# PR+: the EU supranational executives' efforts to reproduce legitimacy via public communication on Twitter

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## Abstract:

*EU executives have a precarious legitimacy relationship with citizens. A lack of democratic accountability, limited capacity to take input, and unpopular policies contribute to this. Public communication offers possibilities to remedy this strained relationship, yet EU executives face multiple challenges to communicate their worth to the wider audience. Despite the well-known potential of social media channels to mitigate such challenges through direct communication with citizens, we know very little about how EU executives legitimate themselves on social media. This study addresses this gap by studying discursive legitimation by EU executives via public communication on Twitter. Combining theoretical insights from the literature on public relations and on the legitimacy of international organizations, we demonstrate that EU executives contribute to a Twittersphere that is populated by small network communities publicizing the EU as a unitary actor, or authorities in a particular policy area. Secondly, our results show that EU executives regularly attempt to draw on all possible sources of legitimacy with their communication. The most frequently used content is information on policies and other output through one-way communication. This implies that EU executives still largely rely on output-based legitimacy to prove their worth.*

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# Introduction

European Union (EU) executive institutions and actors are acutely aware that the legitimacy of the EU is precarious, and with it, their own survival. While citizens recently appear to consider that the EU's current state of integration is legitimate (Schafer et al., 2021, p. 4), this situation is not set in stone and a 'destructive dissensus' looms over the EU (Hodson & Puetter, 2019). Recent political crises such as the Euro-crisis, refugee crisis and COVID-19 have shown that public opinion is an influential factor affecting European integration. With strong Eurosceptic voices being able to turn the political climate from a previous 'permissive consensus' to a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), public opinion about the EU is crucial for the legitimacy of the EU and the longevity of its executive institutions and officials.

As a key part of the effort to safeguard and expand their own legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, EU institutions have built up an elaborate apparatus of professional communication and public relation officials. This includes the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COM) at the European Commission, but also communication units and officials at other Commission DGs and other EU institutions. Many individual EU officials maintain their own active professional social media accounts and regularly appear in the news. Collectively, they produce press releases and social media posts, maintain websites, organize press conferences, send op-eds to newspapers and appear in political talk shows to spread their messages.

This task of communicative self-legitimation lies within the domain of public relations, in particular strategic public communication, since the aim of the public relations is to maintain good relations between an organization and their respective audience (Broom et al., 2013, p. 26). Thus, strategic public communication is one of the main tools for the EU and its supranational executives to sustain the legitimacy equilibrium. EU actors can potentially manage their popular legitimacy by explaining themselves to the wider public, take input from the citizenry, respond to the criticisms, and make their work transparent via strategic public communication.

Generating legitimacy via public communication, however, is a rather complex task for EU executive institutions and actors, partially due to their nature. On the one hand, EU executives possess substantial regulatory capacity. Therefore, it is sometimes argued that the EU and its executives should legitimate themselves based on the efficiency of their output and capacity to contribute to the common good (Hix, 2008; Majone, 1997, 1998; Scharpf, 1999). On the other hand, other observers point to the democratic deficit of the EU and argue that EU executives should improve the channels for input and participation by those who are bound by their decisions (Bellamy & Weale, 2015; Borrás et al., 2007; Follesdal & Hix, 2006). A third line of argument focuses on decision-making and implementation processes as a potential source of legitimacy for the EU executives. By making the decision-making phase more transparent and open to stakeholders, thereby giving insight into how policies are made, it is argued that EU executives can potentially improve their throughput legitimacy (Busuioc & Jevnaker, 2022; Chatzopoulou, 2015; Schmidt, 2013). Consequently, maintaining popular

legitimacy via communication requires a complex strategy that targets these various sources of legitimacy.

EU executives also face several obstacles in terms of message, media channel and relevant publics in strategic communication. In terms of the message, the language of the communication is ladened with a technocratic jargon, thus inaccessible to the wider public (Rauh, 2021; Rauh et al., 2020). Consequently, their messages tend to fail to capture the attention of citizens and fall short on satisfying important conditions for legitimacy management, such as transparency and publicity (Curtin & Meijer, 2006; Hüller, 2007). Another challenge EU executives face is that there is no genuine European public sphere and no widely consumed EU-wide media. Public spheres remain mostly nation-based, with national media catering to member state audiences. These national public spheres are guarded by gatekeepers, in particular national journalists and politicians that often block or distort EU messages to citizens (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2014; Trenz, 2004; Walter, 2015).

Social media can offer solutions to some of the above-mentioned problems. In terms of messages, most social media platforms reward short and simple communication, thus encouraging the communicators to simplify their language. Moreover, social media afford multi-modal communication. Messages can be fortified with multi-media elements such as pictures and videos that can improve comprehension (Tang & Hew, 2018). Regarding obstacles due to traditional communication channels, messages on social media platforms can easily travers the national boundaries, thus offering an extensive reach to the

communicator (Bossetta et al., 2017). A message that achieves virality on social media platforms can change how the organization is perceived by the public in mere hours. With regards to obstacles on reaching the relevant publics, social media offer a direct line to the public, thus limiting the gatekeeping power of national media and politicians. This allows for a shift in the audience of the strategic public communication, away from journalists and the political elite, toward citizens. In addition, social media have a decentralized gatekeeping structure shared between content creators, other users and algorithms (Wallace, 2018).These platforms permit EU executives to determine which issues to inject into this 'digital public sphere' and deliver it unaltered (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017). Lastly, many social media platforms have an inbuilt translation service for messages, thus tailoring the message language to the audience as well. Thus, social media affordances have the potential to overcome several major problems EU executives face in their pursuit of legitimacy via public communication.

While there are several studies focusing on the nexus of EU actors and communication on social media platforms, the majority of these studies either cover electorally accountable actors such as members of the European parliament (European Parliament. Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services., 2021; Fazekas et al., 2021; Haßler et al., 2021; Nulty et al., 2016; Umit, 2017) or are theoretical in nature (e.g. Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Zaiotti, 2020). Against this backdrop, we ask how and to what extent EU executives legitimate themselves via strategic public communication on Twitter. We pursue this question in three sub-research questions, who the EU executive public communication focus on Twitter, which modes and content of communication the EU executive public

communication use, and finally to what extent the EU executives' public communication varies across institutions and individuals in publicized actors and content.

Building on the extant public communication and public relations literatures, we analyze a representative sample of tweets from the EU executive Twitterverse collected between December 2019, and July 2020. This allows us to map and document diversity and frequency of modes of communication and legitimated actors by supranational executives, thus which potential sources of legitimacy the communication can maintain. While it offers limited insight into the intention behind communication, studying the practice of communication itself gives us a fine-grained picture of the discursive legitimation of EU executives.

Our investigation yields three key results. First and foremost, EU executives often shine a limelight to the EU as a whole, their immediate institutions or top brass of such institutions in their tweets. Secondly, the overall frequency of different messages in tweets show that EU executives overwhelmingly talk about their political outputs, followed by their day-to-day activities and opinion, in a one-way mode of communication. Finally, cluster analysis indicate that EU executives tend to combine several different messages in a single tweet. The most common in this communication is what we call "all-in-one" which combines the opinion of the tweet author with almost all other types of messages in a single tweet. These results carry three important implications in terms of EU self-legitimation on Twitter. First and foremost, it seems that EU executives often legitimate the EU as a whole political system in their public communication rather than their individual self. Secondly, EU executives by and large, maintain legitimacy based on their output rather than alternative sources. Lastly, the limited variation on twitter content and referred actors across Twitter accounts indicate that EU

executive communication follows a uniform, even centrally coordinated, communication discipline.

This article is organized in five sections. The next section discusses the potential of different communication strategies to contribute the popular legitimacy of the EU. The third section presents our research design, data, and methods. In the fourth section, we demonstrate our results and evaluate our findings. 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 offers further research venues.

## Strategic public communication and political legitimacy

Most empirical legitimacy studies, including those that study how political authorities discursively legitimate themselves, build on the theoretical foundations of Easton's system-theoretical approach. Easton delineates between two forms of support for a political system. On the one hand, there is the specific support shown towards individual policies, decisions, and actions. Diffuse support, on the other hand, is a "reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effects of which they see as damaging to their wants" (Easton, 1975, p. 273). From this perspective, empirical legitimacy, that is citizens' belief that a political system is legitimate, is a form of diffuse support where people, who are subject to the decisions of political system, accept the authority of the political system and follow its rules (Gilley, 2009; Hurrelmann et al., 2007). Because they do not directly reflect on this, studies of self-legitimation tend to exclude public

relations and public communication from discursive legitimation studies. Public relations strategies are argued to be "open to many different forms, because they serve the less demanding task of creating specific support" (Gronau & Schmidtke, 2016, p. 541). Therefore, most discursive self-legitimation studies focus only on a set of messages that signal conformity to social norms and the logic of appropriateness yet discard the rest of the public communication efforts (e.g. Schmidtke & Nullmeier, 2011)

Yet, Easton's theoretical framework also gives ground to study broader public relations efforts as part of legitimation. Easton himself posits that "over a long time period, diffuse system support may change as a product of spill-over effects from evaluations of a series of outputs and of performance" (Easton 1975, p.446). In other words, repeated instances of dissatisfaction with the political authority are detrimental to the legitimacy of the political authority. Moreover, this gradual degradation of public legitimacy can vary based on the available accountability mechanisms. In political systems like the EU, where the public has limited propensity to hold political authorities accountable for unfavorable decisions, the detrimental effect of unpopular policies is much more exacerbated. As the euro-crisis has demonstrated, policies that spark the ire of citizens can lead to a deterioration of diffuse support for the political system (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012; Hobolt, 2014).

Since spill-over from unfavorable outputs is detrimental to the legitimacy of political authority, public relations efforts become one of the main ways of self-legitimation for such authorities. Public relations are a strategic management function (Dozier et al., 2013) that aims to "establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends" (Broom et al., 2013, p. 26). Success

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for a political authority, then, can be defined as the exercise of authority without resorting to coercion or guile (Beetham, 2013). Since all political authorities, democratic or autocratic, try to foster beliefs that they are rightful, proper and worthy of obedience (Gerschewski, 2018; Weber, 1978), public relations become the main mode of self-legitimation for political authorities.

Public relations efforts can take many forms, from discursive acts to physical events. Strategic public communication is, then, the main tool for maintaining good relations with a public (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018). Strategic public communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). In other words, it is a set of deliberate messages for a designated public and delivered via the most suitable media channels at an appropriate time to achieve a pre-determined effect (Plowman & Wilson, 2018). Assuming that the main goal of public relations is to foster legitimacy beliefs among the audience, the underlying aim of strategic communication is building or maintaining legitimacy beliefs.

It should be noted, however, that the immediate aim of a strategic communication campaign might not be to convince the audience about the political authority's right to rule. Such campaigns can very well be aimed towards promoting a particular policy, or dissemination of a particular piece of information. Yet, whether an individual campaign is to promote a policy or justify a decision, the practice of strategic communication would still be about maintaining legitimacy beliefs among the public to encourage the spill over of specific support to diffuse support.

Strategic public communication can maintain the diffuse support for a political authority by fostering different sources of legitimacy in audience.  The current state-of-the-art literature points towards four key sources of legitimacy for a political authority. The first is the input as a source of legitimacy where the political authority is legitimate to the extent to which it is responsive to the concerns of the constituents of its authority(Bellamy & Kröger, 2013; Follesdal & Hix, 2006). The second source is the output of political authority. A political organization is legitimate to the extent that its policies effectively and efficiently contribute to the common good (Scharpf, 1999; Schmidt, 2021, p. 4). The third source - throughput - is placed in between output and input in the political system. This third source of legitimacy of political authority is based on the quality of the governance procedures, such as the efficacy of the policy making process, accountability and transparency towards the relevant stakeholders, and openness and inclusiveness with regard to civil society (Schmidt 2020, 2021, p. 4). Recent debates on sources of legitimacy have also included a fourth source; identity. In the case of identity legitimacy, a political authority enjoys legitimacy based on what the organization is, the values it stands for and how far the essence of the organization is right and proper (Barker, 2001, chp 1, 2007; Dingwerth et al., 2019, chp 2; Suchman, 1995). Strategic public communication can alter the legitimacy beliefs among audiences by changing their impression regarding different sources of legitimacy. Which source is effected may then depends on the mode and content of strategic public communication.

In more practical terms, our theoretical argument that the aim of EU public relations and strategic communication is self-legitimation is underpinned by EU official documents. The strategic communication plan 2020-2024 by the Commission's Directorate-General for Communication (DG Comm) spells out that their communication should aim to foster

legitimacy belief based on various sources. With regards to the *Recovery Plan for Europe* and

*NextGenerationEU*, the strategic communication plan targets output-oriented legitimacy by

stating "A specific corporate communication campaign […] will focus on how the EU is

responding to the crisis in order to save lives, alleviate economic impacts and create new

opportunities linked to the green and digital transitions." (DG COMM, Strategic

Communication Plan 2020-2024: 4). Similarly, the strategic communication plan includes

goals targeting input and throughput-based legitimacy beliefs. This is most evident in the

statement "One of the key priorities for DG Communication during the Von der Leyen

Commission Presidency is […] listening to citizens developing opinions and making sure that

their concerns and ideas are fed into policy-making" (DG COMM, Strategic Communication

Plan 2020-2024: 7). Thus, DG Comm aims to create channels to loop in citizens into policy

making process via strategic public communication. The Commission's communication plan

more over aims to emphasize "the key principles of transparency, clarity, visibility (of leaders),

speed and trustworthiness" (DG COMM, Strategic Communication Plan 2020-2024: 4). Finally,

their communication goals also include fostering a good image for the EU, thus improving

identity-based legitimacy beliefs among the audience. This intention manifests itself in how

the DG Comm measures "impactful" communication. As key indicator for impact, DG Comm

relies on the percentage of EU citizens that answer positively to the question "In general, does

the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or negative

image?" from the Eurobarometer survey. Just before the present 2020-2024 communication

strategy took effect in 2019, 43% of EU citizens answered this question with 'very positive' or

'fairly positive'. DG Communication's aim is to have this percentage increased in 2022 and

again in 2024. (DG COMM, Strategic Communication Plan 2020-2024: 20). Considering the

EU's own strategic documents, strategic public communication by EU executives aim to

bolster EU legitimacy among citizens through all four sources developed in the literature on system legitimacy and self-legitimation. The question is, to what extent do they attempt to bolster each of these four sources and how uniformly do they do so?

## The contribution of public communication strategies to legitimacy

While strategic communication becomes a key tool for maintaining and reproducing legitimacy beliefs in the absence of democratic accountability and permissive consensus,  EU executives must decide between a set of choices in the practice of strategic communication. First, the EU executives can choose between different organizational strategies. Secondly, there is a range of options in terms of content and modes of communication.

The organizational strategy of communication may be centralized and coordinated in terms mode, content, and timing of the communication. The official documents of DG COMM signal a more centralized approach. It is within the mandate of DG COMM, since it is "responsible for explaining EU policies to outside audiences and coordinate communication within the Commission[2]. More explicitly, DG COMM's Strategic Communication Plan sets out that: "DG Communication will also work to ensure that the Commission's messages are aligned across all services and that they are understandable and impactful". (DG COMM, Strategic Communication Plan 2020-2024: 4) This clearly speaks to the aim of having a centralized PR pattern in which different DGs and subordinate agencies of the Commission send out a coherent message.

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[2] Source: https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/communication_en.

However, DG COM's communication strategy also clearly acknowledges the inextricable link between policy and communication. "Policy-making and communication are two sides of the same coin. …. communication actions and the perception of their effects are strongly influenced by the content/substance of the policy dossiers throughout the policy and decision-making process." (DG COMM, Strategic Communication Plan 2020-2024: 6). Given that different EU institutions have different competencies and work on different policy fields, it may well be that their self-legitimation also differs to match those competencies and policies. Some EU institutions and officials have more executive power than others. Commissioners and DGs have high executive discretion, whilst some EU agencies merely have a monitoring or information sharing function. Thus, the EU executives faces an organizational conundrum in strategic public communication. On the one hand, a centralized strategic communication can present a uniform front across different Twitter accounts that function as the public communication of the EU. On the other hand, a decentralized strategic communication acknowledges the complexities of the EU governances and offers flexibility to accommodate variation in institutional capacity and policy responsibilities. While the former one streamlines the communication and make the strategic communication more manageable in the face of crises, the latter one would enable executives to legitimate themselves based on their needs and resources.

The second set of choices concerns the content and the mode of communication. As figure 1 illustrates, different modes of communication can alter legitimacy beliefs based on different sources depending on the message content. Based on the literature on public relations, three

modes of strategic communication practices are at EU executives' disposal (Dozier et al., 2013; Glozer et al., 2019; Grunig, 2013; Mergel, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Waters & Williams, 2011). The first is one-way communication. In this mode of communication, information flow is top-down, from the political authority to the audience, where the political authority designs and decides the content of the message and delivery channel. The second mode of communication is called two-way asymmetric communication. Such communication from the political authority invites a degree of input from the audience yet whether the authority will act on the feedback or not is not clear. The last mode is two-way symmetric (i.e., dialogical) communication where the political authority and the audience enter a dialog with the aim to co-create content and the agenda. In the two-way symmetric mode, the political authority and the audience engage in a conversation on relevant issues as equals to reach a conclusion. Thus, strategic public communication can alter legitimacy beliefs via different sources based on the chosen mode of communication and the content in it.

Legitimacy based on identity can be maintained by practicing one-way communication that informs the audience about the identity and mandate of the political authority. Such messages can potentially educate the audience about the *raison d'être* of the authority, thus alter the legitimacy beliefs of the audience by creating the sense that the organizations' identity is desirable and proper.

Output based legitimacy can be fostered through one-way communication where the content of the message focuses on the political outputs of the authority. By informing successes and achievements of the political organization, political authorities can encourage the belief that their political outputs effectively and efficiently contribute to the common good of the

audience. This form of communication is called press agentry (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Scharpf, 1999).

Throughput based legitimacy beliefs, on the other hand, can benefit from all modes of communication depending on the content of the message. Throughput based legitimacy essentially rests on two beliefs. First, the audience of the authority should perceive the governing processes of the authority as transparent. Second, the audience of the authority should perceive that the governance process involves and includes all relevant societal groups (i.e stakeholders) (Schmidt, 2013). One-way communication that reports on responsibility of authorities in political decisions and outcomes can then encourage beliefs about transparency among the audience. Two-way asymmetric and symmetric modes of communication, on the other hand, can create the impression that the political authority consults and involves relevant stakeholders in the governance process.
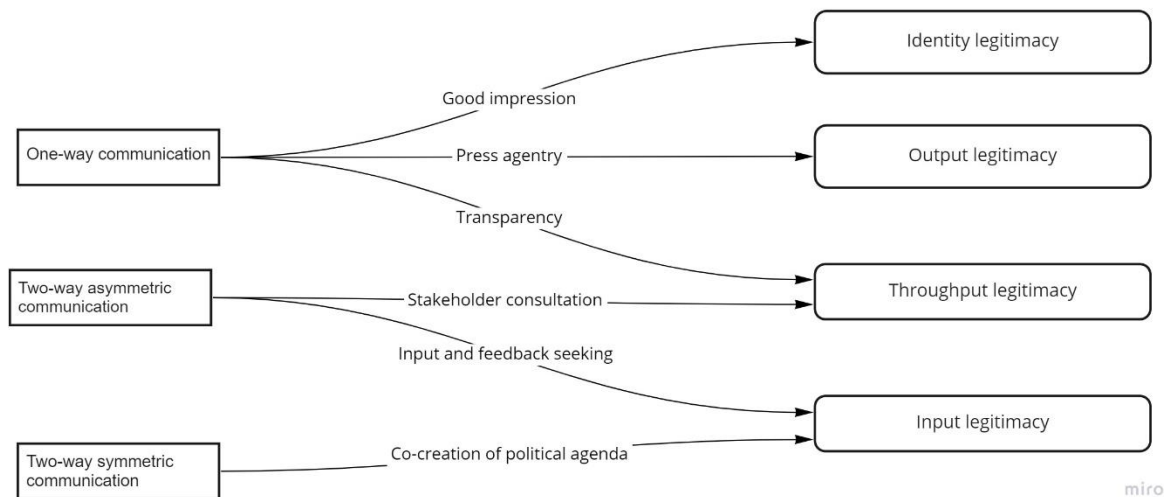


*Figure 1:  Contribution of strategic communication to legitimacy*

Input based legitimacy beliefs can benefit from both two-way asymmetric and symmetric mode of communication. By asking for input and feedback on the political goals and outputs from the broader audience in two-way asymmetric communication, the political authority can establish or enhance positive beliefs about its capacity to represent interests of the audience in governance (Bellamy, 2010; Bellamy & Weale, 2015). Similarly two-way symmetric communication by political authorities can encourage the positive beliefs about the representative capacity of the political authority. Two-way symmetric communication could potentially result in positive outcomes such as trust, mutuality, and empathy between the audience and the political authority (Soon & Soh, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014) as the political authority enters into a dialog with audience as equals to discuss and set the political agenda. These outcomes can, therefore, feed into the impression among the audience that the political authority has the capacity and willingness to represent the interest of the audience.

## Data and Method:

Our sample aims to capture the presence of the EU executives on Twitter as wide as possible. To this end, we have identified 103 verified twitter accounts which belong to the supranational executive branch of the EU polity and scraped twitter handles using the official webpages (full list of handles is presented in Appendix 1). These accounts include commissioners, director generals, deputy-director generals, institutions, and agencies. Then we manually validated the accounts. After selecting the appropriate accounts, we streamed tweets from these accounts using R, rtweet (Kearney, 2019) and Twitter API v1 between December 1st, 2019 and July 30th, 2020. The time period was chosen based on

the external shocks the EU has faced. In this period, the EU had to tackle the financial and public health crisis due to COVID-19 and the immigration crisis in the Mediterranean and along its south and eastern borders. Our reasoning is that these crises require an intensification of public communication, thus leading to a richer data in terms of public communication strategies. We then selected a proportional stratified random sample of 2136 tweets following probability theory (Krippendorff, 2018). This theoretically allows us to create a sample which contains even the least likely category in the population.

We manually coded each tweet as a whole according to its key messages and the key actors mentioned in the tweet. We refer to these key messages as object of publicity, the specific acts in the tweet such as meetings, identity or mission statements, opinions, and identified by "*what is being publicized in the tweet?*". The object of publicity consists of six different categories while the category reply is provided by the Twitter API. We refer to the key actor in the tweet as subject of publicity. The subject of publicity in a tweet refers to the persons or institutions whose activity or opinion is brought into limelight by the author. The subject consists of four categories capturing the relationship between the actor mentioned in the tweet and the author. Categories for object and subject of publicity and example tweets are presented in Table 1 and 2. The subject of publicity variable is coded as a multinominal variable whereas object of publicity categories are coded as individual binary indicators. The reasoning behind this choice is that tweets can contain multiple categories of object of publicity, so we code each category as binary indicators to record whether a tweet includes a message of this category (=1) or not (=0). We conducted three rounds of intercoder reliability tests between the three coders to ensure the quality of data before coding the full sample. The first two rounds showed in sufficient reliability scores, but after intensive training and discussion among coders, we reached sufficient reliability scores across all coding categories (see Appendix 2).

*Table 1: Categories for subject of publicity*

| Category | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| Self | The key actors mentioned in the tweet are the same as the author of the tweet |
| Other actors | The actors mentioned in the tweet differ from the author |
| Compound | The set of actors mentioned in the tweets include both the author and others |
| None | The tweet does not mention any identifiable actors |

*Table 2: Categories of object of publicity*

| Communication strategy categories | Object of publicity categories | Definition |
| --- | --- | --- |
| One-way communication | Identity and mandate | Messages that aim to inform the audience about reasons as to why the EU, its institutions and bureaucrats exist and have a political role |
| | Output | Messages that provide an update and information on political operations, policies, programs, reports published by the EU, its institutions, or its bureaucrats |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Activity | Tweets containing activities such as: meetings, handshakes, travel, signing documents, conference participation by officials that show actions or events taking place outside of Twitter. This could be actions by the account holder or others. |
| | Opinion | Tweets that state the author's preference or evaluation regarding some policy, activity, situation or institutions and actors. |
| | Other | Tweets that do not pertain to political or day to day operations defined in author's mandate such as job announcements or trivia information. |
| Two-way asymmetric | Input seeking | Tweets that seek feedback, input, or opinions of stakeholders or the wider audience on political operations of the EU. |
| Two-way symmetric | Reply | Tweets that are direct replies to other users. |

## Results

We start our examination with a descriptive analysis of the subjects of publicity in the EU executive tweets. As shown in Figure 2, there is a clear trend in terms of who the EU executives bring into limelight with their communication on twitter. While high level individuals such as commissioners, the Commission and the EU council presidents tend to highlight themselves alone (category: self) or along with others (category: compound), institutional accounts (e.g. a directorate general) and technocrats

(e.g. director generals) tend to bring forth primarily other actors or themselves with either retweets or direct references in their tweets.
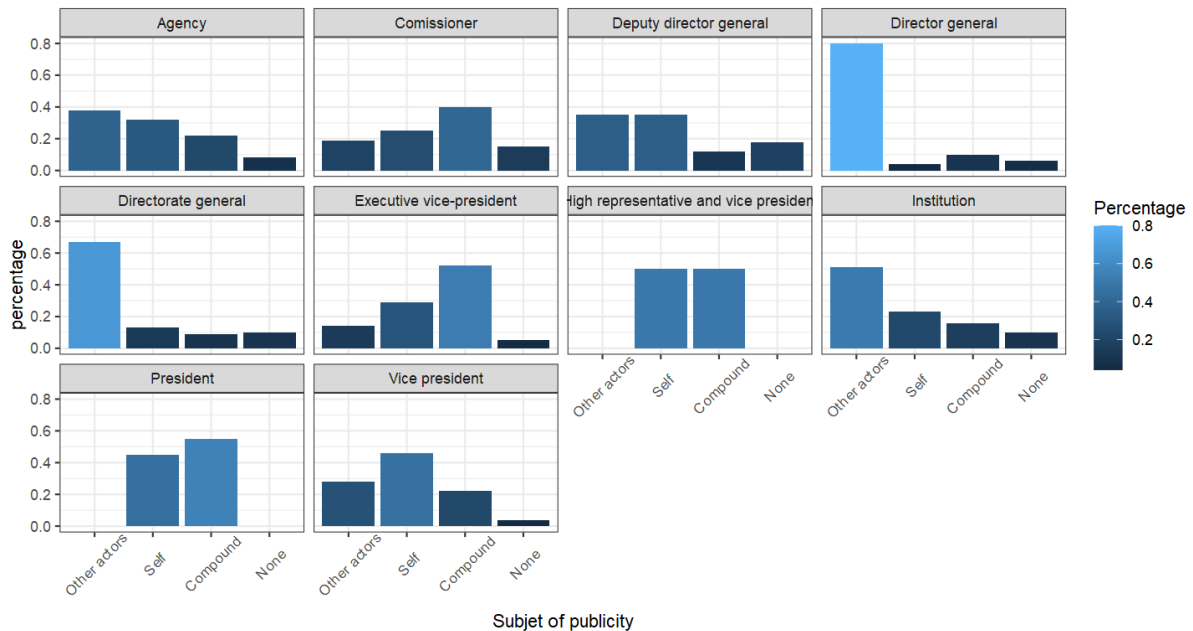


*Figure 2: Percentage share for different subjects of publicity*

Figure 3 illustrates other actors mentioned in the EU executive communications at least four times in our sample. Looking at the most referred actors in the EU executives' Twitter communication shows three insights. Firstly, it seems that the conception of the EU as a unitary actor is quite prevalent in the EU executives' communication, especially in the communication of institutional accounts. This is best illustrated with the communications from Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (@eu_near) and DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (@EU_social). Secondly, the most prevalent actors in the communication of individual executives seems to be their immediate institutions. For example, commissioners such as EU Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders (@dreynders) and Commissioner for Democracy and Demography Dubravka Suica (@dubravkasuica) often refer to the EU commission in their tweets. Lastly, Figure 3 implies that EU

executives' communication on Twitter forms a tight knit community, where executives often amplify

each other. This applies to both institutions or individuals. This implies that there is a degree of

centralized coordination of communication limiting who the executives can draw attention. The full

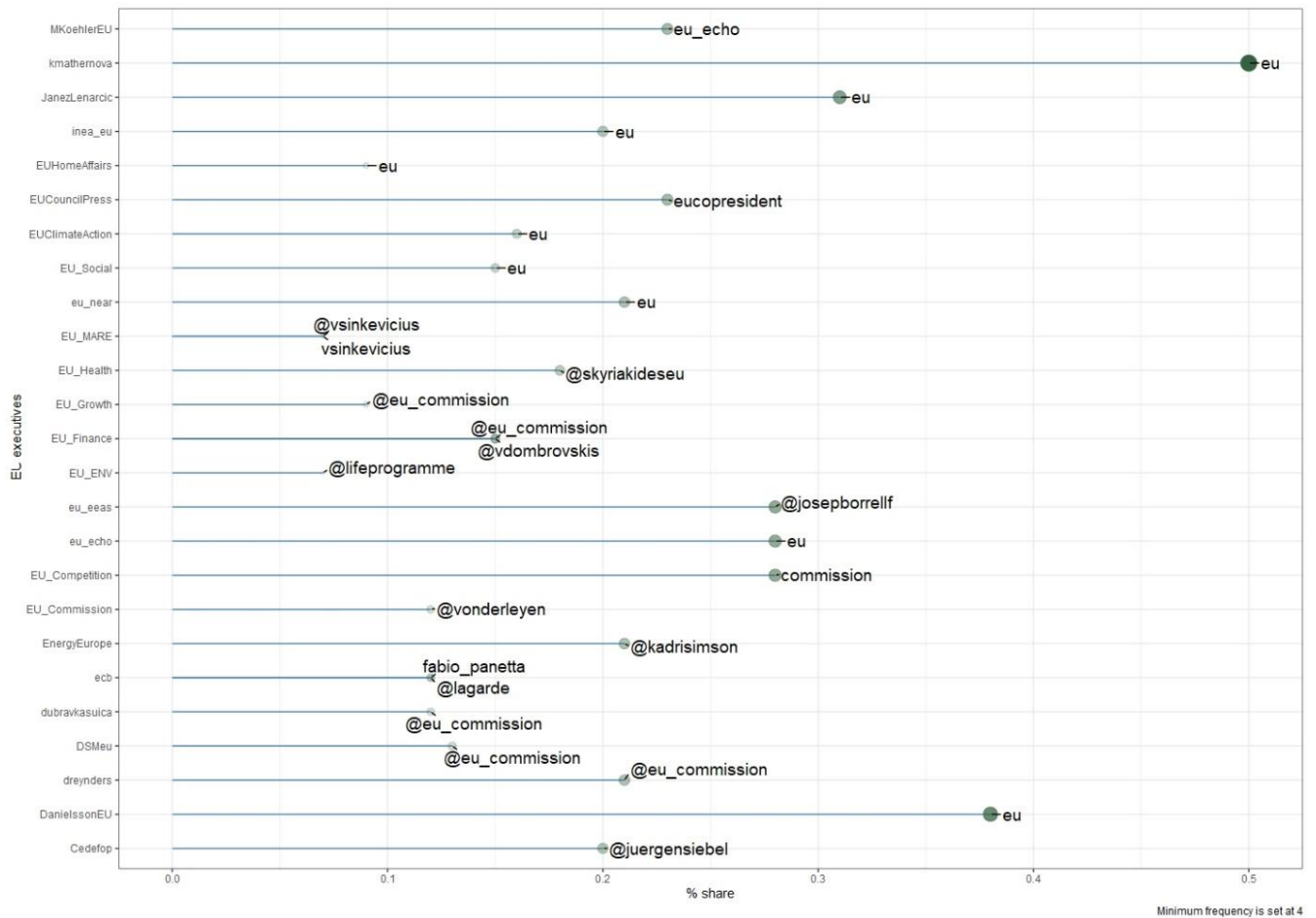list of mentioned actors can be found in figure 1 in Appendix 3.



*Figure 3: Frequencies of most mentioned actors for other and compound categories*

Next, we turn our attention to the modes and content of public communication with an overview of

the EU executive communication on Twitter. As Figure 4 illustrates, one-way communication with a

heavy emphasis on political output is the main mode of communication in the EU executive

Twittersphere. Almost 50% of the tweets in our sample contain a message informing the audience

about the political outputs or output goals. This is, by and large, followed by EU executives informing their audience about their day-to-day activities such as conferences, press-releases, webinars, or meetings; about 35% of tweets include at least one message on these subjects. Another interesting finding is the percentage of tweets that contain opinions from the EU executives. About 30% of all the tweets evaluate a situation or a demand by an EU executive actor or institution. This result is somewhat counter-intuitive given the fact that previous research indicates that EU executives tend to avoid taking clear position and use a very technocratic language to de-politicize in other communication channels (Moschella et al., 2020; Rauh et al., 2020; van der Veer & Haverland, 2018). Conversely, their one-way communication does not seem to put emphasis on identity based self-legitimation since only less than 10% of the tweets contain information on the identity and mandate of the tweet author.
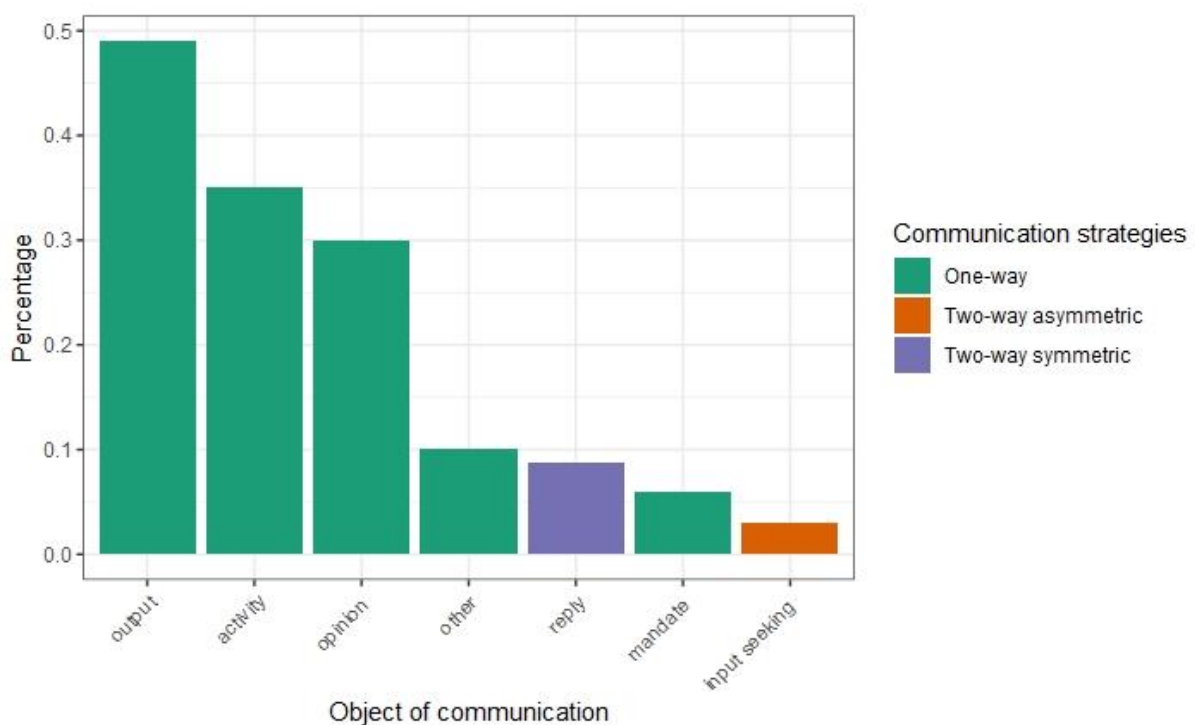


Figure 4: Percentage share of object of publicity for overall EU executive communication

Compared to one-way communication, EU executives seem to seldomly employ two-way symmetric and asymmetric communication. Overall, less than 10% of the tweets are replies to other users while less than 5% of the tweets ask for feedback and opinion from the audience. It is worth noting that these two strategies could potentially foster input and throughput legitimacy by bringing stakeholders and the wider audience into the process of exercising authority. Keeping this in mind, our results imply that EU executives, both institutions and individuals, are putting less emphasis on input and throughput based self-legitimation than on output legitimation.

Disaggregating the object of publicity and communication strategies by actor types reveals further insights. Figure 5 below illustrates the top 3 types of executives for each object of publicity. First and foremost, the figure indicates that expressing opinion is a more common practice among individuals with representative capacity than other individuals and institutions in the sample. High representatives such as @eucopresident Charles Michel, and vice presidents of the European Commission such as Frans Timmermans and Margrethe Vestager frequently express their political evaluations and desires. Similar accounts lead the way in terms of reporting their activities and their mandate to a large extent. Conversely, it seems that the EU commission directorate generals such as @EUDigi, and institutional accounts such as @EU_Commission practice two-way asymmetric communication by asking for input from the audience to a greater extent. These accounts, with the addition of agencies, also lead the way in communicating their output.
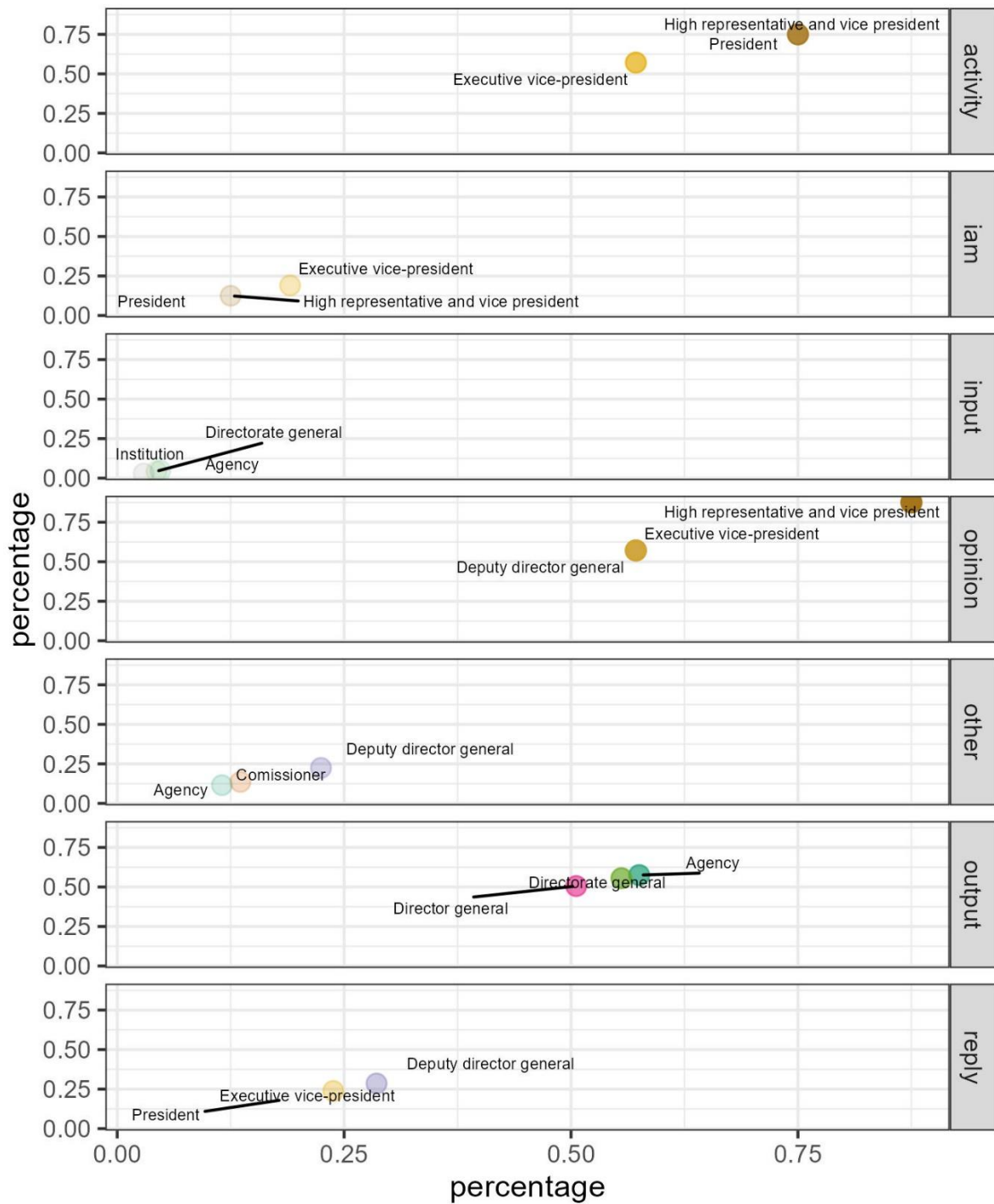
*Figure 5: Percentage share of object of publicity by different types of EU executives*

Figures 5 also implies that many actors combine different message content and communication

strategies in one tweet. Based on this insight, our next analysis focuses on the EU executives' tendency

to combine different objects of publicity. Based on the binary coding of all our variables, we examine

the clustering of messages based on our coding using the Jaccard index with hierarchical clustering. Since cluster analysis is an inductive method and we lack the ground truth, we use 22 of 30 test indices, which are appropriate for binary indicators, offered by Charrad et. al. (2014) to identify the relevant number of clusters. The majority of these indices suggest the tweets cluster into four distinct groups based on the object of publicity they include (see Appendix 3 for the test indices). The results of the clustering analysis are presented in figure 6.
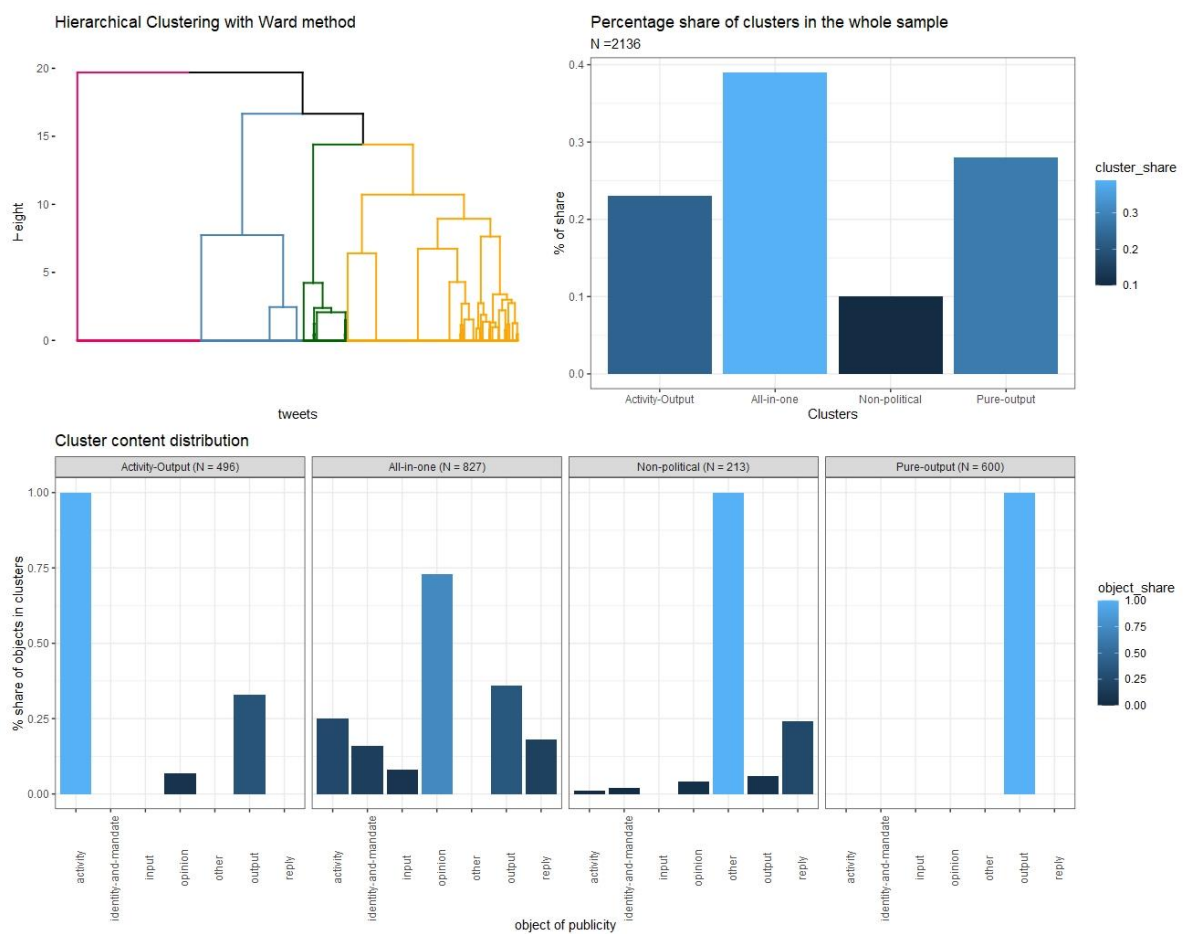


*Figure 6: Hierarchical clustering of tweets based on object of publicity*

Our clustering analysis reveals that the EU executive communication often combines various objects of publicity in a single tweet. As the top-right and bottom panel of the figure 6 illustrates, the EU

executives have a strong tendency to combine all strategies into a single message (all-in-one). In contrast to "all-in-one" type of tweets, other clusters are sparser in information and less often employed. For example, "pure-output", the second most populous cluster, seems to contain only messages of output whereas "activity-output", the third most populous one, puts a heavier emphasis on activities.
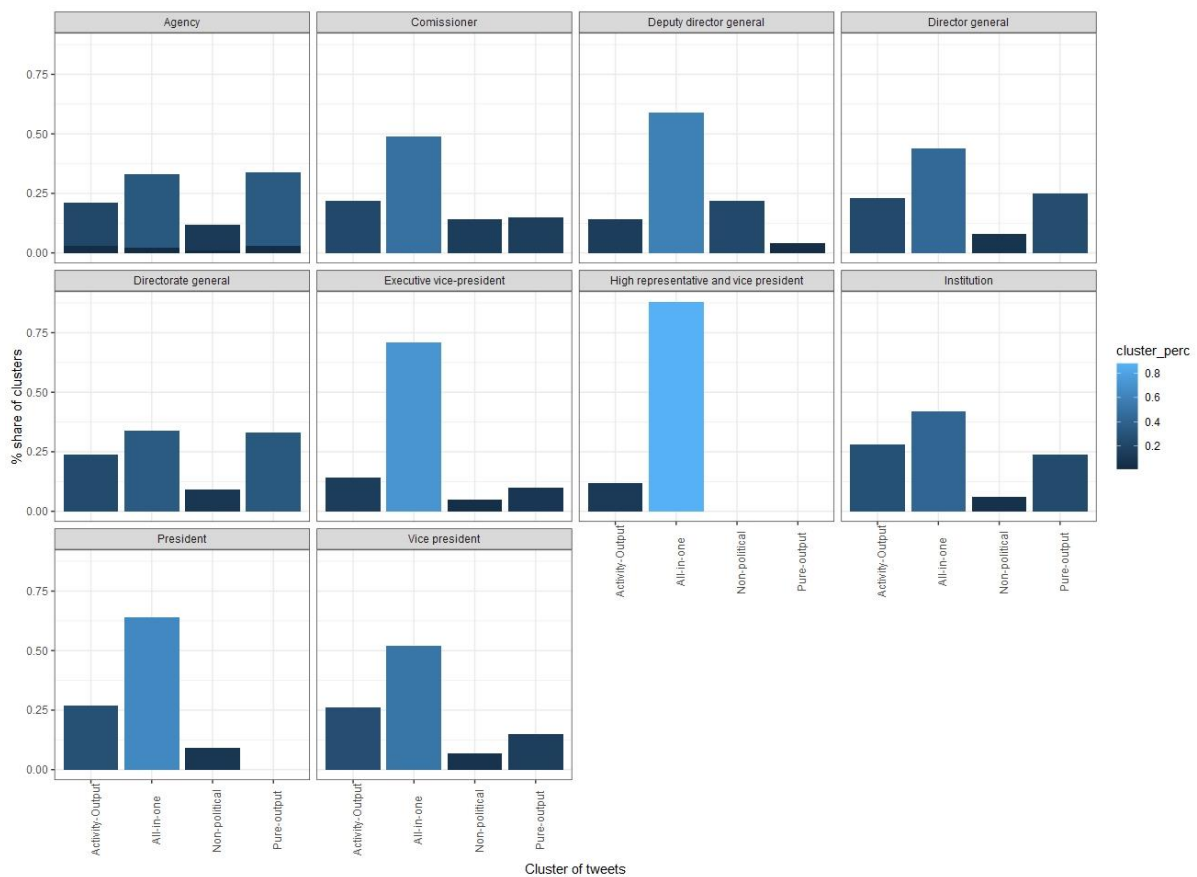


*Figure 7: use of different clusters by EU executives*

A very interesting insight from the cluster analysis is that EU executives' self-legitimation via strategic public communication is by and large polychrome. Figure 7 illustrates the frequency of different clusters by various types of EU executives on Twitter. All-in-one tweets which combine all modes and content types in a single tweet, are the most popular among EU executives. This implies that

executives' communication on Twitter has the potential to foster to all types of legitimacy, albeit to varying degrees. Only agencies seem to marginally deviate from others in their strategic public communication by putting more emphasis on their output. We also estimated a series of binary logistic regression taking the clusters as outcomes to estimate the probability of the next message being from a particular cluster given the communicating executive. The results, presented in Figure 8, corroborate the initial observations from Figure 6. Regression analysis delivers two insights. First, they show that all types of executives are likely, albeit in different magnitudes, to send all-in-one messages. In the case of activity-output type messages and non-political tweets, we observe that individual executives such as commissioners, high representatives and deputy director generals are likely to deviate from other EU executives in terms of communication discipline. When it comes to activity-output type of message High-representatives, executive vice president and deputy director generals are likely to shy away from this type. Deputy director generals and commissioners, however, seems to be more likely to send out non-political messages.
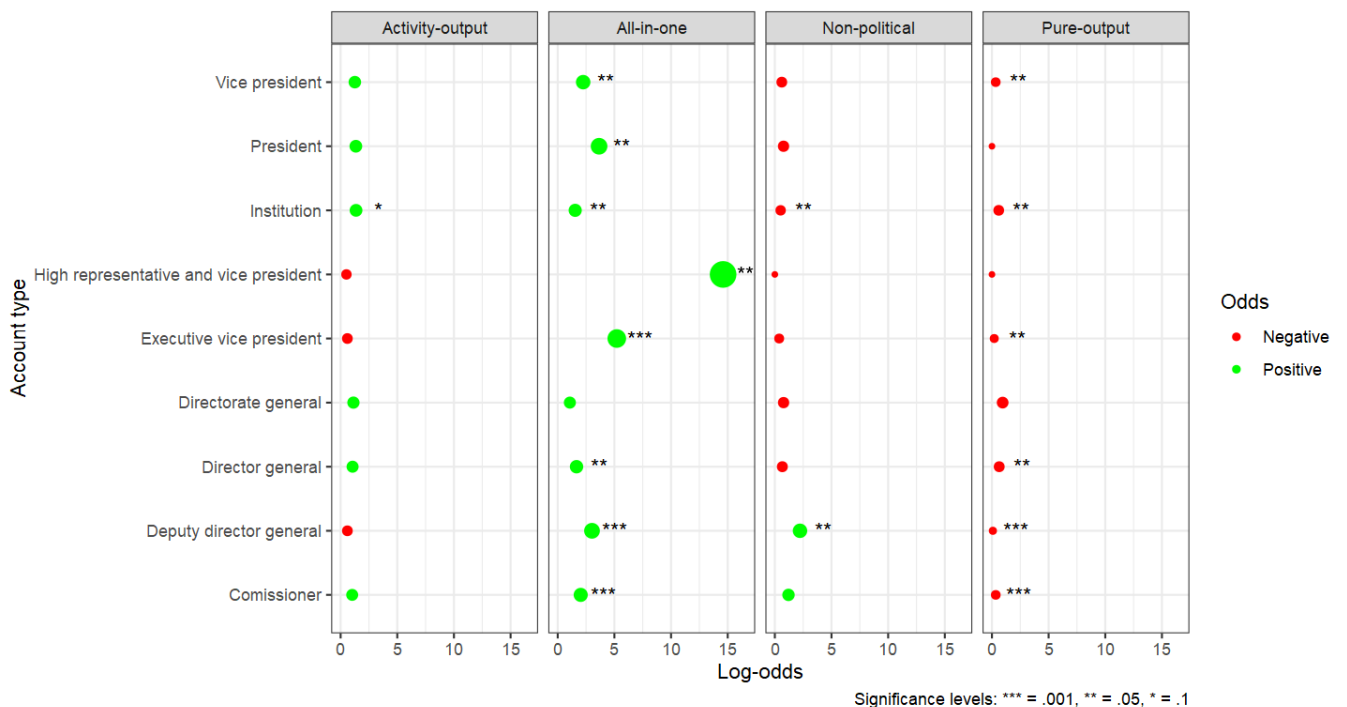


Figure 8: Binary logistic regression results

## Discussion:

Our results provide several important insights into the how EU executives' try to use Twitter for self-legitimation through public relations. We observe two main patterns. First and foremost, our results show that EU executives tend to present the EU as a unitary actor, as illustrated in the figure 3. This implies that executives' strategic public communication is mainly geared towards legitimating the EU as a whole political system rather than individual authorities. This carries two serious implications for legitimacy via public communication. Presentation of the EU as a unitary actor with level of agency limits the capacity of the public communication to provide transparency on the responsibilities and roles of authorities in political decision. Consequently, this indicates that in the case of unpopular policies such as in the case of the Eurocrisis, citizens are more likely to blame the EU as a political system for their discontent rather than individual authorities or institutions such as the European Central Bank or Eurogroup members of the Council. In other words, uniform communication across EU executives presenting the EU as a monolytithic being runs the risk of resulting in delegitimation of the EU as a whole.

The second pattern indicates that EU executives publicize small groups of actors who tend to be closely linked to the author of the tweet such as their own institutions and leader of these institutions. This pattern implies that the communication is somewhat fractured along political responsibilities and mandate. Consequently, this limits the reach of these executives messages. To illustrate that, information on activities and outputs in humanitarian aid is most likely to reach the followers of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, the commissioner in charge and leading figures such as the Director General and Deputy Director General of the Directorate. Such limited dissemination of information hinders the diffusion of messages to a

wider audience and thus traps them inside a quassi-echo chamber of those who are already active and interested in these policy matters. To the extent that this holds, executives' public communication on Twitter has very limited capacity to foster a truly popular form of legitimacy in the sense that only niche publics who are already interested in what EU executives do in specific policy fields are informed, rather than the wider citizenry.

Turning to our results on the content of the EU executives public communication on Twitter, we observe two main patterns. First and foremost, the most frequent messages in executives tweets focus on political output followed by their day-to-day activities and opinion. Since the most common type of message informs the audience about political outputs, public communication seems to target legitimacy beliefs on the worth of their output (i.e output legitimacy) as shown in figure 4. Our results thus imply that responding to academic and Eurosceptic criticsm of lack of input legitimacy is not a priority in EU executives' public communication strategy. However, this is not to say that public communication completely ignores other sources of legitimacy. Our cluster analysis, as presented in figure 6 and 7, demonstrate that EU executives often combine multiple messages in a single tweet thus invoking multiple sources of legitimacy at once, albeit at different frequencies. This is most evident with the message cluster "all-in-one" where executives tend to make a normative statement by expressing their opinion on a political issue while simultaneously informing the audience about their output or activity on the matter, or seeking input from them.

Finally, our analysis of publicized actors and content indicate that EU executive strategic public communication is conducted with a degree of centralization. As frequency analysis in figure 3 and 7 as well as binary logistic regression results in figure 8 indicate, there is limited variation among mentioned actors and types of tweets sent by EU executives. These results imply that strategic public communication follows several key central guidelines in terms of who and what to publicize. Yet, considering that this communication happens via small network communities on the executives' side,

the key implication is that these guidelines are best understood as guidelines, rather than strict directives. There is no extreme centralization vis-à-vis subject and object of publicity. This strategy, theoretically, strikes a balance between the potential to present a uniform front via centralized communication on the one hand and flexibility of decentralized communication tailored to specific competencies of individual EU agencies on the other. Consequently, EU executives' public communication cultivates the capacity to handle legitimacy crises in specific policy areas, preventing spill-over from such crises to other policy areas, containing their scope.

## Conclusion:

European Union executive institutions and actors have a precarious legitimacy relationship with their constituencies in the face of growing politicization, external crises, and communication obstacles. Against this backdrop, social media platforms offer unique opportunities to EU executives to legitimate themselves to the broader public. In this article, we looked at self-legitimation strategies of EU executives via both organizational and practiced strategic communications through Twitter. Combining insights from public relations and the legitimacy of international organizations, we analyzed a representative sample of messages from 103 verified EU executive Twitter accounts published between December 2019 and July 2020.

Our descriptive and inferential analysis points towards several key results. Both in terms of publicized actors and content, EU executives appear to follow a centralized strategic public communication. In terms of the subject of publicity, EU executive institutions and actors tend to present the EU as a unitary actor in their Twitter communication. Besides the EU as a unitary actor, EU executives tend to publicize their immediate institutions and colleagues with the means of direct reference and retweeting in their messages. From a legitimation point of view, these results imply that EU executives'

communication is more geared towards legitimating the EU as political system or legitimating their immediate colleagues rather than self-legitimation. With regards to the object of publicity, our results indicate that most of the tweets from the EU executives are one-way communication with a heavy emphasis on publicizing their political goals and outputs, day-to-day activities, and political opinions. However, EU executive communication on Twitter often combines multiple strategies including several different types of messages. Our cluster analysis indicates that there are four common ways that EU executives combine different objects of publicity in their message. The most populous among these clusters contain almost all types of objects. This implies that when EU executives engage in self-legitimation on Twitter, they often target multiple sources of legitimacy beliefs in a single tweet. They flank their political opinion on a matter with statements on what they deliver (output), do (activity), or whom they consult (input).

Our study has the potential to serve as springboard to several future studies. While we map and document EU executives' communicative legitimation strategies in the study, our research design is not capable of identifying the effect of such communication on the audience. Examining the effect of EU executives' Twitter communication would, thus, greatly contribute to our understanding of sociological legitimacy dynamics. Another fruitful venue would be to extend the study to other components of the EU such as the European parliament and members that have stronger representative capacity. Similarly, the study could also be extended to the full population of tweets from executives. While we were not able to do so because of resource limitations, such studies would provide cross-sectional and longitudinal insight into EU's legitimation practices on social media.

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