Oppenheimer, 2008). Whenever a mental task is subjectively perceived as difficult, it is disfluent. Fluency, then, refers to the experience of processing ease experienced when encountering easy to process information. Fluency can be associated with many

mental processes ranging from object recognition to smelling (Schwarz, 2004). Here, I concentrate on the aspect of linguistic fluency. Unfamiliar words, for example, can lead to disfluent experiences (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Closely related to that phenomenon is the effect of jargon, words which are almost exclusively used in one specific context. Bullock et al. show that scientific jargon reduces support for technology adoption (2019).

The "Hedonic Fluency Model" generally explains this effect (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001). According to this model, fluent processing of information leads to a positive experience which is then attributed to the stimulus. When our cognitive system successfully processes a stimulus, it sends a positive signal. Disfluent stimuli, such as complex language interfere in this process. The negative feeling individuals experience is attributed to the stimulus, regardless of the actual content of the message or the image. Therefore, a highly complex message sent by the EUC could cause the experience of disfluency among recipients, which, in turn, will decrease the acceptance of the political content of the message (in this case: the support for the infringement procedure announced by the EUC). This effect has been shown to be relevant for political content (Shockley & Fairdosi, 2015).

My main hypothesis is that high fluency caused by lower complexity improves support for an infringement procedure by the EUC. This hypothesis directly follows the research described previously.

H1: Lower complexity leads to more support for EUC infringement proceedings.

Even though ample research shows that processing fluency has positive effects, this is not true in all cases. Hansford and Coe demonstrate, for example, that highly legalistic language can have positive effects on support for US supreme court decisions (2019). Shulman and Bullock also show that scientific jargon can positively affect attitudes in crises like the Covid-19 pandemic (2020). Therefore, it appears as if the effect of fluency depends on the context of the situation and the past experiences of individuals. When primed to think that fluency has a negative interpretation, individuals judged fluent stimuli more negatively than disfluent ones (Briñol, 2006). This phenomenon could explain the positive effect of scientific and legalistic jargon. Individuals might simply be predisposed to positively evaluate highly complex legal and scientific language in these

situations. It is possible that for the EUC case, individuals also react positively to a disfluent message? The EUC often presents itself as an expert body, as established before. This strategy can be effective, as these studies show, which would be in line with recent findings which indicate that some people prefer an expert body of governance to other forms of governance (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022). However, in both contexts mentioned before (scientists and judges), citizens already view these actors as experts and expect them to communicate as such. If citizens perceive the EUC to be different from these types of actors, disfluent messages are not likely to have the same effect.

In addition to the context-dependency of fluency effects, there is also debate over the existence of non-linear effects of fluency on attitudes (Landwehr & Eckmann, 2020). According to the Fluency Amplification Model, fluency does not positively affect the attitudes of all people. Instead, fluency *amplifies* prior negative and positive evaluations (Albrecht & Carbon, 2014). Here, policies consistent with prior beliefs are seen even more positively when presented fluently. Policies that are inconsistent with prior beliefs, on the other hand, are evaluated more unfavourably when they are presented fluently. Less complex language leading to a feeling of fluency can therefore be a cause of polarisation of opinion. This set of results could be very relevant for the case of EUC infringement proceedings. If the EUC wants to reduce the polarisation of attitudes around its actions, presenting itself in a complex way might achieve this goal. Suppose the EUC were to communicate an infringement procedure more easily. In that case, it could lead opponents of the EU to be even more averse to the infringement procedure than if the EUC had communicated in a more complex way. However, proponents of the EU would also be more in favour of the infringement procedure.

I argue, however, that in the case of the EUC, prior attitudes towards the EUC should play a different role. One of the reasons individuals are opposed to the EUC is its highly technocratic presentation. As the main representative of the EU to the general public, the EUC becomes the target of negative evaluations attributed to the EU as a whole. The EU is mostly seen as very distant and detached from everyday citizens (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017). Consequently, the complex, highly disfluent language used by the EUC only serves to reinforce that perception among opponents of the EUC. In a working paper, Bischof and Senninger find a similar effect in the domain of German domestic politics (2021).

In their study, respondents made assumptions about a politicians' social and economic background based on the complexity of their message. I argue that citizens do the same thing in the case of the EU's institutional communication: they make inferences about the nature of the EUC based on the complexity of the language used. The highly complex message style used by the EUC, therefore, serves as a heuristic informing citizens about the nature of the sender (Fortunato & Stevenson, 2019). A more complex message evokes the imagination of a technocratic and distant EUC among opponents of the EUC, whereas a less complex message dampens this image. I hypothesise that this effect is less likely to be present among supporters of the EUC infringement procedures. Since the image of the EUC as a technocratic and distant body is already dominant among citizens, those who support the EUC are less likely to update their views when encountering a complex message. I assume that easier language increases the support among respondents who generally oppose the EUC infringement procedures. In contrast, easier language leads to no change among respondents who generally favour the EUC infringement procedures. This means that I predict the treatment to have a different effect across the outcome distribution.

H2: Easy language leads to more favourable among opponents of the EUC infringement procedures.

The treatment will likely lead to further heterogeneous effects. A long tradition in public opinion research has shown that prior knowledge about politics will greatly affect the integration of new knowledge (Gilens, 2001; Jerit et al., 2006). The literature shows that people with high levels of information about politics can easier understand and integrate new information to update their beliefs (Carpini & Keeter, 1996). The strongest predictor of general political knowledge is the level of formal education. Citizens with higher levels of formal education are more capable of engaging with and understanding political information (Liu & Eveland, 2005). Generally, I expect respondents with higher levels of formal education to have fewer problems encountering the original, complex press statements. Also, respondents with lower levels of formal knowledge are less likely capable of integrating the new information contained in the press statements. As a result, I expect them to improve their evaluation of the EUC infringement procedure more in the easier versions compared to the original version than respondents with higher levels of formal education.

Aside from the capability to handle new complex political information, I expect that the motivation to engage with political information also matters. Beyond the actual capability to understand, the feeling of the capability to understand will also influence how much easier language influences attitudes. The concept of political self-efficacy (also: internal political efficacy) describes this feeling (Craig & Maggiotto, 1982). This concept refers specifically to an individual's *belief* that they are capable of understanding politics (Caprara et al., 2009). Individuals low in political self-efficacy will quickly reject complex and, therefore, disfluent political messages. They will, in turn, not change their attitudes toward the EUC infringement procedure and not take into account the EUC's own justification for its actions. I expect the opposite to be true for respondents high in political self-efficacy. These respondents are more convinced that they will understand political messages, and they will, in turn, be less avoidant of messages which are high in complexity. To sum up, I expect formal education and political self-efficacy to act in similar ways. Low values in these variables will weaken the easier text's effect compared to the more complex text.

H3: The effect of H1 is more pronounced among respondents with lower political self-efficacy and lower formal education.

All three hypotheses, analysis plans, study materials and questionnaires were preregistered.¹

4. Pilot Study

In order to test the effect of easier language on attitudes, I first need to verify that press statements about infringement procedures initiated by the EUC are indeed difficult to understand for citizens. There may be different kinds of issues that might be relevant to citizens. Some infringement procedures are more vividly discussed in the media and are more intuitive to understand. Even though the press statements might be relatively equal in textual complexity, their perceived complexity might differ. Since this perceived complexity is more important to my research question than the purely textual complexity, I need to account for its variation in the experimental design.

¹OSF: https://osf.io/kq58h?view_only=353d3e692d9e42f09a2fcbb598b9c93f

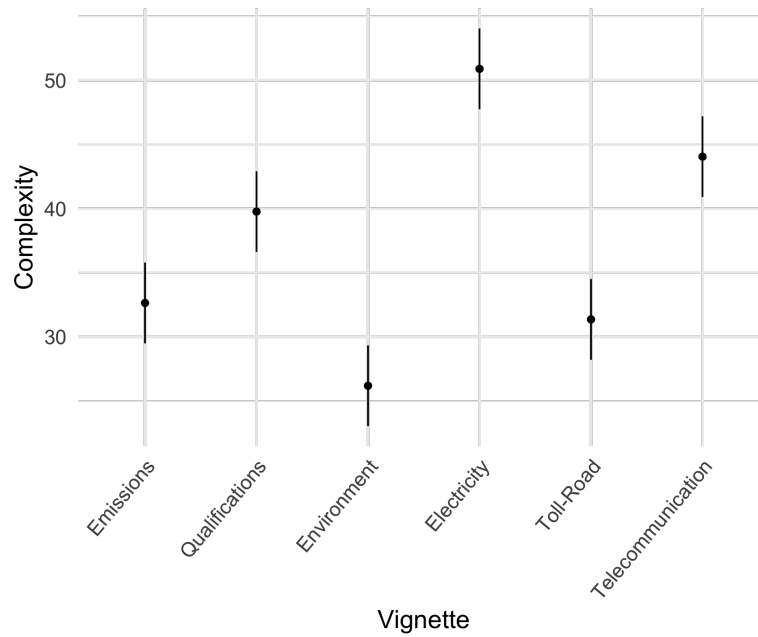


Figure 1: Mean complexity ratings of all vignettes in the pilot study. 95% Confidence Intervals were adjusted for repeated individual ratings.

Therefore, I conducted a pilot study with 250 participants recruited through Prolific. I selected six press statements from infringement procedures against Germany over the last four years. The selected topics range from job-market related policies and market regulation to environmental protection. I slightly shortened the original vignettes to 90-112 words. They were selected and searched using the official archive of EUC press statements. Every participant rated every press statement's difficulty on a scale of 0-100. The results shown in figure 1 demonstrate that respondents evaluate the difficulty of understanding the press statements very differently. Whereas the "Environment" Vignette was easy to understand for most respondents, the "Electricity" vignette was much more difficult. As a consequence of this pilot study, I decided to choose these two vignettes, the press statements related to the Habitats Directive ("Environment") and the Electricity and Gas Directive ("Electricity"), because it gives me the most variation across a relevant variable: the inherent complexity of an issue.

After having devised the additional versions of the EUC press statements, I conducted further pretests to improve the treatments and maximise their impact on the perceived complexity of the texts.

Treatment	No. of words	No. of characters	LIX	Flesch
Environment/Easier	109	706	47	46
Environment/Original	103	767	72	11
Electricity/Easier	93	671	53	32
Electricity/Original	96	759	67	12

Table 1: Text characteristics of all treatments.

5. Experimental Design

To test my hypotheses, I conducted a two by two factorial experiment. The treatment dimensions are A, the topic of the issue (Environment/Electricity) and B, the language complexity of the vignette (Original/Easier). I decided to allocate respondents equally to the resulting four conditions.

I test my expectations in these two separate issues chosen above. The original texts were shortened press statements made by the European Commission. I conceptualise complexity as textual complexity (both semantic and syntactic complexity). I aim to manipulate perceived processing fluency by changing semantic and syntactic complexity. Therefore, to meaningfully impact the perceived fluency of the texts, I changed both the semantic and the syntactic complexity of the original EUC press statements. This means that I shortened sentences, split long-running sentences, and changed the wording of the press statement to use less rarely used words and fewer compound words (compound words are a special characteristic of the German language). The lengths of the texts were restricted to be as equal as possible.

Table 1 shows the treatment characteristics that resulted from this procedure. I report both the LIX index, where easier texts are scored lower and the Flesch index of readability, where easier texts are scored higher. The metrics demonstrate that the manipulation of the original texts was successful in both cases. Additionally, both the original versions and the easier versions are comparable to each other, allowing me to combine them into "easier" and "original" treatment categories.

I decided to study the case of Germany mainly for pragmatic reasons related to the design of the experimental treatments. Keeping the language and the context consistent is particularly important in order to design treatments that contain the

same message content but which have different levels of complexity. Additionally, it allowed me, as a native speaker of German, to assure the comparability of the messages across treatments. The German public tends to be in favour of the EU in general, with relatively stable levels of support for the EU institutions. This allows me to test the impact of the EUC's defences of its infringement procedures in a context where support for these procedures can be expected to be high.

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were informed about the topic of the following questions, and they were informed that they could stop the survey at any point and delete their data. After having answered a series of questions on respondents' characteristics (age, gender, level of formal education), respondents were asked to report their interest in politics, their political self-efficacy (using the two-question PEKS scale) (Beierlein et al., 2014), their propensity to vote for all major German parties and their support for the EU membership of Germany. The PEKS scale included an additional attention check question. Following these questions, participants were informed that they would be asked to read a Facebook post and answer questions about it. Respondents were then randomised to one of the four treatment vignettes. After reading the vignette on a new screen, they were asked to report if they had difficulties understanding the text. Subsequently, they were asked to evaluate four statements about the infringement procedure in question: "The actions of the European Commission are justified in every respect.", "I am sure that the German government did everything right in this case.", "Germany should comply with the wishes of the European Commission as quickly as possible." and "The European Commission should not interfere in Germany's affairs.". Finally, respondents were asked to report if the text made them nervous, fearful, angry, hostile, angry, ashamed or worried. The presentation and interpretation of these emotional self-reports followed the PNAS-M scale (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). The results from this manipulation check are reported in the Appendix.

6. Results

6.1. Data

From 27.08.21 to 06.09.21, I fielded a survey in Germany with a sample size of 1200. The data was collected by Kantar using quota sampling based on gender, age and three education categories (Low, Middle, High). Respondents that failed an attention check were excluded from completing the survey. These excluded respondents did not contribute to filling the sampling quotas. This exclusion criterion was preregistered.

Measurement of the outcome through the 4 pre-specified post-treatment questions was satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.71$, $\omega = 0.74$), as defined by the preregistration. Therefore, individual factor scores were created through regression. The two questions measuring political self-efficacy were combined to form the PEKS scale.

As preregistered, I tested my hypotheses through an OLS regression both with and without covariates that were interacted with the treatment indicator (Lin, 2013). I also conducted these analyses separately for both issues as additional robustness checks. The results from these regressions are reported in table 7 in the Appendix.

Quantile Treatment effects (QTEs) were estimated through a semiparametric procedure (Firpo, 2007). Through QTEs, I can directly evaluate hypothesis 2 because I can test the treatment effect at different points of the outcome distribution. Instead of relying on measures that only indirectly gauge support for the EUC interventions, I can use the measurement of the dependent variable directly.

6.2. Manipulation Check

Did the treatment change what it was hypothesised to do? Because the treatment can only indirectly change the perceived complexity of the text through manipulation of the semantic and syntactic complexity, it might be the case that the treatment did not change the independent variable, which it was meant to change. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct manipulation checks (Mutz & Pemantle, 2015). By testing for aspects of the perception of the text other than the relevant

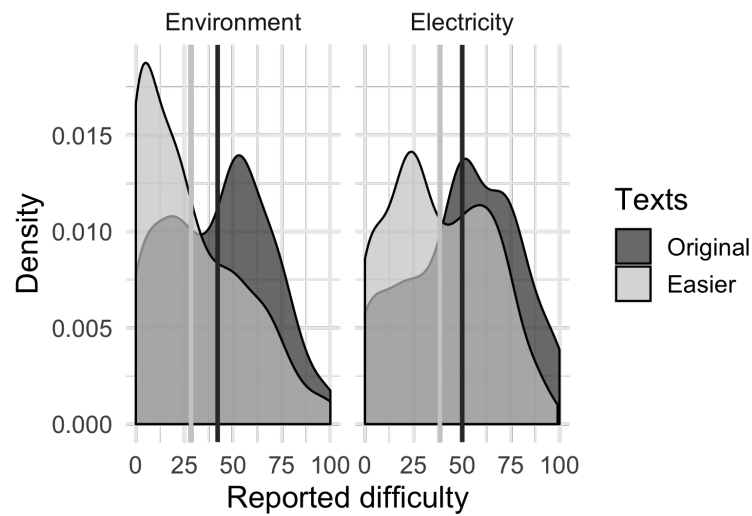


Figure 2: Differences in reported difficulty of understanding the treatment text. The figure shows densities across all 4 experimental groups. Shaded vertical lines indicate the group means.

attitudes, we can better understand what the treatment did and what might have caused the change in the primary outcome.

After reading the text, respondents were asked to report the perceived difficulty of the text on a 0-100 scale. This measurement is sufficient to measure the experience of fluency that respondents experience while reading the text (Graf et al., 2018). Figure 2 shows the results from this measurement by plotting the outcome densities across all four experimental groups. It is evident that both mean and mode are different between the original texts and the easier versions. Interestingly, the difference in the mode in both issue groups is larger than the difference in the mean, which is caused by responses clustering near 0 of the outcome scale. This is especially pronounced for the environment issue, where most respondents answered that they experienced very little difficulty understanding the easier text.

Although the semantic and syntactic complexity of both the original texts and the easier versions were nearly identical in both issue categories, respondents evaluated the electricity texts as more complicated on average. This means that the issue of the infringement procedure also influenced how respondents experienced the difficulty of the text. Their experienced fluency was generally lower for this

issue beyond the change introduced through the experimental manipulation. This difference might be due to the high salience of the environment topic. Subsequently, it might be interesting to test the main outcome separately for both issues.

Figure 2 also demonstrates that there is a large degree of heterogeneity in the perceived difficulty of the texts. Even in the easy conditions, a substantial amount of respondents reported values above 50. Fluency can therefore be low in all cases. In further studies, it would be interesting to investigate the subpopulation that has issues with political texts in more detail.

In summary, it is clear that manipulating semantic and syntactic successfully manipulated the relevant independent variable. In that sense, the experiment "worked", and we can meaningfully interpret the presence or absence of treatment effects on the main outcome.

6.3. Main Results

A visual representation of the main result can be seen in figure 3 which depicts the densities of the outcomes across all four treatment groups. Here we see that the treatment increased support for the infringement procedure in both issue areas. The main comparison can be read directly in table 7 in the Appendix. Aggregated across the two issues the easier texts improved mean support by 0.181 ($p < 0.001$) when accounting for covariates. According to conventional rules of interpretation, the size of this effect is rather small. Nevertheless, this effect is clearly statistically significant. Only in the case of the electricity issue, when I do not adjust for further covariates, the effect is no longer statistically significant for an alpha of 5%. Hypothesis 1 predicted the mean shift towards higher support through the treatment. Even though the magnitude of this change is not large, it is in line with predictions from previous work. The results, therefore, clearly support Hypothesis 1.

Table 7 shows that the effects of the treatment are nearly twice as high for the environment issue than for the electricity issue. This difference might be related to the difference in the distribution of perceived complexity discussed above. As respondents experience less fluency reading the electricity text in general, the effect of simplifying the text might not have been impactful enough. Instead of

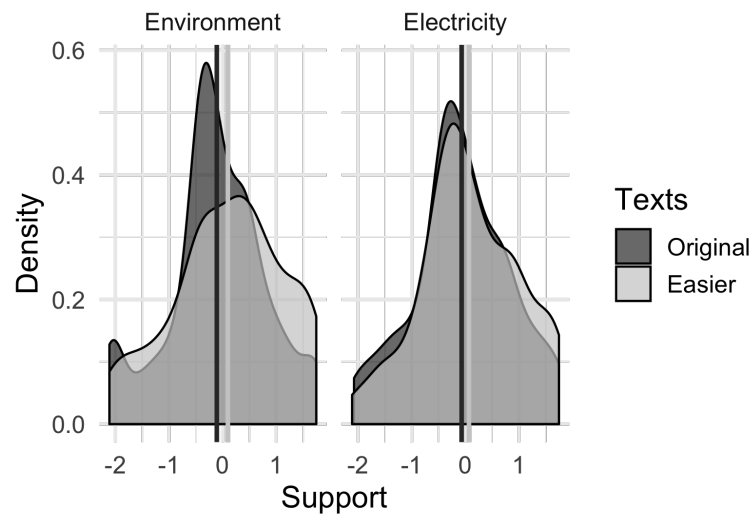


Figure 3: Differences in the summarised support of each infringement procedure. The figure shows densities across all 4 experimental groups. Shaded vertical lines indicate the group means.

being hindered by the highly complex language itself, the characteristics of the issue might have reduced the persuasive effect of the text. Further studies could investigate if the differences between issues appear regularly or if they appear only in this example.

In hypothesis 2, I predicted that there would be heterogenous effects of the treatment among supporters compared to opponents of the EUC infringement procedures. I operationalise this hypothesis through a test of quantile treatment effects. Here, I look at the effect of the treatment at different quantiles of the outcome. Translating hypothesis 2 to this approach, I expect that the treatment effect would be stronger at the lower quantiles of the outcome than at the higher quantiles of the outcome. Table 2 shows the distribution of quantile effects for quantiles between 0.1 and 0.9. A positive effect of 0.345 at the 90% quantile, for example, means that respondents at this quantile would show more support for the infringement procedure if they had received the easier version compared to the case in which they did not. In contrast, the treatment effect at the 25% quantile is only 0.004, which shows that respondents at that quantile of the outcome distribution are not affected by the treatment. By looking at the distribution of QTEs in table 2, we can see that the easier versions of the EUC press statements

Quantile	Estimate	Bootstrap S.E.	P-Value
0.10	0.096	(0.145)	0.507
0.25	0.004	(0.078)	0.960
0.50	0.206	(0.073)	0.004
0.75	0.316	(0.074)	<0.001
0.90	0.345	(0.113)	0.002

Table 2: Quantile Treatment Effects

did not improve support at the lower quantiles of the outcome distribution. Only for those with some support for the EUC infringement procedure we can observe a positive effect.

This means that the treatment had a stronger effect among respondents who support EUC infringement procedures. The effect for those respondents is also substantially higher than the average treatment effect since the latter is down-weighted by the respondents at the lower quantiles of the outcome distribution. This result contradicts hypothesis 2, where I expected the opposite effect. A robustness check shows a similar pattern. Here, analogous to the outcome distribution itself, I look at support for EU membership. The treatment effect does not lead to a significant change in attitudes among opponents of EU integration.² These results seem to be more consistent with the fluency amplification model from social psychology. Lower fluency leads to less positively pronounced attitudes. However, I do not find a similar effect for negative attitudes. In this study, negative attitudes are not reinforced by low fluency.

Moving on to hypothesis 3, I investigate the heterogeneity of the treatment effect in more detail. Hypothesis 3 predicted heterogeneous effects across political self-efficacy and formal education. Figure 4 displays predicted values for the original and easy texts across three levels of education. Clearly, the treatment improved support for the infringement procedures for those with high and low education, but not for respondents with medium levels of education. Most interesting is the effect among respondents with low levels of education. Although the estimation of mean effects is highly uncertain, given the large confidence intervals, the difference between the predicted treatment means is much larger

²See table 8 in the Appendix.

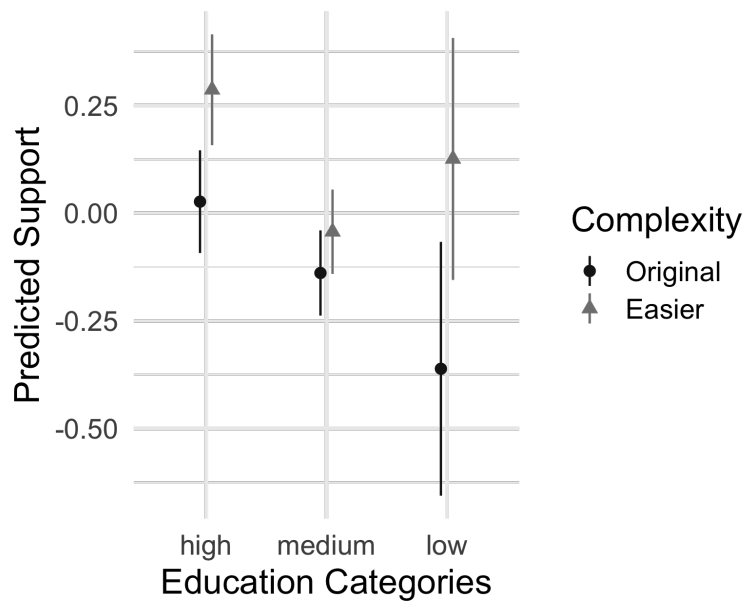


Figure 4: Predicted support across education categories, separated by treatment. Confidence Intervals are 95% intervals. Predictions generated from model 2 (see Appendix table 7)

than among the other education groups. Arguably, this difference is highly practically relevant. In the easier text condition, the predicted support is similar to the base support of highly educated respondents. This result indicates that less complex communication by the EUC could potentially close the "education gap" observed in many studies on EU support (Hakhverdian et al., 2013).

However, this interaction does not confirm hypothesis 3 because the treatment also had a positive effect among the highly educated. The second part of the hypothesis also predicted higher effectiveness of the treatment for respondents low on the PEKS scale. However, the interaction of the treatment with the scale is not statistically significant ($p = 0.164$). Therefore, I find only partial support for hypothesis 3. The large difference in support for respondents with low levels of education deserves to be investigated further. Interestingly, I find that individuals with high levels of interest in politics respond more strongly to the treatment ($p = 0.007$)

Together, I conclude that the treatment worked in unexpected ways for participants. Contradictory to my expectations, the easier press statements led to

particularly big changes in support for both the highly educated and the less educated. Additionally, the QTEs show that the treatment neither improved nor decreased support among opponents of the EUC infringement procedures used in this study. I observe no negative effects neither for respondents opposed to the EUCs' actions nor for respondents that are generally opposed to the EU. Instead, I find strong evidence for the positive effects of the easier text treatments on supporters of the EUC infringement procedures.

7. Discussion

Using a preregistered, population-based survey experiment in Germany (N = 1200), I demonstrate the effects of reduced language complexity on attitudes towards infringement procedures against Germany initiated by the EUC. My findings not only speak to the literature interested in the causes and consequences of politicisation of the EU but also to a more recent literature focussed on the effects of the complexity of politics in general. Overall, I show that easier language used in EUC press statements can lead to a mean positive effect on attitudes. This mean effect is rather small but still theoretically and practically interesting because I show that changing only the style of communication can have an effect without changing the content of the message itself. This indicates that support for an infringement procedure could be stronger if communicated and explained to citizens more easily. Besides the general normatively desirable attribute of informing the public, a reinforced effort by the EUC to communicate to citizens simply could make infringement procedures more resistant to delegitimation from domestic political elites. Furthermore, it could answer critiques from populist political actors who benefit from the perception that the EU is a technocratic and undemocratic institution.

Additionally, I show that easier language does not seem to increase aversion to infringement procedures, even among opponents. This means that easier language does not lead to a polarisation of attitudes around the issue. However, my results also show that the EUC will have difficulty convincing opponents of infringement procedures through its communications. Individuals opposed to infringement procedures possibly have more deeply seated negative associations

with the EU, which leads them to reject persuasive attempts from that sender. Yet the EUC could generate more positive evaluations of infringement procedures through easier language among most individuals, which do support the EUCs' decisions. I also hypothesised that simpler language would especially improve support among individuals with low formal education and low political self-efficacy. The results from this experiment show that this is not necessarily the case. Instead, the simplification of the texts was most effective among respondents *both* high and low informal education. The treatment was more effective among people highly interested in politics but not among those that considered themselves unable to understand politics. Future work should investigate these somewhat contradictory results and try to explain of why the treatment led to higher support in both the high education and the low education categories. Investigating the mechanism behind the treatment could help here. Possibly, the treatment led to higher support because it improved understanding of the topic and because it reduced the perceived technocratic character of the EUC. (Hooghe & Marks, 2005)

One limitation of this study is the high complexity of the original messages. Maybe respondents did not understand the EUC actions in question at all and therefore simply chose a neutral option? This seems implausible because respondents did answer the questions related to the acceptability of the EUC actions in line with their basic EU attitudes. If comprehension were close to zero, one would not expect this result. However, to fully rule out this possibility, future work could increase the number of possible messages to investigate which topics are especially hard to understand. Such future research could also demonstrate if the treatment effects are stable across issues or if they can fluctuate greatly. In this study, respondents were all shown press statements from the EUC. In the real world, such a situation is highly unlikely because citizens self-select into which kinds of information about politics they want to encounter. These effects have been described both theoretically and empirically (Leeper, 2017; Testa et al., 2021). It would be an important continuation of this experimental approach to study individuals who are reluctant to read and expose themselves to such texts. In this study, I focus on a simplified situation where respondents were only exposed to a one-sided message from the EUC. Future research could replicate this study and selectively add competing messages from critical domestic elites.

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A. Appendix

A.1. Self-reported Emotions

It is also helpful to look at the emotional self-reports to better understand how the experimental manipulation changed the respondents' perception of the texts. One possible effect of the treatment could be a politicisation of the issues used in the two example texts (Wilde, 2011). Gellwitzki and Houde argue that politicisation is only possible through the emotional involvement of citizens (2022). Beliefs by themselves would not lead to intensified debates in the public sphere without strong emotions attached to them. If I find a big change in emotional reaction caused by the treatment, it could mean that the treatment affected attitudes through the politicisation of the infringement procedures. Weak emotional reactions could indicate a lack of such a process and persistence of emotional distance to the topic.

These self-reports show that the treatment did change not only the reported difficulty but also the reported emotions participants experienced reading the treatment. Because most participants reported that they did not experience any of the listed emotions, responses were recoded to only record 1 for any reported emotion. Figure 5 shows that participants felt more Anger, Shame and Worry in the treatment condition compared to the control condition. Fear and Nervousness remain very low in both conditions. Together, these results show that the difficulty manipulation made emotional reactions to the texts more accessible. Respondents could more readily react and report their emotions to the easier texts. These results also show that the easier versions did not only affect attitudes because they only improved the feeling associated with the message. However, to most respondents, even the easier texts did not make them experience strong emotions. This could indicate that these topics remain technical and abstract, even in the easier versions.

	Unique (#)	Missing (%)	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
Support	761	0	0.0	0.9	−2.1	−0.0	1.7
Perceived Difficulty	101	0	39.3	27.4	0.0	39.0	100.0
Interest in Politics	11	0	6.8	2.9	1.0	7.0	11.0
PEKS	21	0	7.5	2.5	1.0	8.0	11.0
Nervous	41	0	3.2	13.9	0.0	0.0	100.0
Fear	33	0	2.5	12.8	0.0	0.0	100.0
Anger	65	0	8.3	23.4	0.0	0.0	100.0
Fury	76	0	18.2	31.4	0.0	0.0	100.0
Shame	61	0	9.3	24.4	0.0	0.0	100.0
Worry	66	0	11.3	25.0	0.0	0.0	100.0

Table 3: Summary of metric variables.

		N	%
EU Membership	A good thing.	659	54.9
	Neither a good nor a bad thing.	393	32.8
	A bad thing.	148	12.3
Gender	Male	586	48.8
	Female	609	50.8
	Other	5	0.4
Age	18-29	227	18.9
	30-39	207	17.2
	40-49	294	24.5
	50-59	270	22.5
	60-69	202	16.8
Formal Education	low	87	7.2
	medium	682	56.8
	high	431	35.9

Table 4: Summary of categorical variables.

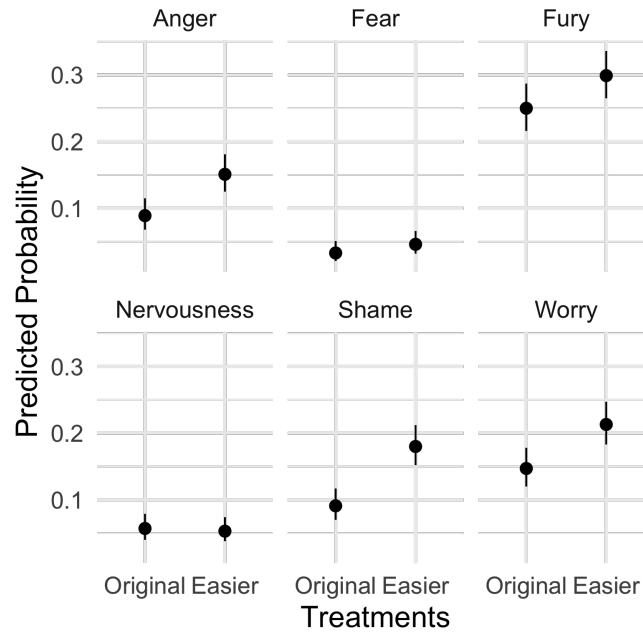


Figure 5: Predicted probabilities of emotional self-reports (1 = reported having experienced the named emotion). Predictions were generated from individual logistic regressions.

		O/Env.		E/Env.		O/Elec.		E/Elec.	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
EU Membership	A good thing.	170	56.9	162	51.1	149	54.6	178	57.2
	Neither good nor bad.	89	29.8	108	34.1	96	35.2	100	32.2
	A bad thing.	40	13.4	47	14.8	28	10.3	33	10.6
Age	18-29	62	20.7	54	17.0	51	18.7	60	19.3
	30-39	55	18.4	52	16.4	47	17.2	53	17.0
	40-49	64	21.4	84	26.5	73	26.7	73	23.5
	50-59	66	22.1	75	23.7	61	22.3	68	21.9
	60-69	52	17.4	52	16.4	41	15.0	57	18.3
Gender	Male	138	46.2	169	53.3	131	48.0	148	47.6
	Female	160	53.5	147	46.4	141	51.6	161	51.8
	Other	1	0.3	1	0.3	1	0.4	2	0.6
Formal Education	low	14	4.7	28	8.8	23	8.4	22	7.1
	medium	180	60.2	186	58.7	137	50.2	179	57.6
	high	105	35.1	103	32.5	113	41.4	110	35.4

Table 5: Balance Table. O = Original, E = Easier

Effect	df	MSE	F	ges	p.value
Complexity	1, 1191	0.85	10.30 **	.009	.001
Issue	1, 1191	0.85	0.01	<.001	.913
Complexity:Issue	1, 1191	0.85	0.48	<.001	.489

Table 6: ANOVA Table

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
(Intercept)	−0.090* (0.038)	−0.095** (0.033)	−0.069 (0.054)	−0.065 (0.046)	−0.110* (0.053)	−0.123** (0.047)
Easier	0.172** (0.054)	0.181*** (0.046)	0.136+ (0.075)	0.133* (0.065)	0.206** (0.078)	0.235*** (0.067)
Issue	All	All	Electricity	Electricity	Environment	Environment
Covariates	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Num.Obs.	1200	1200	584	584	616	616
R2	0.009	0.289	0.006	0.305	0.011	0.305
R2 Adj.	0.006	0.269	0.004	0.266	0.010	0.270
Std.Errors	HC1	HC1	HC1	HC1	HC1	HC1

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 7: Average Treatment Effects for the Complexity Treatment across all Issues. Standard Errors in Parantheses

factor	EU Membership	AME	SE	z	p	lower	upper
Easier	A good thing.	0.185	0.061	3.030	0.002	0.065	0.305
Easier	Neither a good nor a bad thing.	0.160	0.080	1.985	0.047	0.002	0.317
Easier	A bad thing.	0.279	0.175	1.590	0.112	-0.065	0.623

Table 8: Average Marginal Effects for the Complexity Treatment across Support for the European Integration.

Treatment	Text
Environment/Easier	Die Europäische Kommission verklagt Deutschland vor dem Europäischen Gerichtshof. Deutschland hat sich nicht an die Flora-Habitat-Richtlinie der Europäischen Union gehalten. Diese Richtlinie schreibt vor, dass Mitgliedsstaaten Schutzgebiete festlegen. In diesen Gebieten sollen Tiere und Natur besonders geschützt werden. Außerdem sollen die Mitgliedsstaaten Pläne präsentieren, wie genau sie dort Arten und Lebensräume schützen wollen. In Deutschland ist die Frist alle Gebiete so festzulegen schon vor mehr als zehn Jahren abgelaufen. Laut Europäischer Kommission sind die Ziele zum Schutz von Natur und Tieren, die für einige Gebiete bereits festgelegt wurden, nicht genau genug ausgearbeitet. Die Europäische Kommission kritisiert, dass daher nur schwer bestimmt werden kann, ob die Ziele auch erreicht wurden.
Environment/Original	Die Europäische Kommission hat beschlossen, Deutschland vor dem Europäischen Gerichtshof zu verklagen, weil das Land seine Verpflichtungen im Rahmen der Fauna-Flora-Habitat-Richtlinie (FFH-Richtlinie) nicht eingehalten hat. Gemäß der Richtlinie müssen die Mitgliedstaaten dezidierte Schutzgebiete ausweisen und gebietsspezifische Erhaltungsziele sowie entsprechende Erhaltungsmaßnahmen festlegen, um einen günstigen Erhaltungszustand der dortigen Arten und Lebensräume zu erhalten oder wiederherzustellen. Das Ultimatum für die Vollendung der notwendigen Maßnahmen für alle Gebiete in Deutschland ist vor mehr als zehn Jahren abgelaufen. Außerdem ist die Kommission der Auffassung, dass die für die wenigen Gebiete in Deutschland definierten Erhaltungsziele nicht hinreichend quantifiziert und messbar sind und dass sie keine ausreichende Berichterstattung ermöglichen.
Electricity/Easier	Die Europäische Kommission verklagt Deutschland vor dem Gerichtshof der Europäischen Union. Sie will sicherstellen, dass die Elektrizitätsrichtlinie und die Erdgasrichtlinie umgesetzt werden. Diese Richtlinie schreibt vor, dass die nationalen Regulierungsbehörden unabhängig sein sollen. Außerdem sollen sie ausreichende Befugnisse haben. Deutschland hat diese Vorschriften jedoch nicht vollständig eingehalten. Die Regulierungsbehörde ist nicht ausreichend unabhängig von der Bundesregierung. Sie hat auch nicht die nötigen Befugnisse. So kann die Behörde nicht frei die Tarife und Bedingungen für die Nutzung von Elektrizitäts- und Erdgasnetzen festlegen. Diese Tarife und Bedingungen sind größtenteils bereits durch Verordnungen der Bundesregierung festgelegt.
Electricity/Original	Die Europäische Kommission verklagt Deutschland vor dem Gerichtshof der Europäischen Union, um die ordnungsgemäße Umsetzung der Elektrizitätsrichtlinie und der Erdgasrichtlinie sicherzustellen. Ein zentrales Element der Elektrizitätsrichtlinie und der Erdgasrichtlinie sind die stärkere Unabhängigkeit und die Befugnisse für die nationalen Regulierungsbehörden. Deutschland hat jedoch die Vorschriften über die Befugnisse und Unabhängigkeit der deutschen Regulierungsbehörde nicht vollständig eingehalten. Insbesondere verfügt die Regulierungsbehörde nicht über uneingeschränkte Ermessensfreiheit bei der Festlegung der Netztarife und anderer Bedingungen für den Zugang zu Netzen und Regelenergieleistungen, da zahlreiche Aspekte der Festlegung dieser Tarife und Bedingungen weitgehend in den Einzelverordnungen der Bundesregierung geregelt werden.

Table 9: Full text of all vignettes.