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EU and crisis management: Afghanistan and Ukraine on social media

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The European Union (EU) is a very relevant actor in the political scene. The EU's external action is inspired by the principles of peace and rule of law. However, the EU is composed of different institutions and leaders, making it difficult to find a single voice. This promotes a feeling of remoteness that threatens the legitimacy of the EU political system. In recent years, the EU has faced many internal challenges, such as the refugee crisis and Brexit, but recent events in Afghanistan and Ukraine reveal the need to further our understanding of the role of the EU as an international actor. Bearing these trends in mind, this research aimed to explore the management of crisis communication by the EU leaders regarding the two most recent international events: Afghanistan in 2021 and Ukraine in 2022. Specifically, we analyze the profiles of Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), Josep Borrell (@JosepBorrellF), and Charles Michel (@eucopresident). Content analysis is manually performed on 479 tweets on military conflicts over a general sample of 661 messages. The strategies and specific topics are studied based on a pretest. In addition, we calculate the impact rate of the tweets. In this sense, the data were captured for a 2-month period (15 August to 15 September 2021 and 24 February to 24 March 2022). As a result, we show the predominance of messages on Ukraine together with a significantly different action of von der Leyen in terms of strategies and employment of the tools of Twitter. Her impact rate is also higher. This study contributes to current discussions on the mission of communication to foster trust, since the anti-publicity bias of the EU requires better levels of coherence to more effectively disseminate messages.

KEYWORDS

crisis communication, crisis management, social media, European Union, EU institutions, Afghanistan, Ukraine

1. Introduction

The formulation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 reshaped the political-institutional framework of the European Union (EU). The transfer of competences to supranational bodies was granted with the endorsement of the national sovereignty of the different member states, reinforcing the idea of a sovereign Europe. This institutional reform granted clear competences in terms of who has the decision-making capacity during a crisis (European Union, 2012).

A volatile society such as today's needs to be clear about how to act at any given moment, although forecasting is difficult to establish, even more so when there is such interdependence between global actors (Seib, 2012). In this context, the objective of this research is to gain insight into the functioning of the EU in the field of crisis communication.

To do so, we consider the institutional framework and the procedures that have been progressively established.

The focus of this research goes beyond looking at questions of competences assigned by the treaties but will present an empirical approach in order to find out how the different EU institutions actually act. For this reason, the study of crisis management from the perspective of communication is proposed. The EU has developed considerable communication about the benefits of being together (Aiello, 2012), which can be assessed as a kind of public diplomacy (Manfredi Sánchez, 2011). Nevertheless, there is scant research on the existence of a joint social communication strategy launched by the EU in times of crisis and the hallmarks of the messages issued by the EU crisis management actors. In addition to that, crisis communication has also had importance in the way in which institutions and political leaders faced the pandemic caused by COVID-19. There has been more recent research on this topic (Losada Díaz et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021), and it would further justify the need to address the specific case studies that are being analyzed by focusing not on a health crisis situation but one of war.

The empirical character of the present research is produced through the analysis of two case studies, allowing comparisons to be made between the two and a series of conclusions to be drawn. First, the focus will be on events in Afghanistan in August 2021. This country has been marked by conflict and war for decades. Currently, we find this country on the brink of collapse, both economically and socially. The international community's response to humanitarian demands has alleviated the catastrophe in the territory, with peace and ceasefire appearing to be a necessity in the area. The focus of this conflict is to measure the role the EU played in mediating what was provoked by the Taliban takeover of Kabul, thus ending the country's pseudo-democratic regime (Rajmil et al., 2022).

Second, Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory challenged the international security paradigm. The EU as a global actor has mobilized, unanimously condemning the actions of Russian forces. Similarly, up to five sanction packages have been imposed on the Kremlin by the EU. There has been no shortage of solidarity in terms of humanitarian aid from the 27 member states, as well as mechanisms for action by the European institutions. Analyzing the communication strategy in this scenario will be crucial to understand whether proximity is an element to take into account when designing the communication strategy.

In general terms, a comparison of the two case studies will allow us to identify whether there really is a strategy in terms of social communication. In this way, it will be possible to identify whether there is a multiplicity of messages from the European institutions or whether, by contrast, there is real communication coordination. Furthermore, it seems interesting to compare the two cases, as elements such as geographical proximity to the conflict can play an important role in defining crisis communication. However, our focus is not on a precise crisis communication strategy implemented by the EU but rather on the social media communication run by three important political actors within the EU. Finally, the presentation of the framework provided by the treaties and the case studies will show whether there is real cooperation and coordination between EU institutions and bodies.

2. Literature review

The European institutions seek to achieve confidence on the part of citizens, and the institutions should be perceived by citizens as legitimate and efficient. Trust in institutions is everything, as they need it to carry out their actions on a day-to-day basis. Gray and Balmer explore how important reputation can be for an organization. They define reputation as "the aggregate evaluation constituents make about how well an organization is meeting constituent expectations based on its past behaviors" (Gray and Balmer, 1998: p. 696). In this sense, the aforementioned scholars suggest that the maintenance of reputation means that the institution does not need to spend time repairing the possible damage, but the rise of Euroscepticism has put this reputation of the EU into question (de Vries, 2018).

Public trust is linked to the importance of communication in contemporary flawed democracies (Moernaut et al., 2020). In times of a decline of democracies because of the rise of cynicism and distrust (Foa and Mounk, 2016), the value of information is reinforced, as the crisis of democracies means a crisis of the communicative concept of the public sphere. There is scant space for deliberative democracy which is connected with strong neoliberalism and a lack of diversity, threatening the liberal order (Nye, 2017).

When it comes to crisis communication management, several activities can be found, such as threat assessment, prevention and mitigation activities, preparedness/early warning, response, and recovery (Demchak et al., 2010). All things considered, the goal is to reduce risk and present resilience as an institution. In the context concerning the current research, we need to point out that the EU crisis management policy has been fed, on the one hand, by the EU security and defense policy, and, on the other hand, by the EU emergency and disaster policy (Pavlov, 2015).

Regarding communication and actions taken by the EU's Institutions, the Laeken Declaration and the 2006 White Paper on the European Communication Policy work as key documents. Some authors found that the EU has shown great concern about how to communicate and how to develop external communication (Andrino San Cristóbal, 2014). On the other hand, the EU is also distant from the public (Moravcsik, 2002). Events such as the recent economic and Brexit crises have fostered a progressive politization of the EU (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Schmidt, 2019), which explains the will of managing international conflicts.

Online strategies, and particularly social networks, have redefined the EU communication policy (Papagiannas, 2017). These digital tools are understood as an effective way to engage with citizens and reduce the traditional distance from the European project, which explains why the European Commission has mostly used Twitter to impact national public opinions (Tuñón Navarro and Carral Vilar, 2019). According to authors such as Barisione and Michailidou (2017), the current disconnection between the EU institutions and the citizens of Europe could only be reversed if the EU developed an institutional communication that deals with the main problems of the continent, including crisis.

From a wider theoretical perspective beyond the EU, Timothy Coombs launched the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) in order to assess receivers of information and

their perceptions and the attribution of responsibility to the organizations that they may generate (Coombs, 2004). The importance of this theory and why it is presented is due to it helping crisis managers to “identify the best outlets to relay crisis responses and develop strategies to target key sources that might help or hinder attempts to maintain organizational reputation or manage publics’ emotions toward the organization experiencing a crisis” (Coombs, 2004: p. 270). Indeed, the focus should be done in the communication strategy that is performed by the institutions.

The key aspect of crisis communication is to communicate. The target audience may be affected by the crisis, or maybe not, but the institution has to share all the information they have in order to combat all types of rumors that may appear. The main goal is to influence and inform the audience, an audience that have great expectations of the authorities. At this stage, we find again that “if authorities fail to meet these expectations, the public tends to lose confidence in the management” (Buama, 2018: p. 66) that is in charge of the institution.

In addition, the response of the EU to international problems is part of a global strategy (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2020), making public diplomacy a professionalized field. China, the US, and the EU are the main actors in the multipolar political system, but Europe is a cultural community rather than a nation. This overlaps with the traditional popular disengagement with the EU institutions. In fact, the literature has widely discussed the seeding of a European Public Sphere (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo, 2022).

In this context, and as a part of an evolving society, technologies are gaining an important position to help organizations and politicians to be connected with citizens and enhance the public sphere, which may have an impact on the EU. The literature identifies that “the emergence of digitized, networked media ecology has made communication appear increasingly important to achieving outcomes in international politics” (Michelsen and Colley, 2019: p. 61). It is important to highlight that most of the conducted academic research has been focused on analyzing the usage of social media, including Twitter, during political elections (Campos-Domínguez, 2017). Moreover, this is an argument to support how important social media can be in the political arena. At the same time, the mentioned crisis response strategy should protect the organization by eliminating or reducing reputational damage (Allen and Caillouet, 1994).

Despite all this, there is one idea missing in this literature review. The main concept we are dealing with is crisis, and for this reason, this concept should be presented. Mostly, the term lacks a widely accepted definition. Crisis is “a situation, deriving from a change in the external or internal environment, characterized by three necessary perceptions in responsible decision-makers: threat to basic values, urgency, and uncertainty” (Stern, 2003: p. 7–8). The last element is addressed by other authors, who agree that “crisis is typically characterized by a high degree of uncertainty” (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018: p. 958–980). This uncertainty mostly arrives because there is a lack of knowledge possessed by crisis managers in terms of the nature, causes, and consequences of the potential crisis.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

The aim of this study was to explore the response mechanism to war crises that the fundamental treaties of the European Union grant to the different European institutions and supranational bodies. On this matter, the objective of our study was not only to analyze the communication strategies promoted by the different European institutions that have been assigned competences in the field of crisis and conflict resolution but also to quantify the digital impact, from Twitter, of the institutional discourse on the conflict in Ukraine and Afghanistan according to the resources and strategies applied.

Based on our main objectives, the following research questions are posed:

- (RQ1) What is the degree of commitment of the European Union to events marked by different proximity criteria?
- (RQ2) How does the stage of the problem influence the EU’s involvement in an international conflict?
- (RQ3) To what extent is the EU capable of unifying the message and achieving a common position and a common voice in times of crisis?

Bearing these premises in mind, the methodology applied to complete the research responds to the application of a study technique based on comparative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Silverman, 2016). The time frame of the research is 57 days, divided into two time periods. Each period corresponds to a case study, as the conflicts analyzed take place at different times. The first period corresponds to the conflict in Afghanistan and 28 dates are studied, from 15 August 2021 to 11 September 2021. The date of 15 August 2021 was chosen because that is when the Taliban took Kabul. The date of 11 September 2021 was chosen because that is when the US ordered the withdrawal of its troops on the ground.

The second case study focuses on the conflict in Ukraine, which comprises 29 days of analysis. The time frame of this part of the study runs from 24 February 2022 to 24 March 2022. The proposed 1-month period was the most intense period of news after the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The decision to choose 24 March 2022 as the closing date corresponds to the fact that after a month of war, the conflict entered a stalemate phase. In fact, at this point, Russia suggested focusing on the Donbass region. In addition, there is the practical justification that this is when the sample collation began.

Before describing the procedure followed in the content analysis, it is particularly important to define the sample chosen to conduct the research.

3.2. Sample

The sample is made up of social media messages posted by political leaders at the inter-state level in the context of the European Union. The choice of Twitter as the social media platform where the entire sample is located is justified by the impact that this

TABLE 1 The content analysis applied to Twitter.

Quantitative variables	
No. of tweets	Tweet metrics
	- Likes
	- Retweets
Qualitative-discursive variables	
Thematic (a list of topics is provided, based on the key policies of the EU)	Tweet format (own production, retweet, thread, and quoted tweet, which are the main possibilities on Twitter)
Use of hashtags	Mentions
Audio-visual content (picture, video, video live, and link, as they are frequent sources on this social network)	Tweet tone
Language	

Source: Own elaboration.

social platform has in terms of the reproduction and viralization that these messages can achieve (Pérez Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2020).

The tweets are authored by three key players at the European level:

- Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen) → President of the European Commission.
- Josep Borrell (@JosepBorrellF) → High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission.
- Charles Michel (@eucopresident) → President of the European Council.

Therefore, the sample is composed of the tweets that these actors have published. Twitonomy software provides access to the tweets published by the actors under analysis. The general sample of tweets ($n = 661$) is subjected to a thematic categorization to obtain the specific sample ($n = 479$). This sample includes only messages related to the thematic conflict. On the basis of these constants, and in order to fulfill the research objectives, as indicated by the content analysis technique (Neuendorf, 2002), an analysis template sheet is designed. The variables are described in Table 1.

The last methodological step is data processing. The use of statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics version 25 has been employed. The reliability of the intercoder agreement is calculated through Scott's Pi formula, presenting an error level of 0.98. From the analysis of the data, we draw up contingency and frequency tables.

4. Results

4.1. Use of Twitter and preferred topics

After explaining the methodology followed for this research, we proceed to the presentation and commentary of the data used

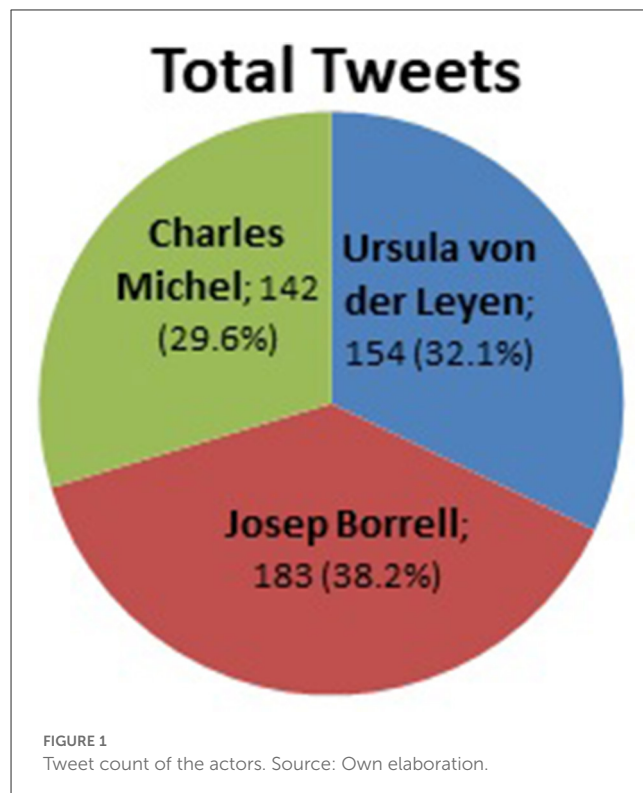


FIGURE 1 Tweet count of the actors. Source: Own elaboration.

in the analysis. Despite having two different case studies, a joint presentation of the results is offered, i.e., handling the research data jointly. As indicated earlier, the analysis of results is the outcome of monitoring the activity of the different EU actors on which the focus has been placed: Ursula von der Leyen, Josep Borrell, and Charles Michel. Quantitative and qualitative-discursive elements will be identified in this assessment.

First, it is necessary to identify the specific sample universe. Quantitative analysis provides information about the sample, identifying the metrics of each of the actors (Figure 1).

Of the total of 479 tweets that were submitted, there is a fairly even distribution in terms of the number of social media messages posted by the different actors. It is worth noting that in the periods analyzed, Josep Borrell is the one who uses Twitter the most to post-social media messages, while the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, has the least social presence. There is a difference of 41 tweets between these two actors, while the tweets from Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, are in an intermediate position, with a difference of 29 tweets compared to the tweets from Josep Borrell, with a total of 154 social media messages.

In order to approach the research questions, the next element presented relates social media messages to both the Afghanistan and Ukraine conflicts. Through a quantitative analysis, we identified how many tweets each political actor has published in each conflict scenario (Table 2).

Looking at the different cells in Table 2, it is possible to identify the trend of each actor in both conflicts, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Approximately 82.9% of the tweets focus on the conflict that broke

out in Ukraine, while only 82 of the 479 tweets refer to the situation in Afghanistan in August 2021.

If we identify the trend indicated by each actor, we find no surprise. They all have the Ukrainian conflict in mind on a greater number of occasions. Josep Borrell was the actor who tweeted the most in both cases, posting 34 of the 82 tweets about the events in Afghanistan. It is striking that Ursula von der Leyen is the one who tweets the least in reference to the conflict in Afghanistan. However, it is Charles Michel who has the least social presence in Ukraine.

Having presented the most relevant data from a quantitative point of view, it is necessary to focus on the evaluation of the most significant qualitative elements. Taking the specific sample of tweets (479) as a reference, we first analyze the thematic branding in the different social media messages.

A total of nine themes were identified to conduct the analysis: Attacks and Condemn; Energy, Environment, and Climate Change; Disinformation; Economy, Industry, and Crisis; Judicial Action and Sanctions; Immigration, Security, and Evacuations; Equality and Social Rights; International Relations (Diplomacy); and Others. One of the issues of the most interest in this research is the relationship between the actors and the thematic (Figure 2) in

order to identify which issues have monopolized the agenda of the different profiles.

The thematic focus of each of the actors can be visually identified, with international relations being the most frequently used topic. Under this thematic, the tweets that were categorized were the ones that showed bilateral and multilateral relations between the actors and third parties. Considering the other themes, it can be identified that a large part of the tweets published by von der Leyen focuses on judicial actions and sanctions. This topic presents a great contrast in the profile of Charles Michel, as this was the fourth most discussed topic by him. With regard to judicial actions and sanctions, this is the basis of the role that the different institutions have when it comes to adopting sanctions, with the European Commission being the benchmark in this respect.

Finally, another topic that has a great presence in the total number of tweets published is energy, environment, and climate change. An example can be found in Ursula von der Leyen's profile: 20 of her tweets focused on this topic. The presence of energy issues in the political agenda of the different actors is justified by the conflict in Ukraine, as EU–Russia dependence on energy supplies is pointed out.

Table 3 shows the issue frames that were present in each conflict, thus generating the political agenda of the actors analyzed.

In order to facilitate the interpretation of the data, the relevant figures are highlighted. The most frequent topics in social media messages are international relations; and immigration, security, and evacuations, accounting for 33.8 and 18.4% of tweets, respectively. The major impact that the frame of international relations has in the previous paragraphs is that it represents the spirit of the EU as a global actor in conflict resolution. On the other hand, immigration, security, and evacuation issues are a consequence of both case studies. The consequences of the

TABLE 2 Military conflict referenced by the actors (%).

EU actor	Afghanistan	Ukraine
Ursula von der Leyen	3.5	28.6
Josep Borrell	7.1	31.1
Charles Michel	6.5	23.2
Total	17.1	82.9

Source: Own elaboration.

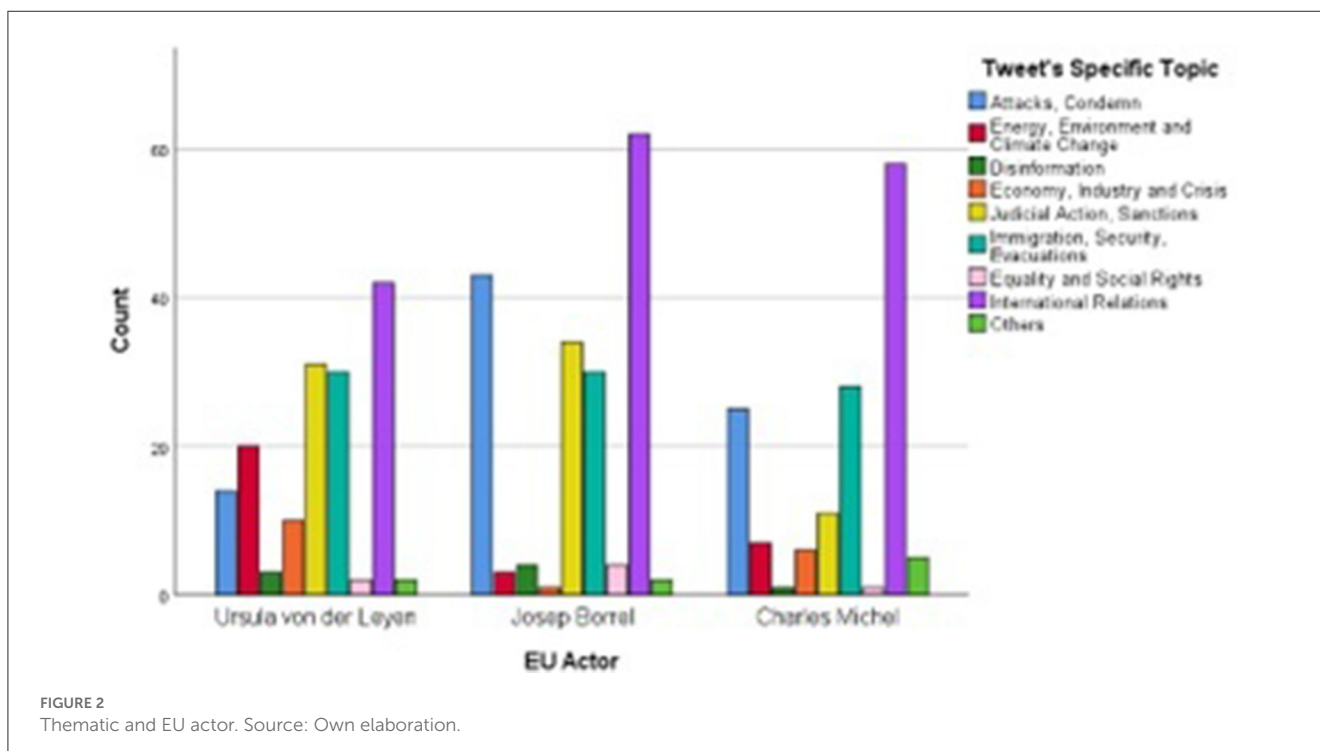


FIGURE 2 Thematic and EU actor. Source: Own elaboration.

TABLE 3 Tweet's thematic (%).

Tweet's specific topic	Afghanistan	Ukraine
Attacks, condemn	1.5	15.6
Energy, environment, and climate change	–	6.3
Disinformation	–	1.7
Economy, industry, and crisis	–	3.5
Judicial action, sanctions	0.4	15.4
Immigration, security, evacuations	6.3	12.1
Equality and social rights	0.4	1.0
International relations (diplomacy)	7.9	25.9
Others	0.6	1.0

Source: Own elaboration.

conflict on the civilian population force them to leave the country. Moreover, the EU's position is crucial in terms of evacuations.

Table 3 highlights the theme of judicial action and sanctions in the Ukraine conflict. More specifically, 15.4% of the tweets referring to the conflict in Ukraine focus on this topic. Looking back at the political news during the period under review, we found that the European Commission launched up to five sanction packages against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine. These actions had a great social impact, generating up to 74 tweets on the subject of sanctions and legal action.

Although already identified in Figure 2, Table 3 provides more detail on the issue frame of energy, environment, and climate change. We found that this topic is only present in the Ukraine conflict, since, as explained earlier, Russia's energy supply to European countries placed this question at the top of the political agenda. In the Afghanistan conflict, this theme is not present, and disinformation is also not present. The latter is present in the case of Ukraine, mainly by identifying the threat posed by Russia in terms of propaganda through the television channels Sputnik and Russia Today among others.

4.2. Scope and impact of the crisis communication

Another variable to which the social media messages of the different political actors have been subjected is the tone of the message (Figure 3). Through this variable, the communication strategy can be analyzed, as it allows the potential receiver to know what the intention of the message received is.

There is no trend in terms of tone in the tweets, as the discursive marks are different for each actor. The tone of three tweets were considered in the analysis: positive, critical, and neutral. Under the positive tone classification, messages that consider improvements and positive actions toward the European Union have been included. In other words, in the tweets included, the profiles analyzed spoke about benefits in terms of wellbeing for the European population. Critical tone refers to messages based on harsh criticism of the actions of a third actor, i.e., Russia. Finally,

neutral tone refers to those messages with an informative slant on current affairs, as well as personal agenda information, such as for example, agreements reached or meetings conducted by the actors.

Having established the criteria that have been followed, we can now comment on the results of the analysis of the social media message of the profiles analyzed. In the case of Michel and von der Leyen, the neutral tone stands out, being present in more than 50% of their publications. In the case of Josep Borrell, the critical tone is more present, with more than 80 of his 183 tweets having a critical bias.

The critical trend is also present in more than 20 tweets in the case of the Charles Michel, President of the Council, while Ursula von der Leyen has the fewest tweets of a critical nature. It is von der Leyen, President of the Commission, who has the greatest presence of messages with a positive tone. These data help us to advance the profile of each of the politicians, highlighting Borrell's critical tone and von der Leyen's neutral and positive tone. In the following, we will focus on examining social media messages from the point of view of their formal production. To do so, we will first pay attention to the formal production itself, analyzing the format of the tweet. Furthermore, we will see how actors use mentions and hashtags. Finally, we will look at the use of audio-visual resources.

The tweet format variable included five options: own production, retweet, thread, quoted tweet, and reply to another user. In Figure 4, the form that each of the actors gave to the different tweets can be seen.

First, it is striking that one of the formats that was considered in the initial analysis framework is not present: replying to another user. The nature of social media channels is that they are dynamic and bidirectional, allowing the political actor to be close to the citizenry. The fact that none of the 479 tweets were in response to another user is quite significant.

Furthermore, the graphs show a great variety in terms of social media message production, supporting the presented theory of the elaboration involved in tweeting. While the own production format is of less interest, the threading and retweeting formats are worthy of further discussion. The use of these formats followed a common pattern: explanation by the actors of concrete political measures that, due to the 280-character limit in every tweet, were difficult to explain in a single tweet. The trend observed is to explain concrete actions in the areas of security, migration, and political-economic sanctions.

Ursula von der Leyen makes the most use of threads, 49.31% times, corresponding to a total of 71 threads. Charles Michel follows with a total of 55 threads. It is striking that Josep Borrell is the actor with the highest production of his own tweets. While it is true that Borrell appears with 51.85% of his tweets being retweets, in net figures we are talking about 14 retweets, identifying a total of 27 threads.

Formal analysis of the tweets continues by identifying the use of hashtags (Table 4) and mentions (Table 5) made by the different profiles. The decision to include these variables is motivated and justified by the fact that they are further evidence of the elaboration of the social media message and the potential interaction in the network atmosphere.

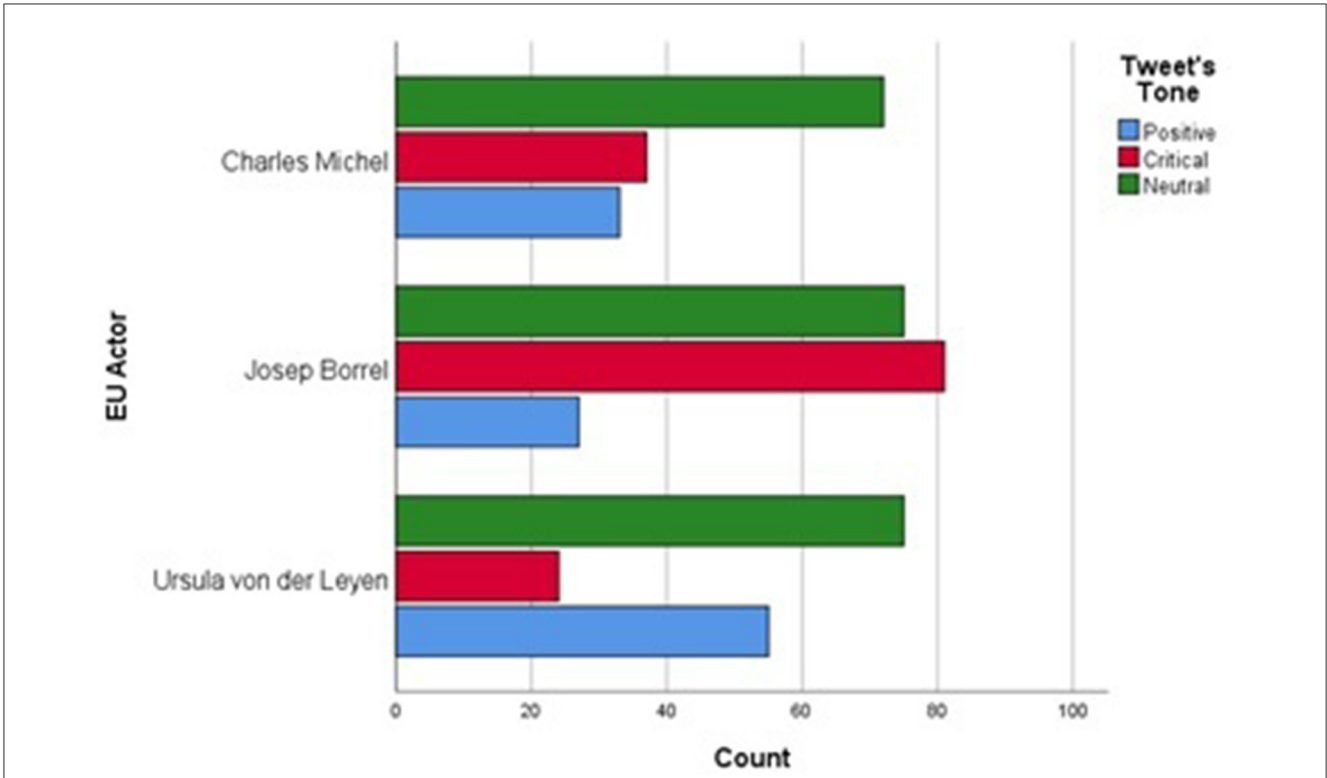


FIGURE 3 Political tone. Source: Own elaboration.

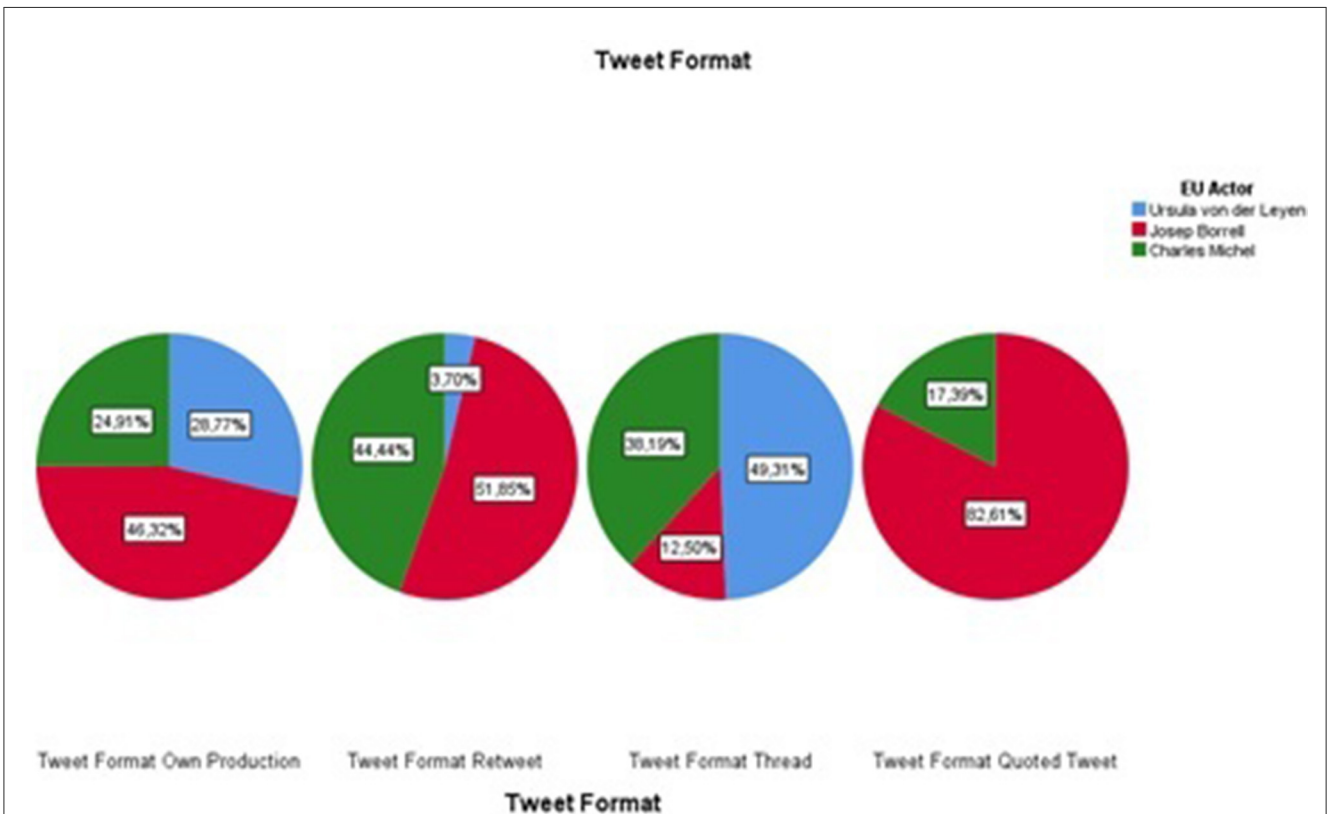


FIGURE 4 Tweets' format. Source: Own elaboration.

TABLE 4 Use of hashtags by the actors.

EU actor	Yes	No
Ursula von der Leyen	14 (2.9%)	140 (29.2%)
Josep Borrell	129 (26.9%)	54 (11.3%)
Charles Michel	113 (23.6%)	29 (6%)
Total	256 (53.4%)	223 (46.5%)

Source: Own elaboration.

TABLE 5 Use of mentions by the actors.

EU actor	Yes	No
Ursula von der Leyen	50 (10.4%)	104 (21.7%)
Josep Borrell	88 (18.3%)	95 (19.8%)
Charles Michel	87 (18.2%)	55 (11.5%)
Total	225 (47%)	254 (53%)

Source: Own elaboration.

In general terms, a balance can be observed in the use of both resources, with more hashtags being used than mentions in general. However, if we look at the figures for each actor, we can see what characterizes their social media message. Commission President von der Leyen hardly uses hashtags in her tweets, only 14 times. This is quite significant, especially if we take into account that the rest of the profiles do and consider the launch by EU institutions of the #EUstandwithUkraine hashtag.

Charles Michel is the only one with a positive balance in terms of mentions. In 87 of his 142 tweets, he made a mention, i.e., he either directly appealed to an interlocutor or simply inform readers of a meeting or conversation he had held. The same trend can be observed in the messages made by Josep Borrell. The fact that the mentions in both profiles follow the thematic trend discussed earlier, the social media messages of both actors were framed as international relation (diplomacy) issues. In addition to that, we include the variable audio-visual elements that von der Leyen, Borrell, or Michel may have incorporated in their messages published on Twitter (Figure 5). Up to five options were considered when sampling and analyzing the data: picture, video, video live, link, and none.

The relationship between the different actors and the use of audio-visual elements is presented. At first glance, major differences between actors can be observed. Ursula von der Leyen most often uses images when posting on Twitter, i.e., she tends to resort to images to present the content. Conversely, both Borrell and Michel tend to publish tweets with audio-visual content. The use of videos is high in the case of Borrell and Michel; for the latter being the most commonly used audio-visual resource. Through content analysis, it has been identified that all actors upload their speeches and political speeches and even recorded interviews onto Twitter. Josep Borrell's use of links is striking, with such links being used 28 times.

To conclude with the content analysis based on a sample of tweets (479) published by Ursula von der Leyen, Josep Borrell, and Charles Michel, we identify who has been the most influential and viral with their discourse. Quantitative and qualitative-discursive analysis helps us to draw conclusions empirically based on the

construction of social media message in times of crisis. To this end, prior scholarship applied a formula to measure the viralization capacity of tweets. A formula is applied based on the following: "RTs [retweets] received will have twice the value of favorites. The final formula to determine the diffusion capacity [...] results from adding the retweets received multiplied by 2 and the favorites received, divided by the number of original tweets published" (Carrasco Polaino et al., 2018: p. 73).

$$\text{Viralization impact} = (\text{SUM retweets} * 2 + \text{SUM likes}) / \text{SUM tweets posted.}$$

The reason why retweets are two times as valuable as likes is because of when a retweet is received, the content of the original tweet appears on the timeline of the person who retweets, increasing the dissemination of the message. Meanwhile, when likes are given, the content of the original tweet does not appear on the timeline of the person who assigns the like, thus, the original message does not increase in terms of dissemination. Table 6 shows the raw data for the number of retweets and likes received by each observed actor.

After applying the proposed formula, the following virality indexes result: Ursula von der Leyen (10349.36), Josep Borrell (1300.47), and Charles Michel (1230.31). In this way, we highlight that Ursula von der Leyen, through her 154 tweets, achieves greater virality in public opinion. In the same way, the virality of each of the conflicts analyzed can be retrieved. Table 7 shows the ratio of retweets and likes that the tweets have received.

The same viralization impact formula is applied to this table and the following results are obtained: the Afghanistan conflict has a viralization of 86,341, while the Ukraine conflict achieves a viralization of 4929,814. The figures illustrate that the Ukraine case studies generated more impact through Twitter.

5. Discussion and conclusion

When designing the research, three research questions were devised on the basis of the objectives. After the presentation of all the empirical elements, this article responds to these questions. Regarding the degree of commitment (RQ1), the EU is more involved with a nearby issue such as Ukraine. Moreover, the involvement of the EU in international conflicts is greater in earlier stages of conflicts (RQ2). According to quantitative and qualitative-discursive content analysis, a series of elements and figures have been shown that are decisive for analyzing the social behavior of the leading actors in the different institutions. In this case, if we pay attention to the quantitative analysis, we can draw some very significant conclusions.

The metrics of the different political actors reveal how one conflict has trended compared to the other. The social impact that the Ukraine conflict (392) has had is three times that of the Afghanistan conflict (82). The Ukraine conflict, caused by the invasion of the Russian Federation, was at an early stage at the time of analysis. This boosted a new cycle of conflict that involved

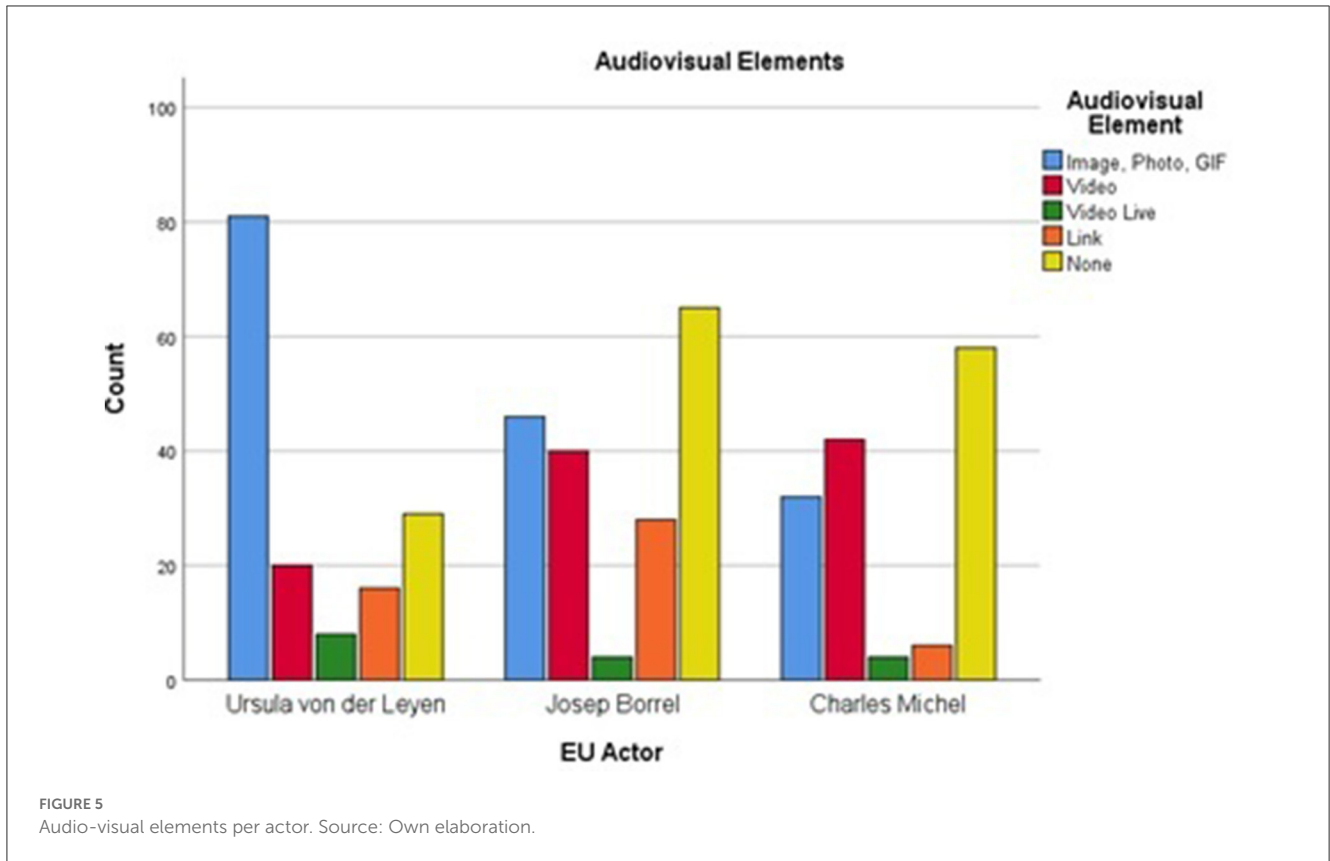


TABLE 6 Metrics of EU actors.

EU actor	Stats	RT	Likes
Ursula von der Leyen	Mean	1560.03	7229.31
	Sum	240,244	1,113,313
Josep Borrell	Mean	260.20	780.08
	Sum	47,616	142,754
Charles Michel	Mean	198.10	834.11
	Sum	28,130	118,444

Source: Own elaboration.

the international community. In the other hand, the scenario in Afghanistan represented the end of a cycle at the time of analysis.

The different social agendas have revealed that the concerns in both areas of war have been totally different. In the case of Ukraine, the most relevant issue has been the judicial one and the application of sanctions, and in the case of Afghanistan, the relevant factor has been immigration, security, and the evacuation of civilians. By the application of sanctions, the EU is playing a primary role as an international actor, and by the same token, the risks it takes with the application of these measures can be high. All these elements show how there has been a lack of commitment to the conflict in Afghanistan.

Similarly, by conducting both case studies, RQ3 is answered, in finding out the communication strategy that the different profiles studied have applied through Twitter. There is no unification of the message or a common position among the three public

TABLE 7 Study cases' conflict metrics.

Military conflict referenced	Stats	RT	Likes
Afghanistan	Mean	168.09	527.24
	Sum	13,783	43,234
Ukraine	Mean	768.88	3392.05
	Sum	301,402	1,329,683

Source: Own elaboration.

representatives. As mentioned earlier, based on the quantitative and qualitative-discursive analysis, we can understand the way in which each actor addressed messages to the audience and find major differences in them.

Finally, we presented the use of audio-visual and hypertextual elements. The impact they have is exponential, as these elements can make the difference in terms of the strategy that each actor (or their team) has carried out on Twitter. For example, it has been observed that Ursula von der Leyen hardly used hashtags or mentions, while the rest of the actors did. Another example is the less frequent use of audio-visual elements by Michel and Borrell when compared to von der Leyen.

This article offers insightful findings on the lack of coordination in terms of communication strategy planning between the different actors and their teams. Through the study of the social media messages posted on Twitter, we found a lack of cohesion, since each actor develops their own communication strategy. In other circumstances, such as for example, at the national political level,

the differentiation that we have identified would be perceived as normal, as it is expected that there would be a struggle between political actors to achieve greater impact on society.

First, in order to achieve the unification of the European message, actors need to coordinate the execution of the message itself. If one looks at the organizational structure of each institution, and within it the team of each actor, one identifies in each institution that each actor has a communication team. Coordination and cooperation between these teams would be indispensable, as any further efforts would be meaningless without such basic coordination.

Second, on the basis of the social media message, further elaboration and dedication are needed on Twitter. After presenting the communication strategy that each actor has carried out, it has been possible to identify the features and elements used by each actor. Twitter as a social network has several features with which the social media message can be designed in detail (Campos-Domínguez, 2017). This means a possible social media communication strategy can be identified, following social media behavioral patterns.

A final element that actors could improve is their interaction with the audience through Twitter. As presented in this research, one of the utilities of social media is the ability to connect with audiences quickly, directly, and at a reduced cost, having an impact on participation in civic and political life (Boulianne, 2015). Despite all these possibilities, no interaction with the audience was observed, which is aligned with previous literature (Woo Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga, 2019). If interaction could be achieved, perhaps impact in terms of virality could be transformed into potential legitimacy. Furthermore, good social media communication would have implications in the shaping of democratic quality, as this is a bidirectional process that currently faces the proliferation of misinformation (Powers and Kounalakis, 2017).

It should be noted that this research has limitations, as the analysis was intended to be the starting point of future research. The study of strategic communication in times of crisis is at an early stage at the European level, so there is much work to be done in the field. The same methodology applied to this research can be applied to other social media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. In this way, the impact of the European Union's message on other audiences could be measured.

Another important avenue of research would be the impact that the political social message has on public opinion, measured

through legacy media. By using more extended time frames and samples covering the EU institutions, future research could go beyond the scope of the present work. Accordingly, it may consider further exploring the impact of the same social message here analyzed in groups with different demographic characteristics. Moreover, it is recommended to also include the gender perspective in future analyses. For example, in some tweets from von der Leyen, she shows different behavior from that of her male colleagues, such as a more positive tone in her messages or use of images, which could suggest the possibilities of a gender perspective approach. As communication plays a key role in crisis management through public diplomacy, we argue that the action of the European project as a supranational organization needs to be widely discussed.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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