



European Parliament

The Twitter activity of members of the European Council

A content analysis
of EU leaders' use
of Twitter in
2019-20

STUDY

EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service

Author: Ralf Drachenberg with Emily Phillips
European Council Oversight Unit
PE 654.200 – January 2021

EN

The Twitter activity of members of the European Council

A content analysis of EU leaders' use of Twitter in 2019-20

Over recent years, the members of the European Council have, in a number of landmark declarations such as the Bratislava Declaration, pointed to the need to improve communication with citizens, as part of the process of building greater trust and confidence in the European Union and its institutions. As social media, and notably Twitter, have become an important part of politicians' communication strategy generally, this study looks at how EU leaders in the European Council communicate on Europe specifically via Twitter.

This EPRS study explores provides an overview of the activity on Twitter of all members of the European Council over an 18-month period – in just over 31 000 tweets posted between January 2019 and June 2020 – covering a very wide range of issues. The study identifies the European topics that EU leaders tweet about – their own interactions, external relations and the EU budget – and it explores the ways in which they communicate and engage with their target audiences, as well as pointing to differences of approach between them. EU-related tweets represent on average about a fifth of all EU leaders' tweets, with a greater emphasis on meetings as such than on substantive policy issues.

Given that EU leaders' tweets on European issues are often picked up less than those on domestic issues, the study looks at whether there is unused potential for them to communicate better on Europe via Twitter, and suggests a number of techniques that might help them better explain Europe to a wider audience through this platform.

AUTHOR(S)

Ralf Drachenberg with Emily Phillips, European Council Oversight Unit

Graphics by Nadejda Kresnichka-Nikolchova

This paper has been drawn up by the European Council Oversight Unit of the Directorate for Impact Assessment and European Added Value, within the Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services (EPRA) of the Secretariat of the European Parliament.

To contact the authors, please email: EPRS-EuropeanCouncilOversight@ep.europa.eu

LINGUISTIC VERSIONS

Original: EN

Manuscript completed in December 2020.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

Brussels © European Union, 2021.

PE654.200

ISBN: 978-92-846-7430-5

DOI: 10.2861/17201

CAT: QA-04-20-655-EN-N

eprs@ep.europa.eu

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu> (intranet)

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank> (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

Executive summary

Over recent years, the members of the European Council have, in a number of landmark declarations such as the Bratislava Declaration, pointed to the need to improve communication with citizens, as part of the process of building greater trust and confidence in the European Union and its institutions. As social media, and notably Twitter, have become an important part of politicians' communication strategy generally, this study looks specifically at how EU leaders in the European Council communicate on Europe via Twitter. The objective is to identify the EU topics they tweet about, outline the differences between the EU Heads of State or Government, and explore the ways in which they communicate and engage with their target audiences.

This study analyses 31 004 tweets by 34 EU Heads of State or Government, posted between January 2019 and June 2020. It shows that the use of Twitter by EU leaders as a communication tool is, on average, comparable to other international political leaders. However, the intensity of use of the platform still varies significantly among them. A similar variation exists for their tweets on European issues: for many, Europe represents a significant proportion of their overall Twitter activity; however, it appears that those who tweet most in general, mention EU issues considerably less proportionally.

One of the main findings is that, if communication is understood as 'reporting on', EU leaders certainly communicate frequently on Europe. They do this mainly in the context of events or meetings, including the European Council. However, a striking feature is apparent in the way individual EU leaders' communicate on Europe via their Twitter accounts: as a general pattern, EU leaders inform people about, or report on, their various meetings, mentioning the main topics discussed, however, EU leaders do not generally explain Europe and the substance of what is going on within the EU institutions, nor do they outline their own positions and priorities or try to convince their audience of their position.

The study shows that the individual issues EU leaders tweet about most are 'interactions between EU leaders', followed by combined tweets on (before, during and after) European Council meetings; tweets on 'interaction with EU representatives' are also frequent. When grouping the individual issues together into clusters, the 'policy' areas which are by far most often the subject of tweets are external relations, the multiannual financial framework and climate issues, which in turn also shows that EU leaders often tweet about topics linked to specific national interests.

Almost all EU leaders announce upcoming European Council meetings, mentioning the main agenda points, but they also tweet about preparatory meetings between individual EU leaders, regional alliances (such as the Visegrád Four), and the meetings of their European political parties. Tweets regarding the European Council President are less frequent, with EU leaders instead tweeting more about other EU representatives (such as the European Commission President). Furthermore, examining Twitter activity over time shows peaks and downturns in the level of interest in a topic, closely connected to the occurrence of milestone events. Finally, there is a strong connection between the intensity of EU leaders' Twitter activity on EU issues and whether they hold the rotating Council Presidency or not.

This analysis of EU leaders' Twitter accounts provides a unique overview of their bilateral meetings and how they communicate about them via Twitter. Diversity is evident when looking at the amount of tweets dedicated to communicating on bilateral meetings, with some Heads of State or Government often issuing several tweets per meeting held and others not being nearly as active. Variances in tweeting on the same bilateral meetings are also evident and leaders who held fewer meetings were not always those from smaller Member States.

When examining the methods EU leaders apply to engage their Twitter audience, the analysis shows that most tweet primarily in their native language, indicating that their main target audience is at

national level. However, when they want to put an important message across, many do translate their messages into other EU languages to reach beyond their own Member State. A few EU leaders also tweet mainly in English (as a non-native language), suggesting a more European target audience on Twitter. While hashtags are frequently used by nearly all EU leaders, many are linked to specific events or locations. The findings also show that, in general, the leaders' EU-related tweets do not generate the same level of interaction (retweets and likes) from their audience as do their tweets on national issues.

Table of contents

Executive summary	1
Introduction	1
1. EU leaders on Twitter: The Union dimension	3
1.1. Methodology	3
1.2. Use of Twitter by EU leaders	4
1.2.1. Total use of Twitter	4
1.2.2. EU-related tweets	5
1.2.3. Relation between total tweets and tweets on EU issues	6
2. Main European issues in leaders' tweets	8
2.1. Frequency and weight of individual EU issues	8
2.1.1. Number of issues	8
2.1.2. Number of tweets on each issue	12
2.2. Clusters and individual EU issues	14
2.2.1. Policy	14
2.2.2. EU institutions and representatives	18
2.2.3. European Council meetings	19
2.2.4. Crisis management	23
2.2.5. Groups of EU leaders	24
2.2.6. EU summits with third-country leaders	25
2.2.7. European political representation	25
2.2.8. Institutional and cross-cutting issues	27
2.3. Main topics covered and differences between EU leaders	29
2.4. Interaction between EU Heads of State or Government	32

2.4.1. Communication about bilateral meeting between EU leaders	32
2.4.2. Tweets about bilateral meetings with other EU leaders	35
3. Tweeting frequency over time	41
3.1. Average tweeting over time and key events	41
3.2. Tweeting on selected EU issues over time	42
3.2.1. External relations	42
3.2.2. EU multiannual financial framework	43
3.2.3. Crisis management	43
3.2.4. EU representatives and institutions	44
3.2.5. Institutional and cross-cutting	46
3.2.6. Council presidencies	47
4. EU leaders' strategies to attract and engage their Twitter audience	49
4.1. Use of hashtags	49
4.2. Use of language by EU leaders on Twitter	51
4.3. Likes and retweets of EU leaders' tweets	53
Conclusions	56
REFERENCES	59

Table of figures

Figure 1 – Total tweets per EU leader January 2019 to June 2020	5
Figure 2 – Total EU-related tweets by EU Heads of State or Government, January 2019 to June 2020	6
Figure 3 – EU tweets as a percentage of EU leaders' total tweets	7
Figure 4 – Total number of EU issues addressed per EU Head of State or Government	9
Figure 5 – Frequency and weight of tweets on EU issues	13
Figure 6 – EU leaders' Twitter activity on different clusters and individual EU issues	14
Figure 7 – Tweets concerning EU external relations per EU leader and sub-issue	16
Figure 8 – Number of tweets by EU Heads of State or Government by meeting format	23
Figure 9 – Twitter communication by EU leaders on meetings with other EU leaders	33
Figure 10 – Main interlocutors for EU leaders' Twitter communication on bilateral meetings	34
Figure 11 – Actual vs potential bilateral meetings between EU leaders as reported on Twitter	35
Figure 12 – Extrapolated sum of bilateral meetings between EU leaders, as reported on Twitter ³⁷	37
Figure 13 – Bilateral meetings between EU leaders who were in office during the full 18-month period	38
Figure 14 – Extrapolated data on EU leaders' meetings and their reporting on them via Twitter ³⁹	39
Figure 15 – Key Franco-German interactions as reported on Twitter by Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel	40
Figure 16 – Average EU leaders' total and EU tweets January 2019-June 2020	41
Figure 17 – Average EU leaders' tweets on external relations, January 2019-June 2020	42
Figure 18 – Average number of EU leaders' tweets on the MFF, January 2019-June 2020	43
Figure 19 – Average number of EU leaders' tweets on Brexit and Covid-19, January 2019-June 2020	44
Figure 20 – EU leaders' tweets on EU representatives and institutions, January 2019-June 2020	45
Figure 21 – Average tweets on institutional and cross-cutting issues, January 2019-June 2020	46
Figure 22 – Average number of tweets by EU leaders who held the Council presidency, January 2019-June 2020	47
Figure 23 – Word cloud of all EU-related hashtags used by 34 EU leaders on Twitter	50

Table of tables

Table 1 – EU-27 Heads of States or Government, January 2019 to June 2020	4
Table 2 – Overview of topics addressed by each Head of State or Government	10
Table 3 – Top 10 EU issues tweeted on average by EU Heads of State or Government	12
Table 4 – Top 10 policy issues tweeted on by EU leaders	15
Table 5 – Share of cluster tweets between groups of EU leaders	24
Table 6 – Breakdown of cluster of tweets on EU summits with third countries	25
Table 7 – Top 3 EU issues of each EU Head of State or Government	30

Introduction

The use of social media has tripled over the past decade, with figures [indicating](#) that over 3.5 billion people worldwide use some form of social media today, equalling 45 % of the total population. It is therefore not surprising that many political leaders have adopted these networks as powerful means to address their citizens and get their messages across. According to a [study](#) published in 2018, Twitter is the most popular platform among world leaders, with 951 accounts belonging to Heads of State or Government in 187 countries. This increase in social media use could explain how Twitter has become an additional important channel for EU leaders to communicate their political views, with 25 out of 27¹ EU Heads of State or Government actively using a Twitter account.²

EU Heads of State or Government gather in the European Council, which, after existing informally since 1975, was institutionalised with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. The European Council's core role is to 'provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and define the general political directions and priorities' ([Article 15\(1\) TEU](#)). The scope of its activity has rapidly evolved over the past decade, and today, the European Council's involvement in the [EU policy cycle](#) is much broader, covering tasks from agenda-setting to scrutiny activities. In the [declaration](#) adopted at the [informal meeting](#) of 27 Heads of State or Government on 16 September 2016 in Bratislava, EU leaders committed 'to improve the communication with each other – among Member States, with EU institutions, but most importantly with our citizens'. The idea was to overcome the lack of connection with people living in the EU, as well as to move away from the '[blame game](#)' and a negative image of the EU that some leaders may have conveyed.

This increased use of social media, in particular the Twitter platform, by EU politicians provides a good opportunity to examine how the latter communicate on the European Union, the European Council and EU policies. The monitoring of politicians' use of Twitter as part of their communication strategies has already led to a rich literature, often focusing on individual politicians³ or countries, assessing leaders' interaction with citizens,⁴ and during election campaigns.⁵ When looking at multiple world leaders, such analysis often concentrates on a single issue, such as the coronavirus pandemic,⁶ or the economic crisis.⁷ Some researchers investigate the reasons behind the adoption of social media for communication by political leaders.⁸

¹ While the German Chancellor does not have a personal Twitter account, her spokesperson's account is listed as the Twitter account of the German Chancellor on the European Council website.

² With the exception of the leaders of Hungary and Slovakia, as from January 2019 to June 2020, they either had no Twitter account, or did not tweet. Since 27 June 2020, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has begun tweeting again.

³ Such as Soedarsono, K. Dewi, Mohamad Bahtiar, Akanmu Diekola Muslim and Khoirunnisa Putri Perdini Idola, 'Political leaders and followers' attitudes: Twitter as a tool for political communication?', *Journal of Critical Reviews*, Vol 7, Issue 8, 2020.

⁴ Enjolras, B., 'How leaders use Twitter and does it matter? The case of Norwegian national politicians', *International Conference Democracy as Idea and Practice*', 2014.

⁵ Alonso-Muñoz, Laura, Marcos-García, Silvia and Ripollés-Casero, 'Political Leaders in (Inter)Action. Twitter as a Strategic Communication Tool in Electoral Campaigns', *Trípodos*, número 39, 2016

⁶ See Rufai, R. Sohaib and Bunce, Catey, 'World Leaders' usage of Twitter in response to the COVID19 pandemic: a content analysis', *Oxford University Press*, 2020.

⁷ For example Redek, Tjaša and Godnov, Uroš, 'Twitter as a political tool in EU countries during the economic crisis: a comparative text-mining analysis', *Drustvena istrazivanja*, 2018.

⁸ Barberá, Pablo and Zeitzoff, Thomas, 'The New Public Address System: Why Do World Leaders Adopt Social Media?', *International Studies Quarterly*, 2018.

This EPRS study provides, for the first time, an overview of the Twitter activity of all EU Heads of State or Government in the European Council over an 18-month period (1 January 2019 to 30 June 2020), covering a wide range of EU issues.

The data set collected seeks to provide evidence of the use of Twitter by EU leaders and to allow an assessment as to whether the European Council and European issues form part of the Twitter communication (strategy) of members of the European Council; and if this is the case, to what extent and on which specific issues. Regarding the European Council more specifically, the analysis explores whether EU leaders explain the work of that EU institution and if they communicate the results of European Council meetings to their citizens via Twitter. The research also indicates whether, in the framework of EU leaders' bilateral or multilateral interactions, there is an active exchange between them for the preparation of, and follow-up to, European Council meetings. Moreover, the study considers to what extent EU Heads of State or Government have integrated references to EU representatives and EU institutions, as well as to European political parties and regional alliances in their Twitter communication. The study also indicates the nature of the tweets, for instance assessing whether they are mainly about updates on the daily activities of EU leaders, or if they also give information on agenda points, explain European issues and disseminate decisions at EU level, or even provide political messages aiming at convincing their audience about the respective positions of EU leaders.

Chapter 1 briefly outlines the main approach to data collection taken in this study, before outlining the uptake of Twitter by EU Heads of State or Government in general, and on European issues more specifically, in comparison to other international politicians. Chapter 2 then assesses activity on 45 individual EU issues, organised around 10 different clusters, and outlines the differences in EU leaders' Twitter activities across policy issues and between each other. This chapter also provides an overview of the bilateral interaction between EU leaders, highlighting those who appear to be more regularly in contact, as reported via Twitter, and showing to what extent they communicate on these meetings. The development of Twitter activities on EU issues over an 18-month period, both on average and regarding individual topics, is scrutinised in Chapter 3, indicating and explaining spikes and downturns mainly linked to events or developments. Subsequently, Chapter 4 examines if and how EU leaders are able to mobilise their audience on Twitter through their EU-related tweets. A first look at the way EU leaders use hashtags and the language in which they choose to communicate when raising European issues via Twitter is followed by an exploration of 'likes' and 'retweets' on five EU leaders' Twitter accounts, to understand whether Twitter users actively engage with leaders' messages on EU-related topics.

The findings and lessons learned from this exercise are accompanied by a consideration of possible recommendations on adjustments to enhance EU leaders' communication on the EU and the European Council. Finally, the study also presents possible future avenues where additional research in this area could be fruitful.

1. EU leaders on Twitter: The Union dimension

1.1. Methodology

This study presents an extensive content analysis of tweets by EU-27 leaders with an active Twitter account,⁹ issued from January 2019 to June 2020. For this research, 31 004 tweets by 34 EU Heads of State or Government – current and former Members of the European Council¹⁰ – were examined, 3 722 of which were sorted into 45 different EU issues. The selection of accounts was based on the list provided on the [European Council website](#), with 21 personal and 4 governmental accounts, including German State Secretary Steffen Seibert, who is government spokesperson as well as head of the Press and Information Office (Chancellor Angela Merkel does not have a Twitter account).¹¹ Furthermore, according to the European Council website, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Slovakian Prime Minister Igor Matovič, do not have active Twitter accounts¹² and could therefore not be included in this research. Conversely, former Slovakian Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini was an engaged Twitter user, enabling the retrieval of tweets up to the point at which he left office in March 2020. This illustrates that the present study provides information about individual EU leaders' Twitter activity, and is not therefore representative of the use of Twitter by administrations of the different Member States.

Given that the timeframe selected for analysing the tweets sorted into EU issues covers 18 months, the leadership in certain European countries changed over the period, with political developments in Denmark, Belgium, Greece, Finland, Lithuania and Slovenia leading to changes in the European Council's [membership](#). Consequently, the research includes data on 34 EU Heads of State or Government¹³ (see Table 1). Where leaders did not hold office for the full 18 months under review, their total tweets were extrapolated based on the average monthly tweets for the time period in which they were in office. In that context, the case of Austria merits further attention, since Chancellor Sebastian Kurz stepped down in late May 2019 and was succeeded by Brigitte Bierlein, who did not appear to hold a personal Twitter account during her period as a European Council member. As a result, the analysis presents a significant data gap of seven months until Sebastian Kurz resumed office in January 2020. The sort was therefore carried out by analysing Sebastian Kurz's profile from 1 January to 28 May 2019, followed by a second period from 7 January to 30 June 2020.

⁹ For the purposes of this study, we have taken an 'active' Twitter account to be one used regularly by the holder for issuing tweets.

¹⁰ This study only takes accounts of tweets by Charles Michel whilst Prime Minister of Belgium, and not since he left that office to become President of the European Council.

¹¹ Twitter accounts are sometimes managed by EU leaders' communication teams, rather than the individual themselves. However Twitter communications nevertheless reflect the views of the respective EU leader who also decides if and how Twitter is used to communicate on EU issues.

¹² Viktor Orbán's Twitter account was dormant from September 2017 to 27 June 2020.

¹³ As Māris Kučinskis was Prime Minister of Latvia for only 20 days during the period assessed, his Twitter account was not taken into consideration for the purposes of this study.

1.2. Use of Twitter by EU leaders

Table 1 – EU-27 Heads of States or Government, January 2019 to June 2020

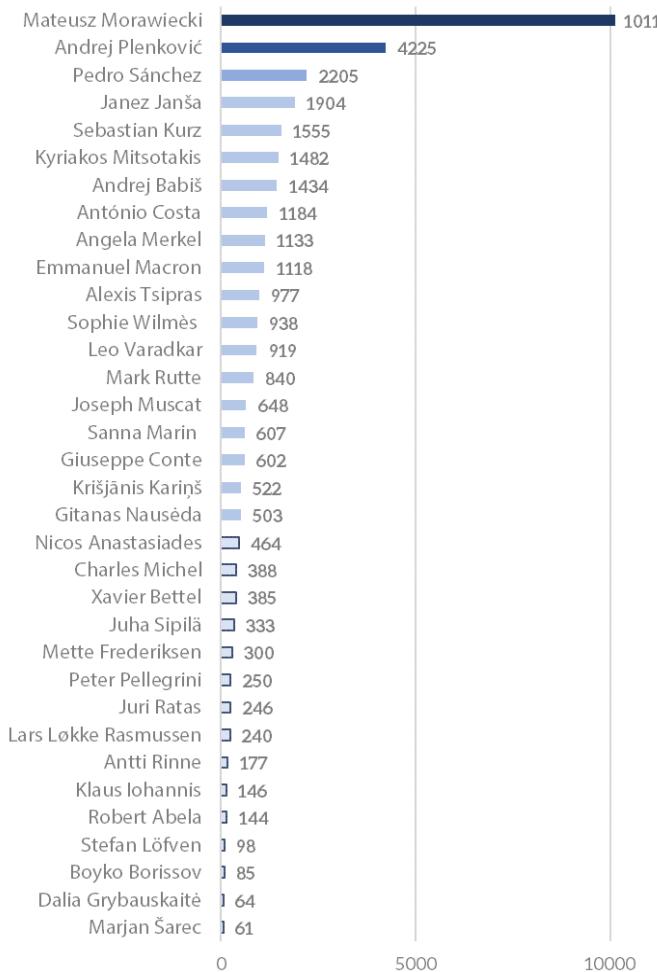
European Council membership between Jan 2019–Jun 2020	Start date End date	Months in office	European Council membership between Jan 2019–Jun 2020	Start date End date	Months in office
 Charles Michel Belgium	01/01/2019 27/10/2019	10	 Dalia Grybauskaitė Lithuania	01/01/2019 07/07/2020	6
 Sophie Wilmès Belgium	27/10/2019 30/06/2020	8	 Gitanas Nausėda Lithuania	07/07/2020 30/06/2020	12
 Boyko Borissov Bulgaria	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Xavier Bettel Luxembourg	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18
 Andrej Babiš Czechia	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Joseph Muscat Malta	01/01/2019 13/01/2020	12
 Lars Løkke Rasmussen Denmark	01/01/2019 27/06/2019	6	 Robert Abela Malta	13/01/2020 30/06/2020	16
 Mette Frederiksen Denmark	27/06/2019 30/06/2020	12	 Mark Rutte Netherlands	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18
 Angela Merkel Germany	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Sebastian Kurz Austria	01/01/19-28/05/19 07/01/20-30/06/20	11
 Jüri Ratas Estonia	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Mateusz Morawiecki Poland	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18
 Leo Varadkar Ireland	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 António Costa Portugal	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18
 Alexis Tsipras Greece	01/01/2019 08/07/2019	6	 Klaus Iohannis Romania	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18
 Kyriakos Mitsotakis Greece	08/07/2019 30/06/2020	12	 Marjan Šarec Slovenia	01/01/2019 13/03/2020	14
 Pedro Sánchez Spain	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Janez Janša Slovenia	13/03/2020 30/06/2020	4
 Emmanuel Macron France	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Peter Pellegrini Slovakia	01/01/2019 20/03/2020	15
 Andrej Plenković Croatia	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Juha Sipilä Finland	01/01/2019 06/06/2019	5
 Giuseppe Conte Italy	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Antti Rinne Finland	06/06/2019 10/12/2019	6
 Nicos Anastasiades Cyprus	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18	 Sanna Marin Finland	10/12/2020 30/06/2020	7
 Krišjānis Kariņš Latvia	23/01/2019 30/06/2020	17	 Stefan Löfven Sweden	01/01/2019 30/06/2020	18

Source: EPoS.

1.2.1. Total use of Twitter

To gauge whether EU leaders were active on Twitter, the authors took account of the total of all EU-27 leaders' tweets over 18 months from January 2019 to June 2020. The data collected show that the 34 EU leaders under consideration tweeted a total 31 004 times, leading to an average of about 50 tweets a month per EU Head of State or Government during this period.

Figure 1 – Total tweets per EU leader January 2019 to June 2020



Source: EPRS.

tweets in the EU sphere has so far been less extensive compared to other political leaders at international level. Interestingly, another (non-EU) European leader, who appears to be on average less active on Twitter than his European counterparts is United Kingdom Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#), with an average of 31 tweets per month.

Surprisingly, if the differences in age are taken into consideration when comparing the Twitter activity of EU Heads of State or Governments, it appears that it is not necessarily the younger EU leaders who are more active on Twitter. The top five tweeters are in four different age groups: with Mateusz Morawiecki being over 50 years old, Andrej Plenković and Pedro Sánchez between 40 and 50 years old, Janez Janša over 60 and Sebastian Kurz in his 30s. The same is also true for the less-enthusiastic Twitter users, who are not always from an older generation, but also include younger EU leaders, notably Marjan Šarec (age 42) and Joseph Muscat (age 46).

1.2.2. EU-related tweets

By narrowing the scope of analysis to tweets mentioning European topics, the data process retrieved 3 722 tweets. As shown in Figure 2, the highest number of tweets on matters linked to the

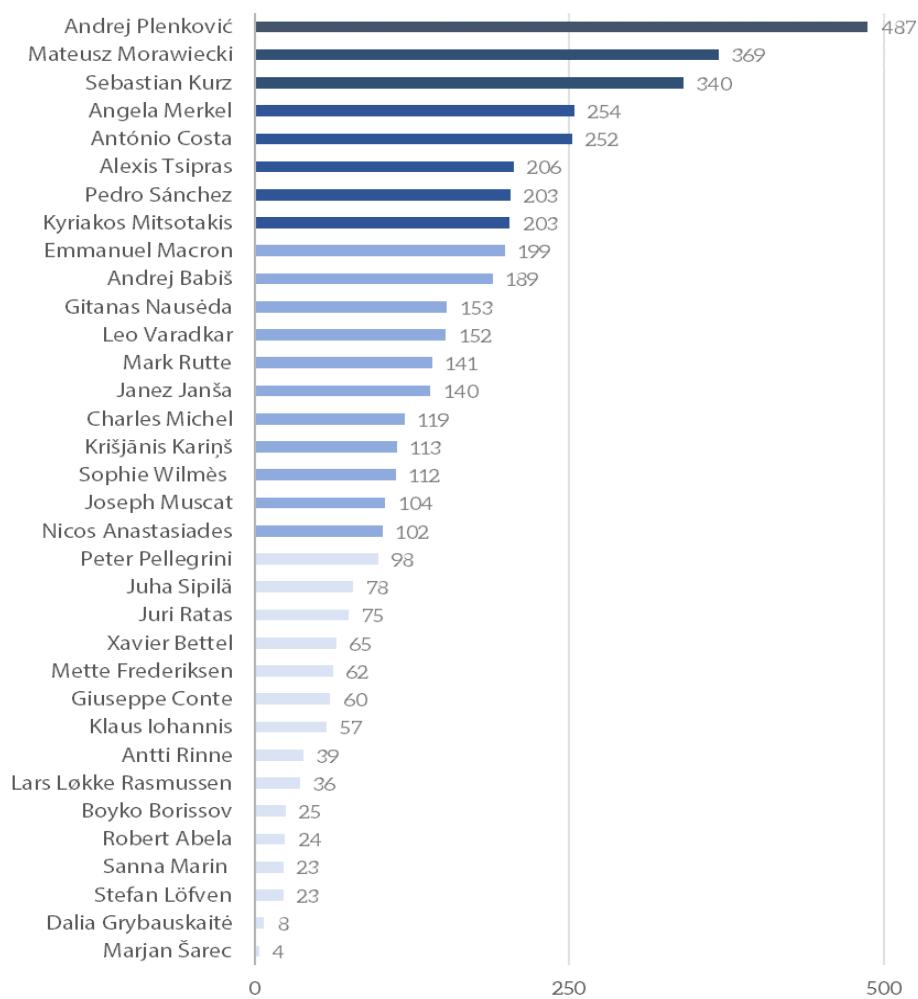
Figure 1 shows that the most active leader on Twitter is Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, with an average of 562 tweets a month. This is twice the monthly number issued by the second most active leader, Croatian Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, with 234 tweets per month on average; more than four times more than Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, with an average of 122; and an even greater difference with other EU leaders. This indicates that most EU leaders still use Twitter relatively sparingly, compared to other international figures. Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#), for instance, tweeted a monthly average of 408 tweets, and Brazilian President [Jair Bolsonaro's](#) personal profile totals on average 308 tweets per month. The most active Twitter user amongst political leaders worldwide, is, by far, United States President Donald Trump, who [tweeted](#) on an average 762 times per month in the period under consideration. Consequently, when looking at the [50 most active world leaders](#) on Twitter only one (Janez Janša) of 34 EU leaders makes it into the top 10, while Croatian Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, ranks 19th. One conclusion is that, although Twitter has gradually found a role in EU leaders' communication strategies, the use of

EU sphere were issued by Andrej Plenković and Mateusz Morawiecki, tweeting an average of 21 and 27 tweets per month respectively. Andrej Plenković's high level of activity on EU issues could be explained by the fact that Croatia held the rotating EU Council Presidency from 1 January 2020 to 30 June 2020 (see section 3.2.6). It is indeed particularly relevant to consider Europe related Twitter activity by EU leaders who have recently, or are about to, hold the rotating Presidency of the Council, such as Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa, during the period considered in this study.

1.2.3. Relation between total tweets and tweets on EU issues

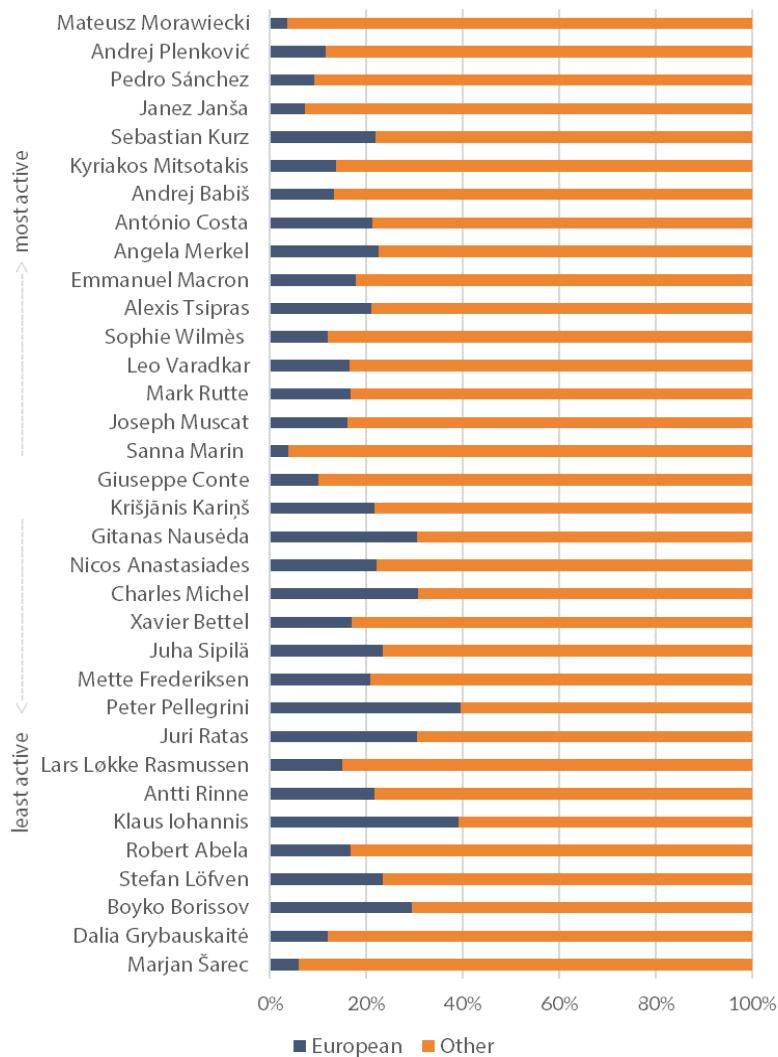
As a further step, the analysis considered tweets on European issues as a percentage of the overall tweets; this approach provides a better picture of the attention EU leaders pay to EU issues, than by looking at the total number of EU-related tweets.

Figure 2 – Total EU-related tweets by EU Heads of State or Government, January 2019 to June 2020



Source: EPoS.

Figure 3 – EU tweets as a percentage of EU leaders' total tweets



Source: EPRS.

applies even more for Klaus Iohannis, as his country held the rotating Council presidency during part of the period under analysis (see more in section 3.2.6).

However, while 10-20 % of 13 leaders' tweets concern EU issues, a further 5 leaders dedicated less than 10% of their output to European issues. Most surprising among these are Mateusz Morawiecki (3.6 %) and Pedro Sánchez (9.2 %), who are both frequent Twitter users and simultaneously very vocal on EU matters via traditional communication channels. Sanna Marin and Janez Janša, the other EU leaders with output less than 10 % of which covers EU issues, were members of the European Council for only a relatively short time during the period under review (6 and 3 months respectively); data were extrapolated for the calculation, but their tweeting frequency on EU issues could also have increased over time. Janez Janša, for example, was in office during the March-June 2020 period under research, a period during which EU tweets by EU leaders were generally rather low, due amongst other things to the coronavirus outbreak and the related focus on national issues (see Chapter 3). This argument also partially applies to Sanna Marin.

Figure 3 shows that the EU leaders most active on Twitter do not necessarily tweet proportionately on EU issues, but rather the contrary. However, a positive finding is that EU issues correspond on average to 18.5 % of EU leaders' tweets collected during this study, showing that Europe does play a significant part in the Twitter communication of most EU Heads of State or Government. More than 20 % of the total Twitter activity of 16 EU Heads of State or Government covered EU issues. EU issues were the subject of around 30 % of five of these leaders' tweets, and Peter Pellegrini and Klaus Iohannis (Romania held the rotating Council presidency during the period) even used around 40 % of their tweets to communicate on EU issues. However, neither use Twitter very often as a communication tool in general, maybe because at national level they prefer to use 'traditional' communication methods.¹⁴

This leads to the conclusion that Twitter is used very often by Peter Pellegrini and Klaus Iohannis to reach a European audience. This

¹⁴ As the scope of this study was limited to Twitter communication, this assumption could not be further substantiated.

2. Main European issues in leaders' tweets

To assess the EU-related Twitter activity of EU leaders, this research categorised the tweets of EU Heads of State or Government according to 45 individual issues.¹⁵ When looking at the European issues tweeted on by EU Heads of State or Government, a distinction must be drawn between the overall number of issues addressed (i.e. how many EU leaders tweeted at least once on this issue) and the attention dedicated to each of the specific topics (i.e. how often was this EU issue mentioned in tweets). Moreover, the 45 individual European issues can also be grouped together into 10 different clusters of similar issues, showing which aspects of the EU system were the subject of most tweets (see below).

2.1. Frequency and weight of individual EU issues

2.1.1. Number of issues

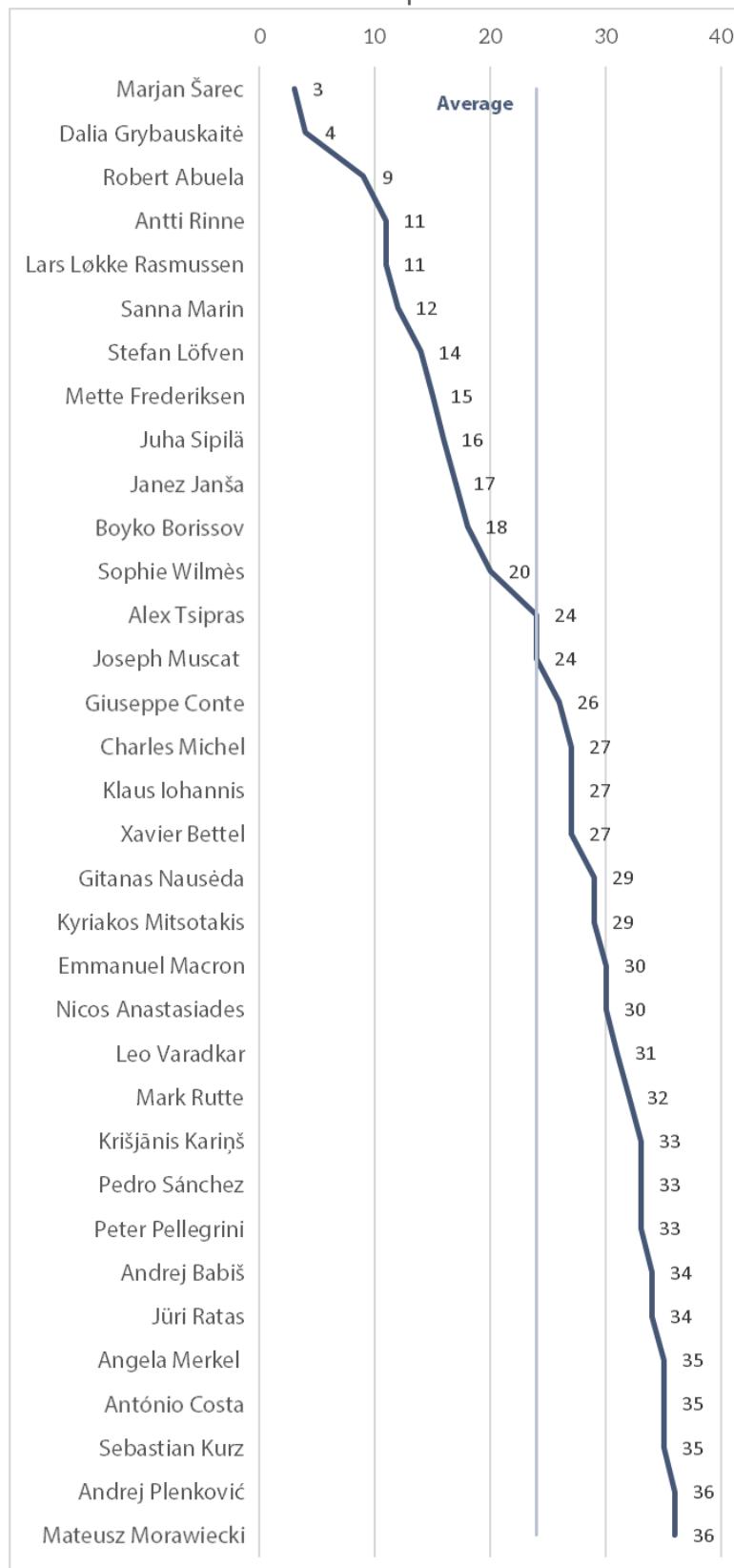
When looking at the frequency of issues addressed, the findings show that, on average, EU leaders tweeted regarding 25 of the 45 individual EU issues examined. This illustrates that a majority of EU leaders covered more than 50 % of the many EU issues identified.

While it could be expected that those leaders who addressed the lowest number of different EU issues in their tweets are also those who were a member of the European Council for the shortest period during the 18 months covered in this study.

Some leaders however, such as Dalia Grybauskaitė, Lars Løkke Rasmussen and Antti Rinne, who covered fewer EU issues in their tweets, were also members of the European Council for only a relatively short period between January 2019 and June 2020. It can also be observed that other EU leaders in the same situation, such as Juha Sipilä (a member for five months), Alexis Tsipras (six months), Joseph Muscat (six months), Janez Janša (four months), covered more EU issues in their tweets than EU leaders who were members of the European Council for a lot longer in this time period, notably Mette Frederiksen (12 months), Robert Abela (12 months) and especially Marjan Šarec (14 months), who is not a Twitter enthusiast, who all mainly addressed domestic politics during this time. The most frequent EU issues tweeted about were: 'interaction with other EU leaders' (31), 'interaction with EU representatives' (31), 'economic governance' (31), 'the multiannual financial framework (MFF)' (31), 'reporting after European Council meetings' (30) and 'Brexit' (30). While some of the most frequently mentioned EU issues are also among the top issues tweeted on as a percentage of the leaders' overall EU tweets, significant differences also exist.

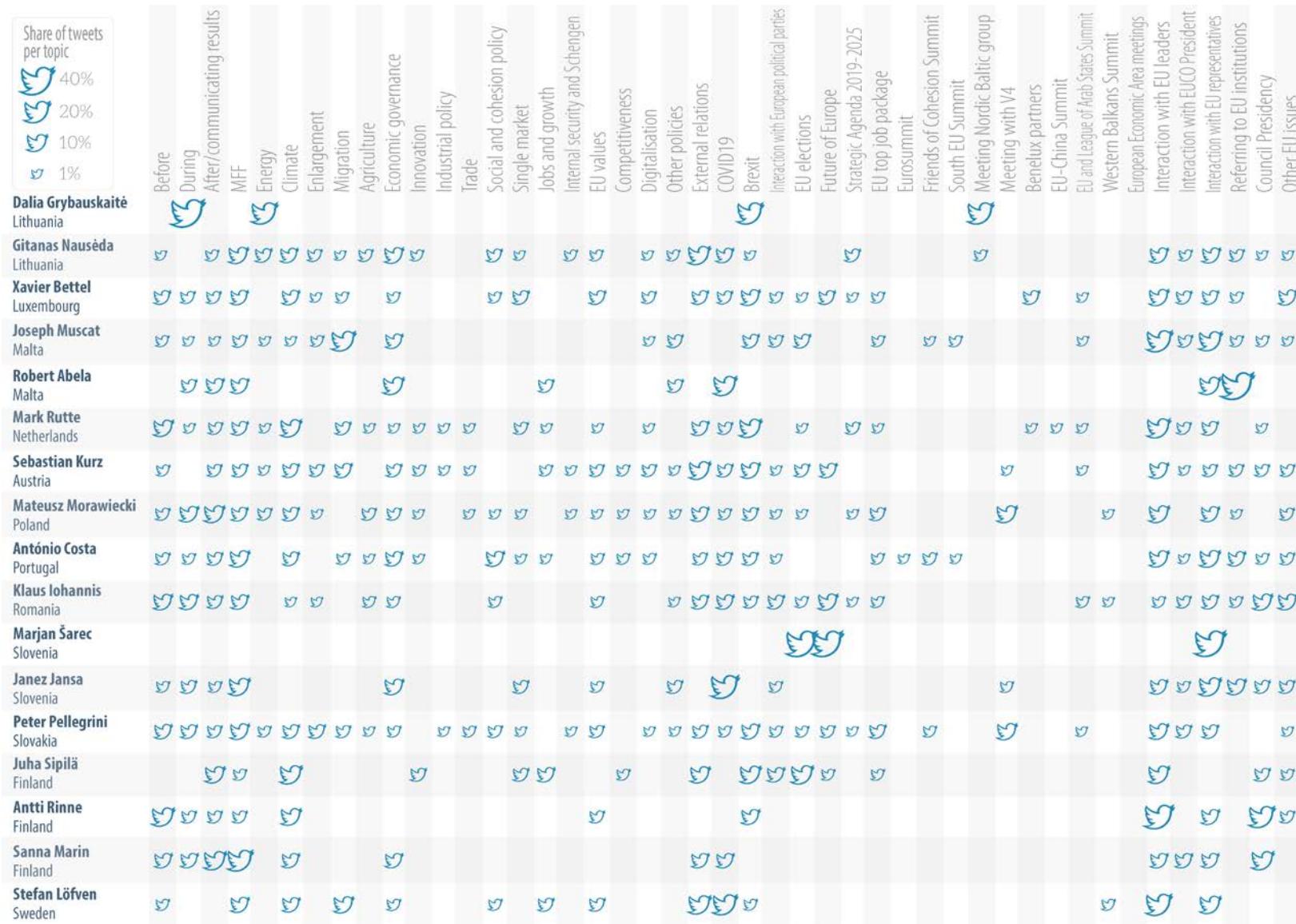
¹⁵ A tweet can concern various EU issues, when for example a leader reports on a bilateral meeting, which discussed three different policies in preparation of a European Council.

Figure 4 – Total number of EU issues addressed per EU Head of State or Government



Source: EPRS.

Table 2 – Overview of topics addressed by each Head of State or Government



Source: EPoS.

2.1.2. Number of tweets on each issue

Looking at how often an EU issue was mentioned on average in the tweets of EU leaders gives an indication of how much attention they pay to a particular topic in their communications strategy.

Table 3 – Top 10 EU issues tweeted on average by EU Heads of State or Government

Top 10 topics	share of total tweets
Interaction with EU leaders	10.6%
European Council meetings	9.8%
External relations	7.4%
Interaction with EU representatives	6.4%
MFF	6.1%
Brexit	5.5%
Climate	5.0%
Economic governance	4.5%
COVID19	3.8%
Referring to EU institutions	3.0%

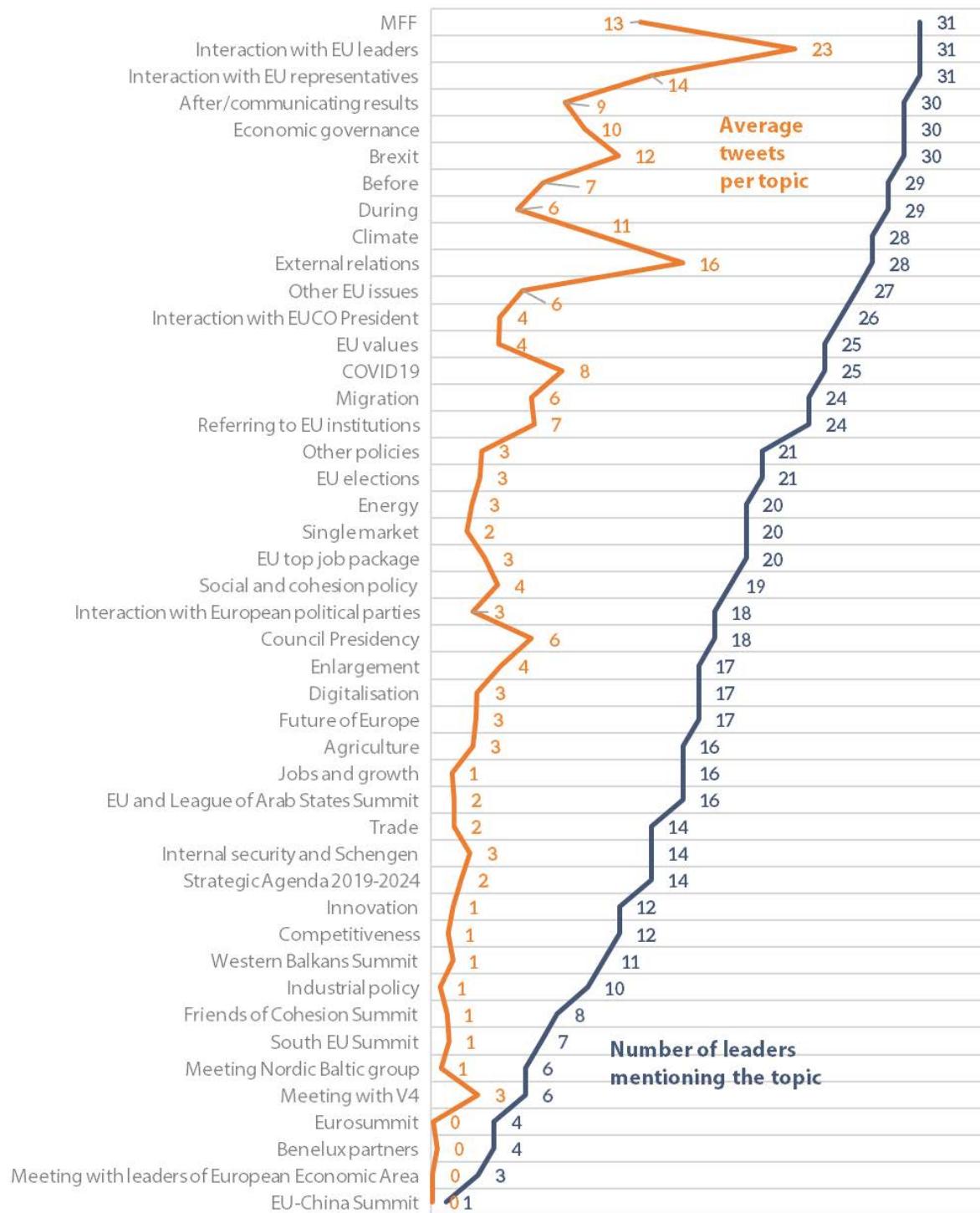
Source: EPRS.

When broken down into 45 individual issues as part of this study,¹⁶ the highest number of tweets (10.6 %) concerned the 'interaction with EU leaders' category, followed by combined tweets on (before, during and after) European Council meetings (9.8 %), external relations (7.4 %), interaction with EU representatives (6.4 %, not including tweets regarding the European Council President) and the MFF (6.1 %).

Before looking into the individual issues in detail, it is worthwhile briefly juxtaposing the data collected on the overall number of issues addressed with the average number of tweets on a specific topic. Figure 5 indicates that, in many cases, the topics raised by most EU leaders on average also received a lot of overall attention in their tweets. Topics such as the MFF, interaction with EU leaders and interaction with EU representatives scored highly, while others such as Euro Summits, EU-China Summits and Benelux, scored lower in both respects. For some topics however, there is a difference between frequency and emphasis. In the case of external relations for instance, fewer EU leaders addressed the topic than could have been expected from the total amount of tweets dealing with the issue. Conversely, this means that those who tweeted on this issue, tweeted a lot to achieve such a high average. The same applies for the issue of the V4 (i.e. the four Visegrád countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), on which only six leaders tweeted, but the average number of tweets is much higher than for many other issues where up to 17 EU Heads of State or Government tweeted.

¹⁶ As a consequence of the high number of individual issues, the respective percentages are rather small.

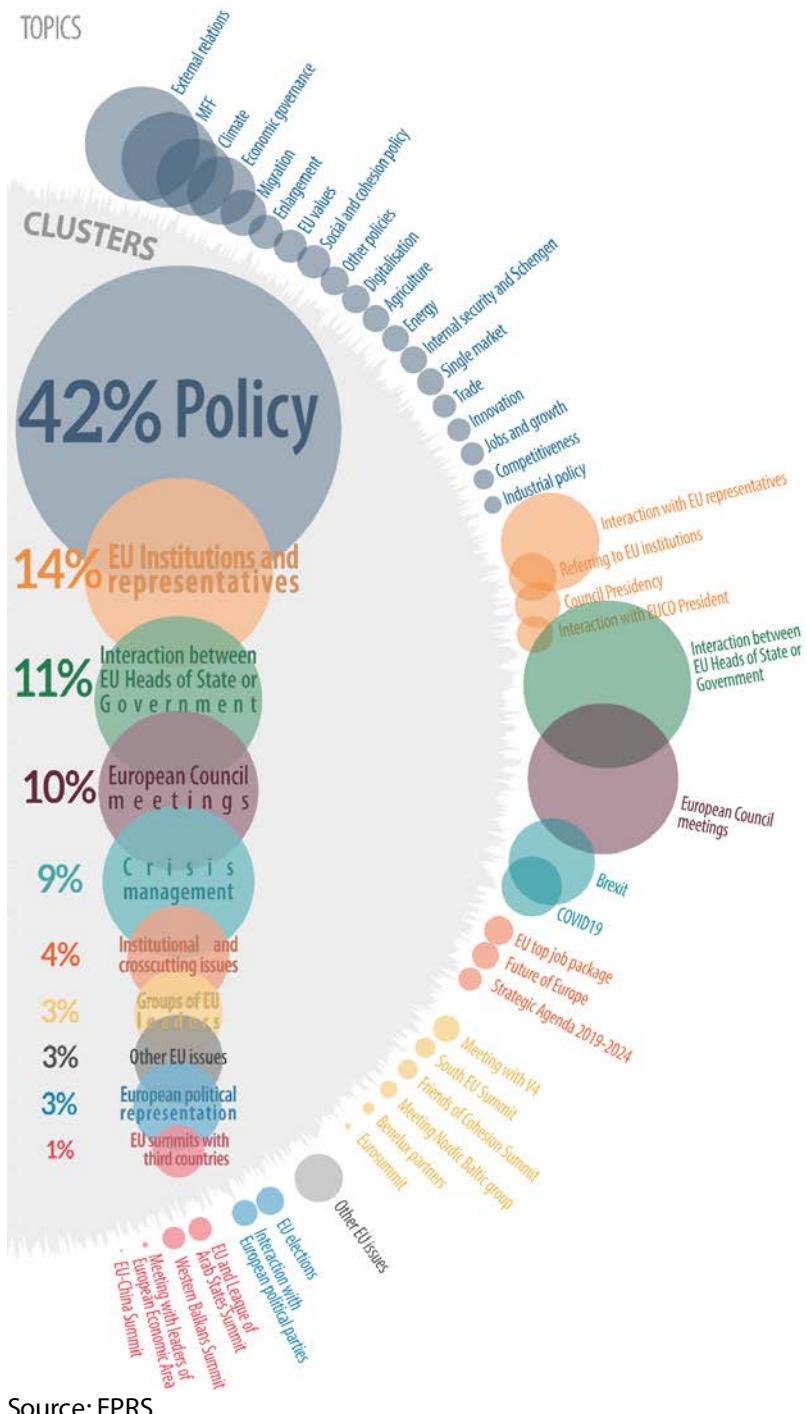
Figure 5 – Frequency and weight of tweets on EU issues



Source: EPRS.

2.2. Clusters and individual EU issues

Figure 6 – EU leaders' Twitter activity on different clusters and individual EU issues



Grouping similar issues together, we organised the data on the subject of tweets into 10 clusters: 'European Council meetings', 'policy', 'crisis management', 'institutional and cross-cutting issues', 'European political representation', 'EU summits with third countries', 'EU institutions and representatives', 'groups of EU leaders', 'interaction between EU Heads of State or Government' and 'other EU issues'.¹⁷

When examining the Twitter activity of EU leaders according to these clusters of similar issues, the 'policy' cluster can be seen to be the subject of most tweets (42 %) (see Figure 6). 'Other EU issues' as a cluster comprises mainly tweets regarding historical or cultural references, such as Europe day or the anniversary of the EU's enlargement.

2.2.1. Policy

As outlined above, the 'policy' cluster was the subject of the highest number of tweets. The cluster includes 18 different EU policy areas, on which a substantial number of tweets were identified. For the purposes of this study, policy areas that were the subject of a minimum number of tweets were collected under 'other policies', which includes issues such as education and culture, as well as mobility and transport. The large number of EU issues in this cluster can also explain the dominance of this cluster in the

¹⁷ 'Interaction of EU Heads of State or Government' and 'other EU issues' are actually not real clusters, because they comprise only one individual issue. However, this individual issue includes various sub-issues, such as for example physical meetings, phone calls, or congratulations in the case of interaction between EU leaders.

overall picture; however, the top five policy areas alone already make up a significant proportion of the overall tweets on 'policy'.

Table 4 – Top 10 policy issues tweeted on by EU leaders

Top 10 policies	share of total tweets
External relations	7.4%
MFF	6.1%
Climate	5.0%
Economic governance	4.5%
Migration	3.0%
Enlargement	2.0%
EU values	2.0%
Social and cohesion policy	1.9%
Other policies	1.5%
Digitalisation	1.4%

Table 4 shows that external relations, with 7 %, was the policy area that was the subject of most tweets, followed by MFF (5.5 %), climate (5 %) and economic governance (4.5 %). Policy issues that were tweeted on less extensively by EU leaders include industrial policy (0.3 %), competitiveness (0.5 %), jobs and growth and innovation (both at 0.6 %).

The following paragraphs consider the subjects most tweeted about: external relations (7 %), and the MFF (5.5 %), in more detail.

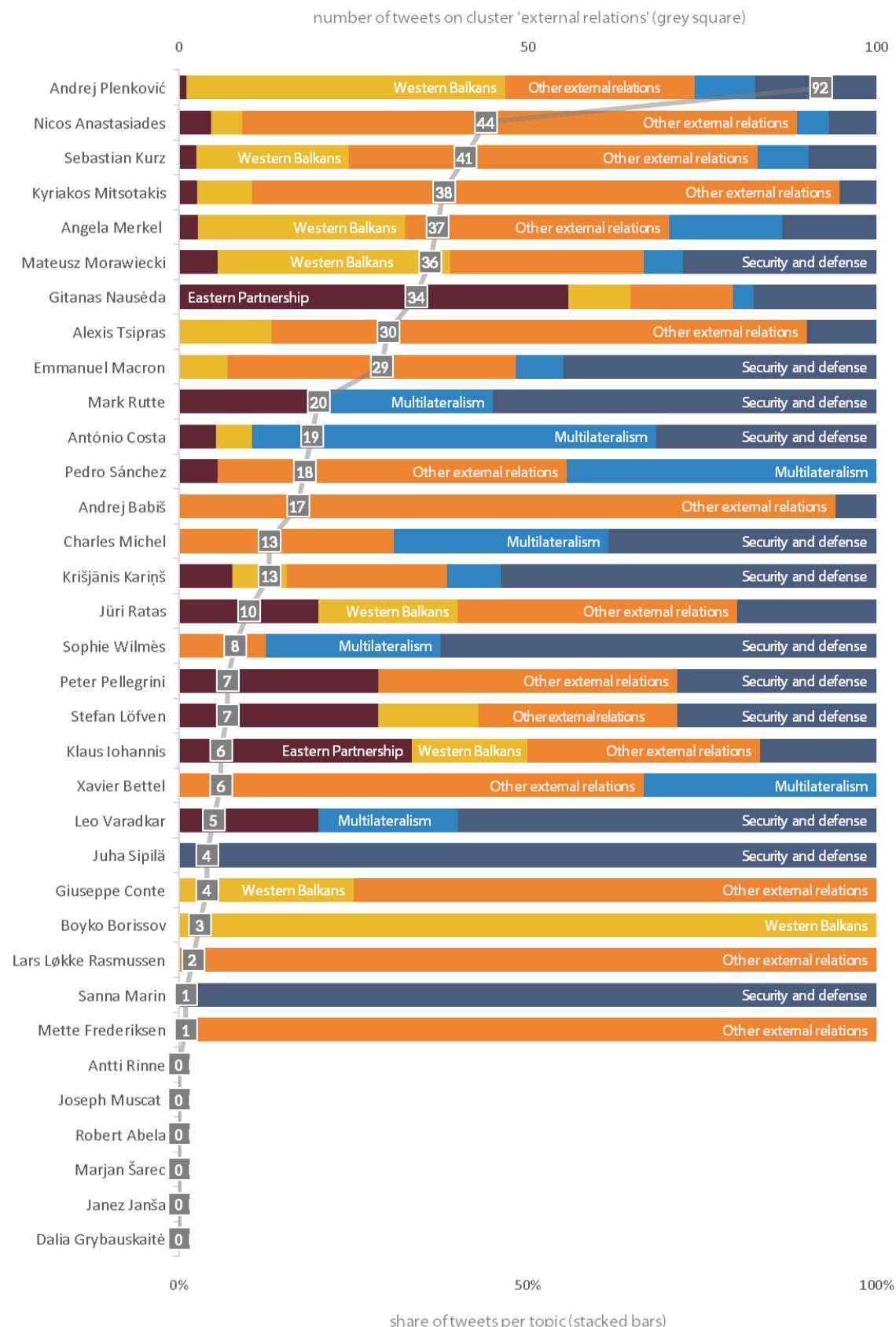
Source: EPRS.

External relations

The 'external relations' category was the subject of 7.4 % of all tweets and addressed by 28 out of the 34 EU leaders during the period under examination; all except Marjan Šarec, Janez Janša, Dalia Grybauskaitė and Antti Rinne. This is not surprising, as external relations is a macro policy area, including many different issues; the most prominent topics found in this study were: the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, and multilateralism, as well as security and defence.

'Other external relations' (3 %), includes tweets on EU-US relations, the Libyan situation, Turkish-European cooperation and forging stronger partnerships with China and Africa. Most tweets labelled as 'Other external relations' were issued by both Greek Prime Ministers, Alexis Tsipras (17 %) and Kyriakos Mitsotakis (12 %) and by Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades (16 %), (see Figure 7). This comes as no surprise, as these EU leaders were the most vocal in relation to the violation of international law by Turkey and its illegal drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean during the period under examination. Tweets condemning Turkey's actions were mainly issued during the June 2019 European Council meeting, at which discussions on the need to take measures were stressed by Alexis Tsipras in his [tweet](#): 'The European Council has sent a clear message to Turkey, unequivocally condemning its illegal actions in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)'. Other statements of consensus reached by EU leaders were conveyed in the context of the December 2019 European Council, when Nicos Anastasiades [expressed](#) 'his full appreciation for the #EUCO conclusions on the collective response against Turkey's illegal actions' and Kyriakos Mitsotakis was [satisfied](#) to have received 'support of all member states against Turkey's provocation' (Turkey's non-compliance with the Law of the Sea).

Figure 7 – Tweets concerning EU external relations per EU leader and sub-issue



Source: EPRS.

The data provide results worthy of deeper analysis on certain external policy issues. The issue of the 'Western Balkans' is particularly outlined in Andrej Plenković's total tweets (4%) issued in the context of the Western Balkans Summit and his aim to ensure stabilisation within the region. Boyko Borissov, Alexis Tsipras and Sebastian Kurz were also distinctly active on the 'Western Balkans' issue, with 7%, 3% and 3% of total coverage respectively. Tweets on the issue of 'multilateralism' (1% of total EU tweets) primarily referred to the EU's global role and the need for international cooperation, with Charles Michel (3%) underlining this key aspect more than other leaders. Under the 'Eastern Partnership' umbrella, the subject of 1% of total EU tweets, EU leaders Gitanas Nausėda and Stefan Löfven were the most attentive to the importance of strengthening links with eastern European partners, as they dedicated 7% and 4% of their total Twitter output respectively on the matter. Lastly, 'security and defence' (2% of total EU tweets), includes tweets on countering terrorism and reinforcing international security, with more EU leaders sharing a higher percentage in this issue than on other policy issues clustered under 'external relations'. The most active leaders on Twitter on EU security and defence were Juha Sipilä (9%), Sanna Marin (6%) and Sophie Wilmès (5%).

Multiannual financial framework

The EU's long-term budget was, after external relations, the policy issue covered in the highest number of tweets by EU Heads of State or Government. However, the MFF was mentioned by more of the EU Heads of State or Government than external relations, with all but three of the 34 Heads of State or Government examined in this study tweeting on this broad EU issue. Most tweets were issued by Andrej Plenković, with 101 tweets making up over 10% of his total EU tweets. Klaus Iohannis even dedicated 22% of his EU tweets to the MFF during this period. Other leaders, who tweeted relatively often on the subject of the MFF, in relation to their overall level of EU tweets, were Sanna Marin, (19%), Sophie Wilmès (16%), Mette Frederiksen (13%) and Janez Janša (11%).

Many EU leaders tweeted on the EU long-term budget in the context of meetings, mostly bilateral, where the MFF was one of the issues discussed, however mainly without going into detail. The MFF was often referred to when tweeting about the main EU priorities of the moment or for the next months. Tweets on the MFF were also often reported in connection with meetings of specific issue-related coalition groups amongst Member States, such as the 'friends of cohesion' and the 'frugal four'.

When tweeting about their priorities for the next MFF, EU leaders very often mentioned 'cohesion' and, to a lesser extent, 'agriculture'. This is understandable considering the fact that there are 17 Member States in the 'friends of cohesion' group, which seeks to safeguard EU spending on cohesion and agricultural policies. Among EU leaders, one of the most vocal advocates of strengthening the common agricultural policy (CAP) under the next MFF was Pedro Sánchez, who emphasised the need for a stronger CAP to meet the future challenges within the EU in 14 tweets during the period. Other priorities raised in relation with the MFF were included in the 'focus on modern policies'. Mark Rutte [tweeted](#) that 'we also want the budget to be modernised, with a greater focus on innovation, climate and migration'; Emmanuel Macron [called](#) for Europe 'to have an ambitious budget to invest in healthy food, in ecological transition, digital and artificial intelligence, defence and protection of our borders'. For certain Member States from the 'frugal four' grouping, a central issue was the overall size of the long-term budget, as highlighted in tweets issued by Mette Frederiksen, calling for leaders to 'maintain the EU budget at 1%'.

Some tweets also related to the state of negotiations, issued in particular around European Council meetings. During the special February 2020 European Council, Kyriakos Mitsotakis [tweeted](#) that he was 'in discussions with the leaders of France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and Belgium on the #EUBudget'. Prior to the failed February 2020 negotiations, certain leaders

expressed their scepticism over the possibility of striking a deal in that month, with Andrej Babiš [affirming](#), when discussing his position in detail with the Presidents of the European Council, Charles Michel, and European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, that an agreement on the EU budget 'will be very difficult' to reach.

Furthermore, a number of tweets expressed views as to the suitability of certain proposals put forward by the European Commission, the Council presidency or the President of the European Council. António Costa, for example, [tweeted](#) that 'the proposal of the Finnish Presidency for the 2021-2027 MFF is a huge mistake', while Sebastian Kurz, speaking for the 'frugal four', [tweeted](#) that 'we clearly reject the #EUCommission's proposal for the new #MFF of 1.11%'; likewise, Pedro Sánchez [described](#) Charles Michel's budget proposal as 'disappointing'. Another leader, clearly manifesting disappointment with the Commission proposal and its intention to reduce funding was Andrej Babiš, who [complained](#) that 'the draft favours countries with high unemployment rate and low GDP growth'.

In the later part of the observation period (January 2019 to June 2020), after April 2020, the MFF was often tweeted together with coronavirus and/or the Recovery Fund. Some of the tweets were about the national allocations in the proposals for the MFF and the recovery fund. Mateusz Morawiecki for example [tweeted](#) that 'Poland will receive around EUR 3 billion from European Union funds for the Common Agricultural Policy.'

Lastly, regarding the language used, the MFF as an issue was an element in a vast array of tweets issued in a language other than the native language of the author, with leaders such as António Costa, Mark Rutte and Pedro Sánchez engaging with a broader audience by translating their original tweet on the EU budget into English (see section 4.2).

2.2.2. EU institutions and representatives

The cluster 'EU institutions and representatives' comprises the individual issues: 'interaction with EU representatives', e.g. EU Commissioners or the presidents of the European Parliament and the Commission (6.4 %), 'references to EU institutions' (3 %), 'the Council presidency' (3 %), and 'interaction with the European Council President' (2 %).

European Council President

The European Council President is the chair, agenda-setter, facilitator, and representative of the European Council. [Studies](#) have shown that the European Council President has played an essential role, notably following the Brexit referendum, in ensuring that the messages coming from the European Council were consistent and based on the principles set in landmark declarations such as the [Bratislava Declaration](#), following the United Kingdom decision to leave the EU; he notably put strong emphasis on the need to maintain unity within the EU, to listen to the expectations of EU citizens and to deliver on EU policies – and this, despite a heavy rotation in EU Heads of State or Government in the European Council over recent years.

While the use of Twitter by the European Council President to communicate about the European Council and its members has already been documented in '[Charles Michel: 100+ days in office](#)', the other European Council Members have not reciprocated this enthusiasm when tweeting about the European Council President. While 26 out of the 34 examined EU leaders tweeted about the European Council President, the total number of tweets is surprisingly low. The EU leaders who most often referred to the European Council President were Sanna Marin (6 %) and Nicos Anastasiades (6 %). These tweets mostly concerned meetings that they were attending, or which were taking, or had taken, place with the European Council President, or the president-elect.

The other tweets concerning the European Council President were mainly diplomatic messages, aimed at thanking Donald Tusk for his time in office, such as those expressed by Jüri Ratas when he [tweeted](#) 'Thank you @donaldtusk for your bold leadership, sincere cooperation and kind support! It has been an honour working with you. Dziękuję!', and Giuseppe Conte, [calling](#) Donald Tusk 'a wonderful friend', or later congratulating Charles Michel on his election and welcoming him to the European Council.

However, EU leaders may indeed be retweeting tweets by the European Council President. This activity has not been assessed at this stage, as EU leaders' retweeting activity was beyond the scope of this study.

Interaction with EU representatives'

Contrary to the tweets relating to the European Council President, references and interaction with EU representatives, mainly the Commission President, Brexit chief negotiator Michel Barnier and Commissioners, were much more present in leaders' tweets.

EU leaders appear to focus more specifically on interaction with Commissioners from their respective countries, either congratulating them on their appointment to the College of Commissioners, or meeting them physically. Krišjānis Kariņš was notably engaged in mentioning Valdis Dombrovskis when the latter was appointed Vice-President of the European Commission in September 2019, [stressing](#) that 'Latvia holds one the most influential portfolios and improves geographical balance of the EU's high posts'. Albeit classified as an EU-related tweet, this type of tweet comprises a national connotation, as EU Heads of State or Government predominantly meet Commissioners from their own countries and often barely interact with representatives outside the domestic sphere. Exceptions include Margrethe Vestager, with whom some EU leaders met to discuss the digital agenda and priorities to ensure a digital transition, as well as Dubravka Šuica, primarily in relation to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Interactions also refer to meetings with the newly appointed European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and Brexit chief negotiator Michel Barnier, in light of the preparations for negotiations on the future relationship between the EU and UK.

There were also a number of tweets regarding the President of the European Parliament, such as from Angela Merkel's account when [tweeting](#) about the 'close coordination with representatives of the European institutions ahead of the European Council next week: Chancellor #Merkel receives @EP_President Sassoli and @eucopresident Tusk. @EUCouncil @Europarl_EN'. Likewise, following a bilateral meeting, Pedro Sánchez [portrayed](#) the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, as 'a man of strong ideals in an essential position for the future of the EU'.

Council presidency

Some 18 EU Heads of State or Government tweeted on the Council presidency. Tweeting most often on the Council Presidency were Antti Rinne (20 %), Andrej Plenković (13 %), Sanna Marin (13 %) and Klaus Iohannis (9 %). This observation is not surprising, as, during the 18 months covered by the study, all of these EU leaders were the Head of State or Government, for part of or the whole period during which their country held the rotating Council presidency.

2.2.3. European Council meetings

Tweets in the cluster regarding 'European Council meetings' are a combination of three individual issues: 'Before European Council meetings', 'During European Council meetings' and 'after European Council meetings'. Distinguishing between three different phases of a European Council meeting was important to separate tweets that 1) announce European Council meetings, inform on

the agenda and mention preparations; 2) provide up-to-date information on the development of a meeting; and 3) report on the outcomes of a meeting. Sometimes, tweets are not always easy to categorise as before, during and after, especially during a two-day (or longer) meeting, when after the first day, leaders report on the results of the first day/initial sessions.

The analysis shows that, on average, leaders tweet more before and after a European Council meeting than during, with a slightly higher number of tweets reporting on the results of a European Council. EU leaders with the highest percentage of their tweets on Europe covering preparations for European Council meetings originate from Nordic countries (Mette Frederiksen, Denmark, 15%; Antti Rinne, Finland, 13 %; and Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Denmark, 9%), and from the Netherlands (Mark Rutte with 9 % of his overall European tweets). The absolute champion in live summit tweeting, however, was Dalia Grybauskaitė, who dedicated 40 % of her, admittedly low, number of European tweets on reporting from European Council meetings. EU leaders who dedicate most of their tweets on Europe to reporting on the results of the European Council are Sanna Marin (13 %), Mateusz Morawiecki (10%), Robert Abela (7 %), and Alexis Tsipras (7 %).

Before European Council meetings

The analysis of the tweets before European Council meetings indicates that heavy preparation activities take place between EU leaders before a European Council meeting: 33 % of all tweets reported of many preparatory and coordination meetings. Most of these were bilateral meetings in the week/days before the European Council, or on the day of the meeting itself, yet these encounters also encompass meetings with groups and alliances of Member States; EU representatives, notably the European Council President; social partners; and their European political families. Only around 22 % of tweets before European Council meetings actually mentioned the topics on the agenda of the meeting, while the rest did not. In terms of leaders' communication with their citizens on EU-related matters, however, there appears to be some room for improvement.

Around 20% of tweets before European Council meetings indicate the priorities of the national leaders. A number of these concerned the MFF negotiations, issued when giving doorstep remarks or when reporting from their statements before their national parliaments. Angela Merkel and Sophie Wilmès in particular tweeted extensively on the priorities mentioned in their statements before their national parliament or parliamentary committee. About 6 % of leaders tweeted that they were on their way to or arriving at the meeting or that the meeting was starting. Another example of an EU leader attempting to inform their national parliament and citizens before a European Council meeting is Giuseppe Conte, who addressed the Italian parliament for an informative note and made a live broadcast using social media prior to the leaders' video-conference in June 2020.

An example of a best-practice tweet before a European Council is Angela Merkel's March 2019 podcast on the European Council, where she [explained](#) an upcoming European Council meeting and its main topics. Angela Merkel has also used podcasts on other occasions to explain aspects of the functioning of the European Union, such as [climate policy](#) or the Council presidency.

During European Council meetings

A lot of the tweets issued by leaders during meetings of the European Council concentrate on the discussions in or between the individual sessions of the European Council. Some also tweet about activities on the sidelines of a European Council, such as bilateral or group meetings of a number of EU leaders on the margins of a session, such as Mateusz Morawiecki [reporting](#) on a V4 meeting during the extraordinary European Council meeting of 10 April 2019 or Pedro Sánchez [informing](#) on

'intense activity of meetings in Brussels within the framework of #EUCO, also with the leaders of the Friendly Countries of Cohesion'.

 **Giuseppe Conte** 
@GiuseppeConteIT

Seconda giornata a Bruxelles. Continua intenso il confronto, nonostante le difficoltà, per arrivare ad un Bilancio europeo all'altezza delle aspettative dei cittadini
#EUCO

Translate Tweet



4:41 PM · Feb 21, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

Many tweets are also about the respective individual statements (i.e. which priorities they stressed) that EU leaders made in the course of a European Council session, such as Sebastian Kurz tweeting that 'If we want a modern and competitive #Europe, we need real change. I will therefore present my ideas for a new EU #treaty at today's informal #EUCO in #Sibiu.' Likewise, Alexis Tsipras [tweeted](#) 'With President N. Anastasiadis, we ask the Council to take clear decisions on the violation of international law by Turkey'.

Other tweets reported on the status of a discussion (resuming, ongoing, under way, attending, continuing, postponing), stressed the sticking points, report on the quality of a meeting (e.g. good, excellent), or on the difficulties encountered in the discussions (e.g. often on the MFF or 'top job' package of appointments to EU institutions) that allow interested parties to follow the progress of the discussions'.

Examples include Andrej Babiš [tweeting](#) that 'the negotiations at the Brussels European Council are long and complicated. All night. Over 12 hours', or Peter Pellegrini [informing](#) on 'continuing discussion on #MFF at @EUCO in Brussels. No light in a tunnel yet. Breaking up discussions in various groups'.

After/reporting from European Council meetings

Many EU leaders tweet on the results of a European Council meeting, but the analysis of the tweets also showed that they were often selective in the topics on which they reported. This may be linked to the character limit of a tweet (280), forcing them to concentrate on the headline topics, or simply to their intention to stress points of particular national interest.

At its meeting on [21-22 March 2019](#), the European Council agreed for example to extend the Article 50 period until 22 May 2019, but also discussed jobs, growth and competitiveness, climate, fighting disinformation, the EU-China summit, Ukraine's sovereignty, the EU's readiness to provide humanitarian relief assistance to Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe and marked the 25th anniversary of the European Economic Area. The analysis of the tweets in the course of that meeting's results shows that 12 leaders tweeted a total 30 times, of which 18 tweets mentioned decisions on Brexit, three on the single market and industrialisation, two mentioned China and two addressed climate policy. António Costa was the only leader who [mentioned](#) that 'the European Council today expressed deep solidarity and condolences for the losses caused by Cyclone Idai in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. The European Union will provide humanitarian aid to affected populations'.

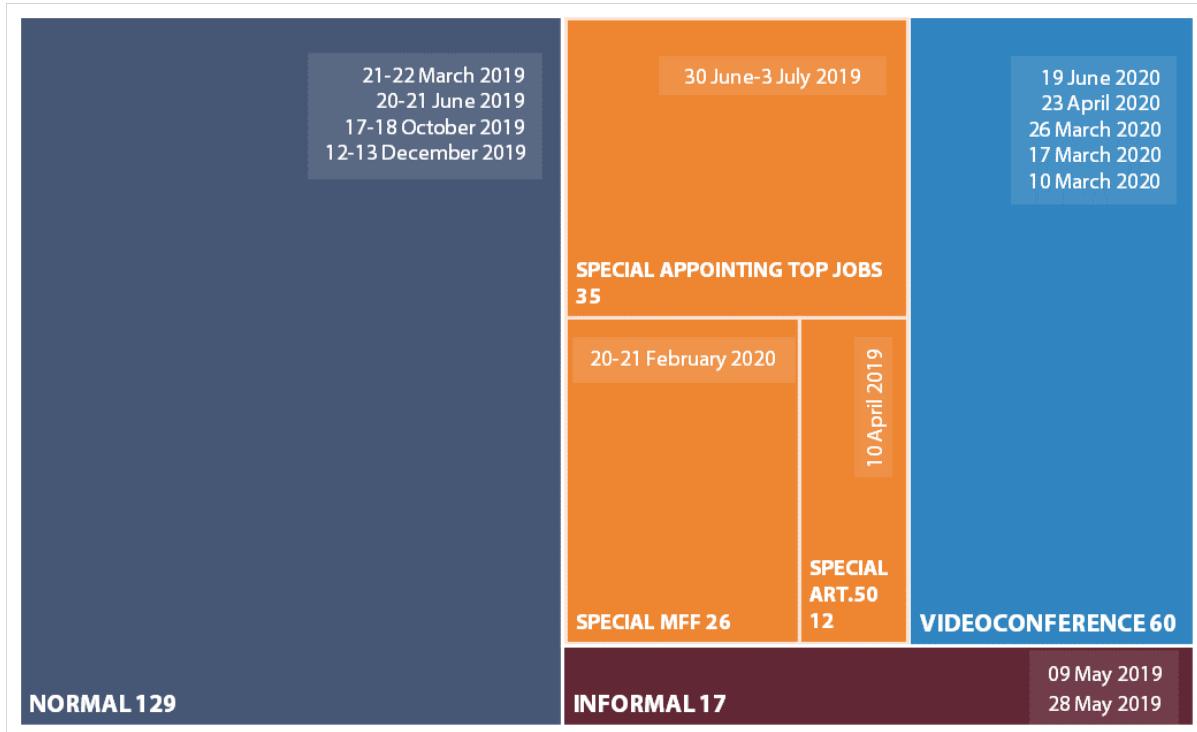
The tweets on the [European Council of 20-21 June 2019](#) were similarly diverse. The meeting dealt with high-level EU appointments, climate policy, the Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024, the MFF, disinformation, enlargement, Brexit, Euro Summit, Country-specific recommendations, Turkey's illegal drilling activities, and Ukraine and Russian sanctions. Out of the 27 tweets on the results of the meeting (coming from 9 different leaders), the decisions on climate policy were mentioned in 9 tweets (by 5 different leaders) and 8 tweets on the discussion on institutional leadership. At the meeting, the adoption of the Strategic Agenda was tweeted five times each by a different leader. The illegal Turkish activities were [mentioned](#) four times, but only by Alexis Tsipras, while the euro area was the subject of three, and the MFF two, tweets. The follow-up to the meeting (i.e. that EU leaders would meet again a week later) was only [tweeted](#) about by Angela Merkel. Another topic which was covered by only one [tweet](#) was the downing of flight MH17. Some of these examples show clearly where certain national interests lie and which of these interests elicit tweets.

Besides the majority of tweets reporting on decisions, some of the tweets following a European Council indicate the time and place of national press conferences or include the entire press conference video, especially in Emmanuel Macron's case. Unfortunately the term (European Council) 'conclusions' was hardly ever mentioned and no leader informed citizens as to how to access the full set of conclusions.

Tweeting on European Council meetings depending on the type of meeting

When looking at the different European Council meetings between January 2019 and 30 June 2020, it becomes evident that EU Heads of State or Government do not tweet on all meetings and all types of meetings equally.

Figure 8 – Number of tweets by EU Heads of State or Government by meeting format



Source: EPRS.

Figure 8 shows that normal European Council meetings, the Special European Council on appointments to a package of top jobs in European institutions of June/July 2019 and the Special European Council on the multiannual financial framework of 21-22 February 2020, were most tweeted about. The regular European Council meetings of October and December 2019 were the subject of many tweets, perhaps also because the former was the last meeting presided by Donald Tusk, and the latter, the first meeting presided by Charles Michel. There were far fewer tweets reporting on the results of the informal meetings and the video-conferences.

2.2.4. Crisis management

The cluster on 'crisis management' consists of the individual Brexit and coronavirus issues. Both have individually generated a significant number of tweets, with 8 % and 4 % of total leaders' EU-related tweets respectively. When examining the average number of tweets on these issues over time, it can be observed that neither issue was constantly mentioned in an equal manner, but that activity was linked to periods where they were high on the EU agenda (see section 3.2.3).

Coronavirus

As was to be expected, coronavirus issues were tweeted widely among EU leaders. Every EU Head of State or Government in office during the pandemic, with the exception of Mette Frederiksen, tweeted on the issue in a European context. Most active were Janez Janša (25 %), Stefan Löfven (17 %) and Robert Abela (15 %). While with a 3.86 % share of all EU tweets by leaders over 18 months, the topic ranks quite high – eighth of the 45 topics assessed – the fact that the coronavirus only existed as a topic for four of the 18 months studied should be taken into consideration. During these four months, the coronavirus was mentioned in about 20 % of all EU-related tweets.

The coronavirus related EU tweet posted in the largest number of EU languages (five) was [issued by Angela Merkel](#) to announce 'the agreement of the Eurogroup Finance Ministers' on a common

approach to fighting the impact of the outbreak; this 'marks an important milestone in the European common and solidarity response to the coronavirus pandemic' (for more on linguistic diversity, see section 4.2)

Brexit

Besides 'interaction with other EU leaders' (with 31 leaders tweeting on this issue), the MFF (also 31 leaders), and tweets following European Council meetings (30 leaders), Brexit was one of the issues most tweeted about by EU leaders (30). Of the overall leaders' tweets, Brexit also ranked very high, as number 5 of 45 issues. The large majority of the related tweets were issued in the framework of meetings during which Brexit was on the agenda, however without going into detail about Brexit in general or stating clear positions. Many tweets also welcomed an agreement with the UK (such as Joseph Muscat [welcoming](#) the EU-UK #BrexitDeal on 17 October 2019), or expressing EU leader's disappointment with a political decision in the UK (such as votes in the House of Commons against the Withdrawal Agreement). An exceptional tweet relating to the content aspects of Brexit came from Angela Merkel, [providing](#) German and UK citizens with a link to information explaining Brexit and its expected consequences for politics and businesses.

Tweets that included clear messages emphasised the desire 'to avoid a hard Brexit', supported 'Ireland', or stressed that 'the Withdrawal Agreement is the best possible deal'. A number of tweets marked the last day of the UK's EU membership, many expressing their unhappiness with this event. Stefan Löfven [tweeted](#) that 'today is a sad day. A close friend and ally is leaving the European Union. We need a strong future relationship for a richer and safer Europe'. Another example was Emmanuel Macron's direct [address](#) to 'British friends, whose country has just left the European Union, after 47 years of life together'.

2.2.5. Groups of EU leaders

EU Heads of State or Government not only meet as part of the European Council meeting in the configuration of 27 Member States, but also at specific meetings with smaller groups. These specific group meetings include only a limited number of EU leaders (and without the participation of non-EU leaders). Many of these groups are 'alliances', which for geographic and/or historical reasons group together to increase their influence when representing their interests in the European Council.

Table 5 – Share of cluster tweets between groups of EU leaders

Group of EU leaders	share of cluster
Meeting with V4	45.7%
South EU Summit	17.9%
Friends of Cohesion Summit	16.6%
Meeting Nordic Baltic group	10.8%
Benelux partners	6.3%
Eurosummit	2.7%

Source: EPoS.

Overall this cluster sums up to around 2 % of leaders' total EU tweets, with many of them referring to the meetings of the 'Visegrád' or 'V4' countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). Other groups mentioned are the Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), the 'friends of cohesion' (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain, advocating cohesion funding), the South

EU Summit (Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) and the Nordic-Baltic group (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden).

While the Heads of State or Government from all V4 countries,¹⁸ as well as two non-V4 EU leaders, Sebastian Kurz and Angela Merkel, tweeted on V4 issues, Mateusz Morawiecki (10 %) and Peter Pellegrini (9 %) were the main leaders to dedicate a lot of their EU tweets to this matter. Regarding 'Benelux interaction', only Xavier Bettel and Charles Michel (as Belgian Prime Minister) and Sophie Wilmès tweeted on their encounter.

The Euro Summit is also included in this cluster, as formally only those countries who have adopted the euro as their currency, are members of this group. However, the summit was hardly mentioned in EU leaders' tweets.

2.2.6. EU summits with third-country leaders

In total, the cluster on 'EU summits with third-country leaders' counts for around 1.5 % of the overall EU-related tweets. It refers to meetings between all EU Heads of State or Government and representatives of third countries. In the period under observation, these were mainly the EU and League of Arab States Summit, the EU-China Summit, the Western Balkans Summit, and the meeting of the European Economic Area (EEA) (see Table 6). However, depending on the event, considerable differences in the Twitter activities of EU leaders can be observed. Whilst only Mark Rutte referred to the EU-China meeting in his tweets, the EU and League of Arab States Summit was the subject of tweets by 16 leaders (more than half of EU Heads of State or Government in office at the time), and Lars Løkke Rasmussen dedicated 14 % of his overall tweets to this summit. The other EU summit with third countries which received many tweets was the EU-Western Balkans Summit.

Table 6 – Breakdown of cluster of tweets on EU summits with third countries

EU summits with third countries	share of cluster
EU and League of Arab States Summit	47.7%
Western Balkans Summit	44.9%
Meeting with leaders of European Economic Area	4.7%
EU-China Summit	2.8%

Source: EPRS.

2.2.7. European political representation

This cluster consists of the individual issues of 'European political parties' and 'European elections'. The first issue comprises meetings, and interactions in general, between EU leaders and their respective political parties at EU level, whereas the second issue refers to the European Parliament elections which, considering the time frame observed, took place in May 2019.

European political parties

While not a major issue in the Twitter activity of EU leaders (1.3 %), 19 of the 34 European Council members examined tweeted about interaction in, but also between, European political parties and/or the European political groups in the European Parliament. Leo Varadkar was by far the most active on this issue (26 tweets), followed by Pedro Sánchez (12 tweets), Nicos Anastasiades (7) Krišjānis Kariņš (6), Boyko Borissov (6 tweets) and Klaus Iohannis (6 tweets). With the exception of Pedro Sánchez, all the others are members of the European People's Party (EPP) political family.

¹⁸ The Hungarian Prime Minister had no active Twitter account.

However, if tweets regarding European political parties are taken as a percentage of their total European tweets, Boyko Borissov (16%), Leo Varadkar (8%), and Sanna Marin (6%) were most active.

The overall tweets focused also extensively on the EPP, with a share of around 66 % of all tweets on European political parties. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) political family was the subject of around 18 % of the respective tweets and the Renew Europe family of 6.8 %. Part of the tweets (5.7 %), referred to the various political families or political groups in the European Parliament in general. As a result of majority [patterns in recent years](#), more EU leaders from the EPP family sit in the European Council than from other political families; the substantial number of tweets suggests that EPP Heads of State or Government have to a large extent integrated their European political party into their Twitter discourse.

Very often tweets regarding European political parties concerned the summits of European political parties, which often preceded European Council meetings, as well as standalone meetings. Other tweets concerned EU Heads of State or Government meetings or the support for a specific lead candidate from a European political party for the position of President of the European Commission as well as on the negotiations between representatives of the European political parties on the package of EU 'top jobs'.

European Parliament elections

Between 23 and 26 May 2019, European citizens voted for their representatives for the ninth European Parliament legislature. European elections were widely tweeted about by the members of the European Council, with 21 EU leaders in office at the time tweeting on the subject. The three leaders who dedicated the highest percentage of their tweets to this issue were Marjan Šarec (33 %), Juha Sipilä (13 %) and Leo Varadkar (7 %). EU leaders tweeted only during a very limited time on the matter – around the elections and shortly after – with most tweets (70 %) concentrated in the month of May 2019. This also explains the low overall percentage that this issue reached over the whole 18-month period.

Often, tweets regarding the European Parliament elections reported on bilateral meetings or conferences in which the issue was included as part of the discussions. Many EU leaders tweeted their support for their national candidates. Sebastian Kurz, for example, [tweeted](#) '@othmar_karas does excellent work as VP delegation for Austria and Europe and is one of the most experienced members of the European Parliament. In the #EUElections on May 26th he is again the top candidate of the @volkspartei to run'. In many cases, Heads of State or Government also supported the lead candidate from their European political family. Most who did so supported Manfred Weber from the EPP; but Pedro Sánchez [tweeted](#) 'we are going to make @TimmermansEU be the next President of the European Commission'. Many also stressed the importance of the elections.

On election day, many EU leaders invited citizens to vote and/or reported their own ballot casting. Krišjānis Kariņš [tweeted](#) 'I call for you to be active and to take part in the European elections! Membership in the EU is an opportunity for Latvia to grow and develop'. Another element in the tweets regarding the European elections was the reporting on the high turnout. Xavier Bettel tweeted 'Europe wins! Voter turnout very high and pro-European parties are strongest' and Jüri Ratas [tweeted](#) that 'This year's participation in #EUElections2019 was highest in 25 years. Europeans gave a strong message and support to the pro-European parties'.

Later tweets reported on the election successes of national parties and/or thanked national candidates for their contribution during the election campaign. Over 10 % of the tweets focused on the European Council meetings, especially that of 28 May 2019, which discussed the results of the European Parliament elections.

2.2.8. Institutional and cross-cutting issues

This cluster includes the issues of the 'future of Europe' (1.3 %), the '2019-2024 Strategic Agenda' (0.9 %) and the 'package of EU top jobs' (1.6 %).

Future of Europe

While not a high percentage, 'the Future of Europe' issue was still tweeted about by 17 EU Heads of State. The limited number of tweets on the Future of Europe theme could be explained by the fact that the Future of Europe debates in the European Parliament with Heads of State or Government were nearly over at the start of the period (January 2019-June 2020) under observation, as most interventions had already taken place.

Many tweets referring to the Future of Europe were about announcing or reporting from conferences or meetings, including bilateral meetings between Members of the European Council, at which the Future of Europe was discussed. In some cases, such as by Charles Michel, they provided [links](#) to their speeches, but in many cases the 'why' (i.e. why do we need this debate and the 'what' (i.e. what should this debate be about) were not addressed in the tweets on the Future of Europe. Besides those EU leaders who tweeted the main messages of their speeches on the Future of Europe in the European Parliament, one positive example of tweeting on the 'why' and 'what' came from Sebastian Kurz, who [stated](#) that 'The discussion about the future of #EU in #Sibiu today was necessary because other regions of the world are already overtaking us. It is therefore important to put the #EU on a new footing with a new EU treaty.'

Earlier tweets (January-April 2019) on the Future of Europe focused on debates with EU Heads of State or Government in the European Parliament. All of those EU Heads of State or Government who were supposed to address plenary between January and April 2019 also tweeted on the occasion, not only mentioning the event, but also tweeting the key messages of their speeches. Peter Pellegrini for example [envisioned](#) a Union that acts on the global stage, as well as earns the trust of its citizens, while Pedro Sánchez stressed that 'it is time to protect the values that make the #UE a unique project, to protect Europe so that Europe protects its citizens'. Juha Sipilä [called](#) for the implementation of the Rome Declaration and concrete actions on climate, safety and growth. Giuseppe Conte and Krišjānis Kariņš limited themselves to communicating the hyperlink leading to their speech, allowing users to tune-in live or later. The only speaker who addressed Parliament on the Future of Europe and did not tweet about it was Stefan Löfven.

In May 2019, tweets on the Future of Europe debate were mainly associated with the Sibiu Summit adding up to around 17 % of the tweets on the topic, but many of these were tweeted by the host of the meeting, Klaus Iohannis, as well as by Sebastian Kurz. Tweets between December 2019 and June 2020 concentrated on the Conference on the Future of Europe as a main point of the Future of Europe discussion, making up about 12 % of tweets. Nearly all tweets came from Andrej Plenković, who held the rotating Council presidency at the time and tweeted that the Conference on the Future of Europe was necessary 'because we need to see how to make the European project more efficient and add value to citizens'.

EU Strategic Agenda 2019-2024

At its meeting of 20-21 June 2019, the European Council adopted the EU's [Strategic Agenda 2019-2024](#), setting four priority areas that will guide the work of the EU institutions over the next five years. The vast majority of tweets on the Strategic Agenda¹⁹ were about meetings, mainly bilateral, but also some European Council meetings, where the specific author tweeted that the

¹⁹ Sometimes, however, it is difficult to be sure if the Strategic Agenda was meant when the term 'European agenda' was tweeted, as European agenda and Strategic Agenda are sometimes used synonymously.

Strategic Agenda was being discussed. In hardly any cases were the desired priorities of the Strategic Agenda mentioned. There were however some noteworthy exceptions. António Costa [tweeted](#) that 'the new European agenda must respond to citizens' wishes, guarantee security and prosperity; betting on the green economy, education and digital economy and a strategic partnership with the African continent for the 21st century'. Mark Rutte [tweeted](#) that 'among other things, we discussed the priorities of our countries on the EU's Strategic Agenda, such as security, migration and climate'. Charles Michel [stated](#) 'our priorities for the next 5 years: #EUCO must focus on more jobs, the climate challenge and security. This is the project for the future European coalition. Our focus is clear for @EUCouncil: invest in more jobs, security and the fight against climate change'.

Tweets on the Strategic Agenda very often also included a reference to the 'top jobs' discussion and/or mentioned that the adoption of the MFF was to be the implementation/follow up of the Strategic Agenda. António Costa for example, [tweeted](#) 'Next step: the adoption of a multi-year budget to match the ambitions of this new agenda in meeting the expectations of our citizens'. Likewise, Andrej Plenković [tweeted](#) that 'the next multiannual financial framework, [was] the most important document to follow the EU Strategic Program adopted at #EUCO in June'. For Andrej Plenković, it was very important (7 of his 12 tweets on the issue) to stress that the demographic challenges for the EU, and for Croatia in particular, were taken into consideration in the Strategic Agenda.

While 13 EU leaders issued tweets that referred to the Strategic Agenda or the European agenda, only 6 actually tweeted on the adoption of the Strategic Agenda: Andrej Plenković, Emmanuel Macron, António Costa, Mark Rutte, Klaus Iohannis and Mateusz Morawiecki. However, none of them explained what the EU's Strategic Agenda is, and only Klaus Iohannis indicated the agenda's priorities by tweeting 'the adoption of the #StrategicAgenda, which perfectly reflects our common vision for the #FutureofEurope, protecting our citizens, freedoms and values should be central in our future actions'. The focus of Mateusz Morawiecki's tweet on the Strategic Agenda was to stress the Polish influence, claiming that 'We have included key topics for Poland in the Strategic Agenda. Our contribution to this agenda was one of the most detailed among all member countries.'

It appears that both the Future of Europe debates in the European Parliament and the Strategic Agenda present missed opportunities for most EU leaders to explain the EU to citizens and to outline their political views on Europe to their followers.

EU 'top jobs'

Following the results of the European Parliament elections, EU Heads of State or Government met at their [informal meeting on 28 May 2019](#) to start the appointment process for a number of high-level EU positions. Six EU Heads of State or Government –Andrej Plenković (EPP), Krišjānis Kariņš (EPP), Mark Rutte (Renew Europe), Charles Michel (Renew Europe), Pedro Sánchez (PES) and António Costa (PES) – were nominated as negotiators for their political families to discuss the high-level appointments informally. The package of high-level EU appointments was further discussed at the [European Council of 20-21 June 2019](#), but again without reaching agreement. After a lengthy [meeting](#), lasting from 30 June to 2 July with interruptions, the European Council agreed on the package of candidates for the EU high-level positions. This package of EU 'top jobs' included appointment of Ursula von der Leyen (Germany) as European Commission President; Charles Michel (Belgium) as European Council President; Josep Borrell (Spain) as High Representative/Vice-President of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Christine Lagarde (France) as President of the European Central Bank.

As the selection of a large part of the EU's institutional leadership is a significant event, it is unsurprising that EU leaders tweeted substantially on this issue – 20 of the 27 leaders in office at the time. Peter Pellegrini tweeted most (5 %), followed by Alexis Tsipras (5 %), Pedro Sánchez (4 %) and

Mateusz Morawiecki (4 %) – Pedro Sánchez being the only one not a member of the political parties' negotiating teams.

As the large majority of tweets relating to 'EU top jobs' are very much concentrated in a short period between 28 May and 3 July, this results in a rather low percentage of tweets in relation to all EU tweets over an 18-month period.

When examining the specific content of the tweets, the analysis shows that the early tweets in late May 2019 more specifically mentioned the process and criteria in the decision-making process, as well as support for individual candidates such as Manfred Weber or Frans Timmermans. Later tweets in June, reported considerably on the bilateral and group meetings, as well as on the policy priorities on which the new institutional leadership was expected to focus. In July 2019, tweets mainly reported on the difficulties in the negotiations, announcing and explaining the results as well as claiming victory in the negotiations. An example of the latter is Mateusz Morawiecki, who [tweeted](#) that 'we secured the interests of Poland and all of Central and Eastern Europe.' Throughout May to July 2019, EU leaders tweeted about their objectives in the negotiations on the top jobs, e.g. Juha Sipilä [tweeted](#) that 'Finland is seeking a strong position as Commissioner and is promoting speculative Finnish names in the ECB's management', whilst Jüri Ratas [tweeted](#) that, for him, 'it is important to see the geographical, demographical and gender balance in the outcome'.

2.3. Main topics covered and differences between EU leaders

The analysis of the individual EU leaders' Twitter communication shows considerable differences in their focus. While some were very much in line with the average 'top tweets' on EU issues ('interaction with EU leaders', external relations, 'interaction with EU representatives', MFF and Brexit), EU Heads of State or Government as a general pattern tweeted on policies or issues that have a national connotation or specifically affect their country.

Table 7 – Top 3 EU issues of each EU Head of State or Government

Country	Leader	Top 3 topics per leader	share of leaders' tweets	Country	Leader	Top 3 topics per leader	share of leaders' tweets
Belgium	Charles Michel	Interaction with EU leaders Brexit External relations	18% 12% 10%	Lithuania	Dalia Grybauskaitė	During Energy Brexit	40% 20% 20%
	Sophie Wilmès	MFF COVID19 Climate	16% 10% 9%		Gitanas Nausėda	External relations MFF Economic governance	13% 9% 8%
	Boyko Borissov	Interaction with EU leaders Interaction with EU representatives Interaction with European political parties	17% 15% 15%		Xavier Bettel	Interaction with EU leaders Brexit Other EU issues	9% 8% 7%
Czechia	Andrej Babiš	Interaction with EU leaders MFF Interaction with EU representatives	11% 9% 8%		Joseph Muscat	Interaction with EU leaders Migration Interaction with EU representatives	20% 16% 15%
Denmark	Lars Løkke Rasmussen	Interaction with EU leaders Brexit EU and League of Arab States Summit	23% 14% 14%	Malta	Robert Abela	Referring to EU institutions COVID19 Interaction with EU representatives	37% 15% 11%
	Mette Frederiksen	Interaction with EU leaders Before MFF	24% 15% 13%		Mark Rutte	Interaction with EU leaders Brexit Climate	15% 13% 11%
Germany	Angela Merkel	Interaction with EU leaders Other EU issues External relations	24% 9% 7%		Sebastian Kurz	External relations Interaction with EU leaders Brexit	12% 8% 8%
Estonia	Jüri Ratas	Climate Interaction with EU representatives MFF	10% 9% 9%	Poland	Mateusz Morawiecki	Meeting with V4 Interaction with EU leaders After/communicating results	10% 10% 10%
Ireland	Leo Varadkar	Brexit Interaction with EU leaders Interaction with EU representatives	19% 16% 9%	Portugal	António Costa	Interaction with EU representatives MFF Interaction with EU leaders	10% 9% 9%
Greece	Alexis Tsipras	External relations Interaction with EU leaders Interaction with EU representatives	22% 10% 7%	Romania	Klaus Iohannis	Future of Europe Council Presidency Other EU issues	9% 9% 8%
	Kyriakos Mitsotakis	Interaction with EU leaders External relations Migration	15% 14% 12%	Slovenia	Marjan Šarec	Interaction with EU representatives EU elections Future of Europe	33% 33% 33%
	Pedro Sánchez	After/communicating results Social and cohesion policy Climate	8% 8% 7%		Janez Janša	COVID19 Interaction with EU representatives MFF	25% 13% 11%
France	Emmanuel Macron	Interaction with EU leaders Other EU issues External relations	13% 10% 9%	Slovakia	Peter Pellegrini	Meeting with V4 Interaction with EU leaders MFF	9% 8% 8%
Croatia	Andrej Plenković	Council Presidency MFF External relations	13% 10% 9%	Finland	Juha Siipilä	Climate EU elections Interaction with EU leaders	13% 13% 11%
Italy	Giuseppe Conte	Economic governance Interaction with EU leaders Strategic Agenda 2019–2024	18% 11% 10%		Antti Rinne	Interaction with EU leaders Council Presidency Before	27% 20% 13%
Cyprus	Nicos Anastasiades	External relations Interaction with EU leaders South EU Summit	21% 15% 10%		Sanna Marin	MFF Council Presidency After/communicating results	19% 13% 13%
Latvia	Krišjānis Kariņš	Interaction with EU leaders Interaction with EU representatives MFF	11% 11% 8%	Sweden	Stefan Löfven	Interaction with EU leaders COVID19 External relations	20% 17% 13%

Source: EPRS.

During the period under observation, it can be observed that, as Romania and Croatia held the rotating Council presidency of the EU, Andrej Plenković and Klaus Iohannis focused mainly on the activities and topics discussed in the framework of their respective presidencies. This also explains the high percentage of tweets by Sanna Marin and Antti Rinne, since Finland held the Council Presidency in the second half of 2019, during which the former succeeded the latter in office. Peter Pellegrini and Mateusz Morawiecki both focused their Twitter communication on V4 issues. As for Leo Varadkar, considering the significance of the Brexit process for Ireland, he obviously focused his main Twitter activity (19 %) on the Irish issues in that context. Alexis Tsipras and Kyriakos Mitsotakis concentrated on external relations, in particular on tensions with Turkey. Giuseppe Conte narrowed the scope of EU-related tweets to economic governance, linked to a heated debate on the European Stability Mechanism, which he felt [risked](#) 'dividing the country', as well as to the Commission's infringement procedure over Italy's public debt in June 2019. The latter topics demonstrate how EU leaders are inclined to primarily discuss issues at the EU level on Twitter that constitute a challenge for the country and have considerable national significance.

To give further examples to illustrate the focus of tweets by Heads of State or Government: Sophie Wilmès, who was not in office for the whole of the 18 months under observation, focused on the MFF (16 %) and on the coronavirus pandemic (10 %), as these topics were centre staged during a large part of her membership of the European Council. Janez Janša's tweets also focused on

coronavirus, even more on average than other leaders (24 % of his EU-related tweets), largely due to his four-month membership of the European Council coinciding exactly with those during which the coronavirus pandemic hit the EU. Marjan Šarec neither tweeted extensively on Europe, nor in general, which explains that a low number of individual tweets can affect the average of 'top issues' on which leaders tweeted. As for Pedro Sánchez, his main tweets were on social and cohesion policy (8 %) and climate policy (7.42 %). Tweets on the first issue can be explained by politicians from his political side of the spectrum focusing on social issues (see also [The Future of Europe debates in the European Parliament, 2018-2019](#)). Pedro Sánchez's comments on climate policy are related to Spain's focus on cohesion policy during the discussions on the MFF. Regarding Stefan Löfven, his second most tweeted EU issue was, interestingly, coronavirus (17 %), which is surprising considering he was a member of the European Council throughout the whole 18-month period, and that this issue ought therefore to occupy on average a lower proportion of his output over the entire period. Joseph Muscat's second most tweeted EU issue was migration (16 %), which appears logical considering his country's position as a frontline Member State in the fight against illegal migration. Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel both tweeted on the 'other EU issues' category, in second place in their rankings at 10 % and 9 % respectively. Indeed, a lot of Angela Merkel's tweets in this category concerned German-French relations from a European perspective, as well as the celebration of remembrance of different historical European dates. Boyko Borissov has a high percentage of tweets on European political parties (15 %) and enlargement (10 %).

As discussed above, leaders stressed certain arguments depending on their political affiliation or topical issues in their home country. It is noteworthy that social democratic leaders such as Pedro Sánchez and António Costa tweeted extensively in favour of a fairer and more social Europe and the development of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Since this research concerns individual EU leaders – and not the countries they represent – it is worth briefly examining cases of Member States where the leader changed between 1 January 2019 and 30 June 2020 and some differences in the use of Twitter and the policy areas discussed can be identified. There appears to be a stark difference in Twitter use between the two Belgian Prime Ministers in office during the period in question, for example. Sophie Wilmès, who held office for eight months, tweeted in general more extensively than her predecessor Charles Michel, who was Prime Minister for longer; with the latter tweeting 338 times compared to Sophie Wilmès' 938 total tweets. However, a subtle difference can be discerned in their discussion on Europe in their respective Twitter feeds, as Charles Michel and Sophie Wilmès focused their attention on EU-related issues in 119 and 112 tweets respectively. As regards policy areas discussed, both leaders gave importance to climate issues in a similar way (25 % and 22%), but Charles Michel primarily focused on external relations, whereas Sophie Wilmès gave greater emphasis to the MFF, given the significance of this topic at the time she took office. When analysing the language and communication style, both leaders engaged with the audience mainly using French and Dutch. However, English was much more prominent in Charles Michel's profile, with 23 tweets translated into English compared to Sophie Wilmès' 4 tweets. The Belgian leaders were more alike in adopting a neutral tone when announcing results achieved at the European Council level, with Sophie Wilmès providing a few exceptions in sometimes expressing more satisfaction and [sharing](#) her feelings when tweeting on the progress achieved towards an agreement on the MFF/Next Generation EU in early summer 2020. In Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweeted much more than his predecessor Alexis Tsipras, with 1 482 total tweets against 977. However, when focusing on EU-related tweets, Alexis Tsipras slightly surpassed Kyriakos Mitsotakis, as the former issued 206 tweets, 3 more than his successor. Compared to Belgian Prime Ministers who use several languages in their tweeting activity, Alexis Tsipras and Kyriakos Mitsotakis predominately communicated in Greek in their Twitter profiles; however, Kyriakos Mitsotakis nevertheless tweeted 14 times in English, twice in French and German, and once in Dutch. Alexis Tsipras and Kyriakos Mitsotakis' tweets covered

external relations prominently, although Alexis Tsipras appeared to pay greater attention to this issue (48 %) than his successor (23 %). Both leaders also emphasised migration as a topic, although it ranked third in Alexis Tsipras' mentions of policy areas, while it was much more present in Kyriakos Mitsotakis' coverage of EU policies, at 20 %. Finland saw three changes in leadership over the course of the period studied, with Sanna Marin being most active on Twitter, based on extrapolated data with 607 tweets, followed by Juha Sipilä (333) and Antti Rinne (177). However, their EU tweets paint a different picture: Juha Sipilä tweeted the most on Europe with 75 tweets, followed by Antti Rinne and Sanna Marin with 39 and 23 tweets respectively. Amongst them, Juha Sipilä also issued most tweets in English (five), even if in a limited way when considering his overall EU tweets. In terms of policy areas mentioned in their tweets, Finnish leaders ranged from climate policy to Brexit and the MFF, with the Council Presidency at the core of Sanna Marin's and Antti Rinne's Twitter discourse, as Finland held the EU's rotating presidency between July and December 2019.

2.4. Interaction between EU Heads of State or Government

Of all the individual issues examined, 'interaction between EU Heads of State or Government' was the subject of the highest percentage of leaders' tweets at 10.6 %. This issue included all types of bilateral interactions between EU Heads of State or Government, e.g. meetings, phone calls, references, or comments on others' initiatives. Additionally, the issue was mentioned by nearly all EU leaders. Of the 34 EU leaders' accounts examined, 31 tweeted on their interaction with other EU Heads of State or Government and 19 dedicated more than 10 % of their EU tweets to reporting on their interactions. For Antti Rinne, Angela Merkel, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Mette Frederiksen, Joseph Muscat and Stefan Löfven, tweeting on their interaction with other EU leaders made up over 20 % of all their EU tweets.

The data collected for this study also allow a focus on the different aspects of this interaction: 1) On the amount of communication (i.e. total tweets by EU leaders on bilateral meetings (physical, telephone or by video) with other EU leaders); and 2) The number of bilateral meetings (physical, telephone or by video) they had with other EU Heads of State or Government, as reported on via Twitter. To assess the bilateral meetings between individual EU leaders, as reported on via Twitter, and their communication on these meetings, it was necessary to distinguish them strictly from other forms of interaction between EU leaders, such as commenting on other EU leaders' initiatives or congratulating them. These forms were removed from the overall data on 'interaction between EU leaders'. This gives a picture of which EU leaders report on having frequent, average and low, contact with other EU leaders.

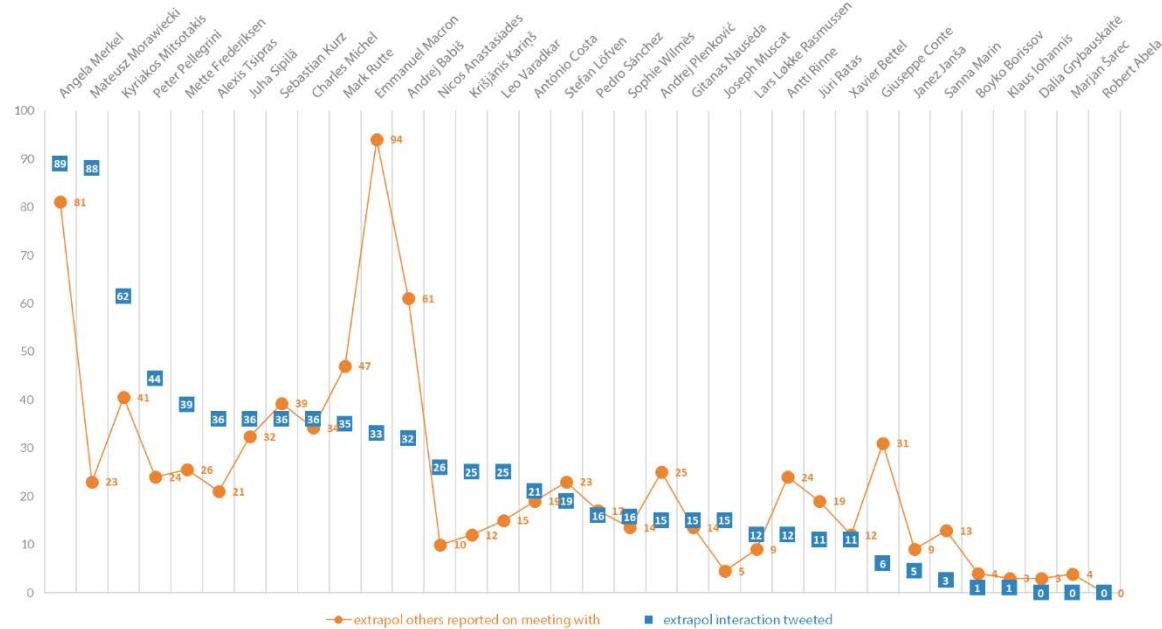
2.4.1. Communication about bilateral meeting between EU leaders

As was the case on other aspects, significant diversity can be observed in the way EU leaders communicate about bilateral meetings with other EU leaders. This could of course be related to the actual number of meetings they had and this will be explored further below. The top communicators on meetings with other EU leaders were Angela Merkel (89 tweets) and Mateusz Morawiecki (88 tweets) followed at some distance by Kyriakos Mitsotakis (62) and Peter Pellegrini (44).

The data collected enable not only assessment of who communicated most via Twitter on bilateral meetings with other EU leaders, but also an illustration of how much peers communicated on meetings with each leader (see Figure 9). This shows that some EU leaders, such as Angela Merkel, Sebastian Kurz, Charles Michel, António Costa, Stefan Löfven, Pedro Sánchez, and Xavier Bettel, used more or less the same number of tweets as their peers used on meetings with them. At the same time, there are EU leaders whose peers tweeted a lot more about meetings with them than they did themselves. For example, Emmanuel Macron received three times more tweets than he

made about meetings he had with other EU leaders, Andrej Babiš received twice as many and Giuseppe Conte even five times as many (probably due to the coronavirus situation in Italy). Conversely, Mateusz Morawiecki was mentioned nearly four times less in tweets about bilateral meetings than the number of tweets he himself issued.

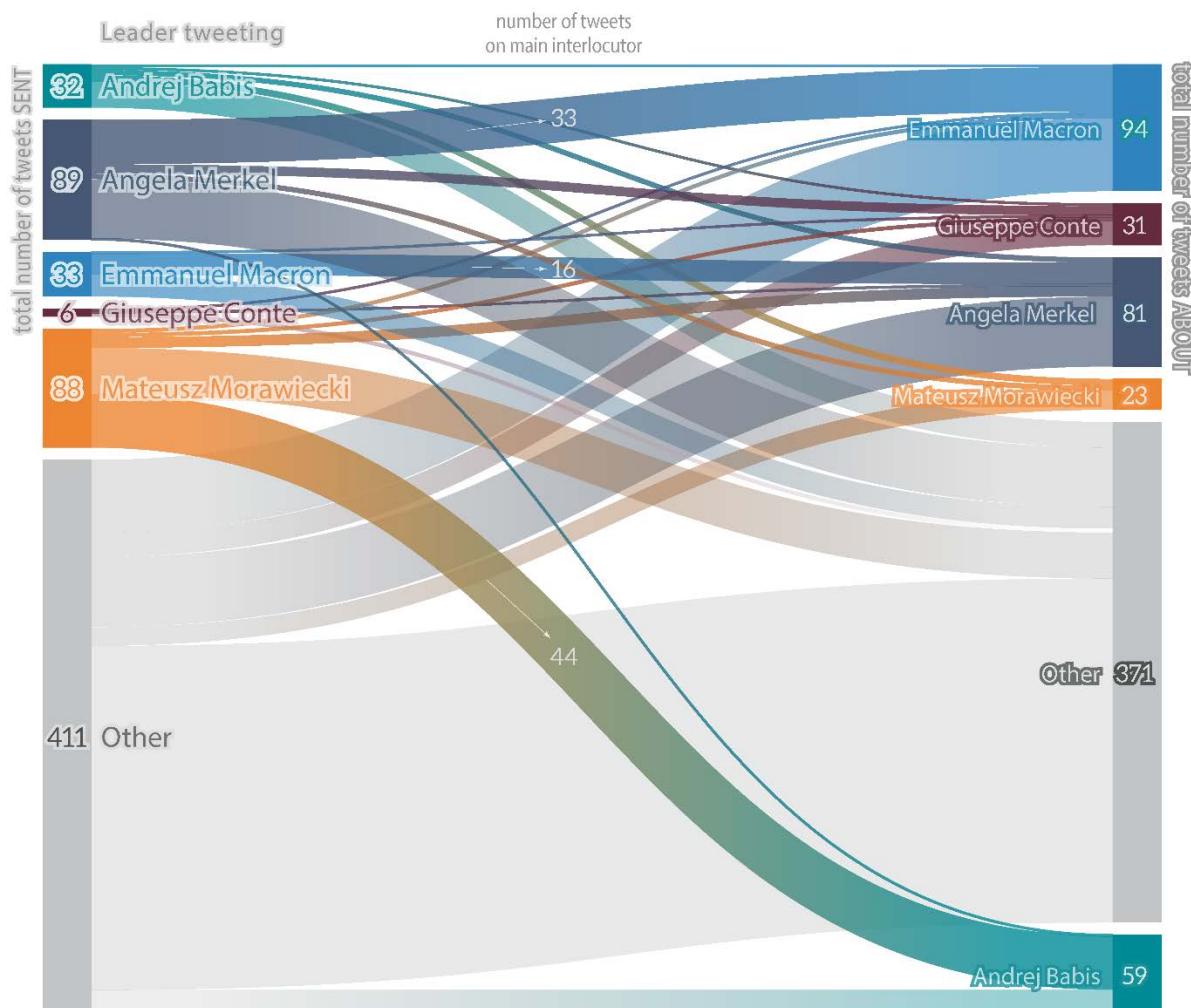
Figure 9 – Twitter communication by EU leaders on meetings with other EU leaders



Source: EPRS.

The collected data allow to further focus on reporting about bilateral meetings between EU leaders by identifying cases where EU leaders issued a particularly high number of tweets reporting on bilateral meetings with one specific European Council colleague. Figure 10 shows that Mateusz Morawiecki used a very high portion of his overall tweets on bilateral meetings mentioning Andrej Babiš (61 of his 88 tweets). It also shows that Peter Pellegrini used a third of his tweets to communicate on meetings with Mateusz Morawiecki and one third on meetings with Andrej Babiš, indicating that most contacts for these leaders were with their V4 group colleagues. A similar finding applies to the Franco-German partnership, where Angela Merkel dedicated one third of her tweets to meetings with Emmanuel Macron, who even dedicated half of his tweets to bilateral meetings with Angela Merkel.

Figure 10 – Main interlocutors for EU leaders' Twitter communication on bilateral meetings



Source: EPRS.

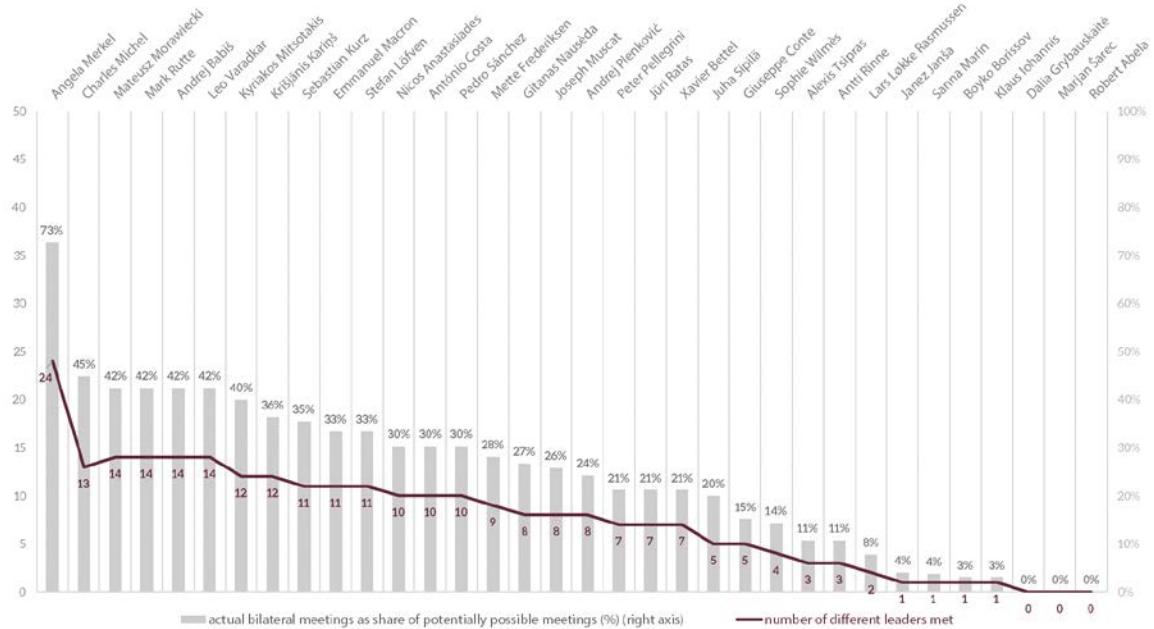
2.4.2. Tweets about bilateral meetings with other EU leaders

Bilateral meetings (physical, telephone or by video) between individual EU leaders can take place either in their home countries, or on the margins of European Council meetings or international events, such as the world economic forum in Davos, the G7 or G20 meetings.

When looking at the number of peers with whom each EU leader reported holding bilateral meetings, it can be observed that, from January 2019 to June 2020, Angela Merkel interacted by far the most with other EU leaders, as communicated on Twitter, tweeting about meetings with 24 of the 33 EU Heads of State or Government. Following, at a clear distance were Andrej Babiš (15), Mateusz Morawiecki (14), Mark Rutte (14) and Leo Varadkar (14). The latter's relatively high number of contacts with 14 other EU Heads of State or Government can probably be explained by the specific situation of Ireland in the Brexit negotiations.

Figure 11 also shows the 'used opportunity' of each EU leader (i.e. how many of their counterparts could one EU leader have theoretically met during his or her time in office over the 18-month period assessed). The analysis shows that a number of leaders, notably Mateusz Morawiecki, Charles Michel, Mark Rutte, Andrej Babiš and Leo Varadkar met over 40 % of all EU leaders they could potentially have encountered and that Angela Merkel reached over 70% of her potential.

Figure 11 – Actual vs potential bilateral meetings between EU leaders as reported on Twitter



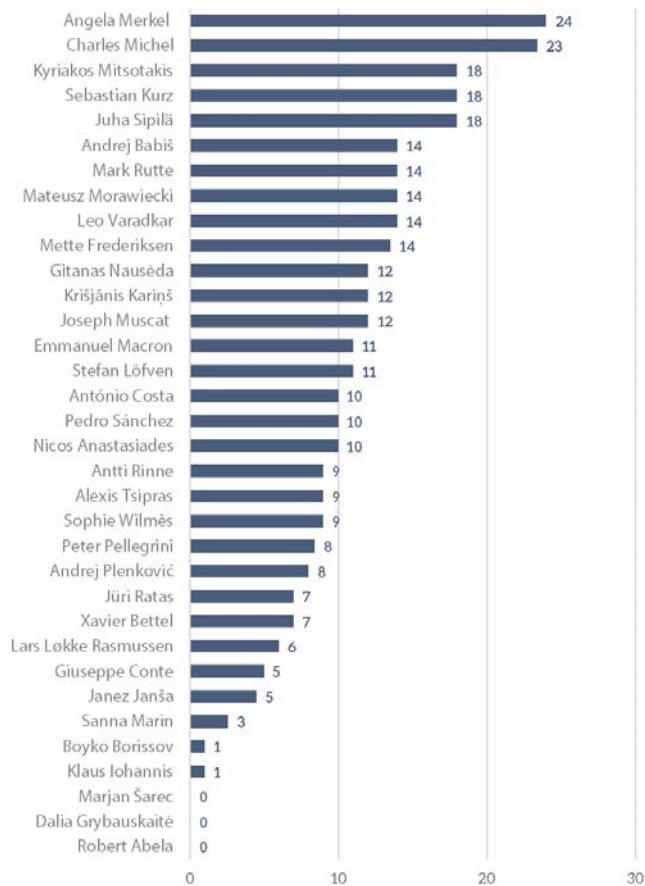
Source: EPRS.

It could theoretically be expected that EU Heads of State or Government from larger Member States have more bilateral meetings than EU leaders from smaller Member States. Surprisingly, the Twitter output of Emmanuel Macron (11), Pedro Sánchez (10) and Giuseppe Conte (5), all leaders of large Member States, reports relatively few direct contacts (physical, via telephone or by video-conference) with the other Members of the European Council. In fact, many EU leaders from smaller Member States reported more on meetings with their peers. This is particularly surprising, as leaders of larger Member States also had more occasions to meet with other EU leaders, during G7 meetings during the period or other international meetings such as the World Economic Forum in Davos or at the G20 in Osaka in June 2019.

The data suggest that, of all the EU leaders assessed, 14 had a significant level of interaction with their peers, reporting meeting or talking to 10 or more colleagues over the 18-month period. On the contrary, 13 leaders reported relatively little bilateral interaction with the other EU Heads of State or Government, all with five or fewer contacts, three of which (Marjan Šarec, Robert Abela and Dalia Grybauskaitė) reported no contact. In assessing the figures however, it should be noted that many were Members of the European Council for only part (sometimes rather brief) of the 18-month period under observation; others, such as Klaus Iohannis, Boyko Borissov and Giuseppe Conte were in office during the whole period, thereby increasing the possibilities to meet their peers and tweet about it. In that context, Klaus Iohannis's relatively low number of reported bilateral meetings is all the more surprising as Romania held the rotating Council presidency for six months during the period studied, which would have provided frequent opportunities to meet other EU leaders. This may, however, be due to there being few meetings as the Prime Minister, rather than the President of Romania held the role of Council President; or alternatively, that such meetings took place but were not tweeted about.

Comparing EU leaders who were in office for the full 18 months with those who were in office more, sometimes significantly, briefly between January 2019 and June 2020, does not provide an ideal comparison. Therefore, when looking at extrapolated data (meaning that for those Members who were not EU Heads of State or Government for the full 18 months under observation, an estimation of the number of meetings over the period based on the average number of meetings in the months during which they were Members of the European Council can be calculated), a different picture appears.

Figure 12 – Extrapolated sum of bilateral meetings between EU leaders, as reported on Twitter

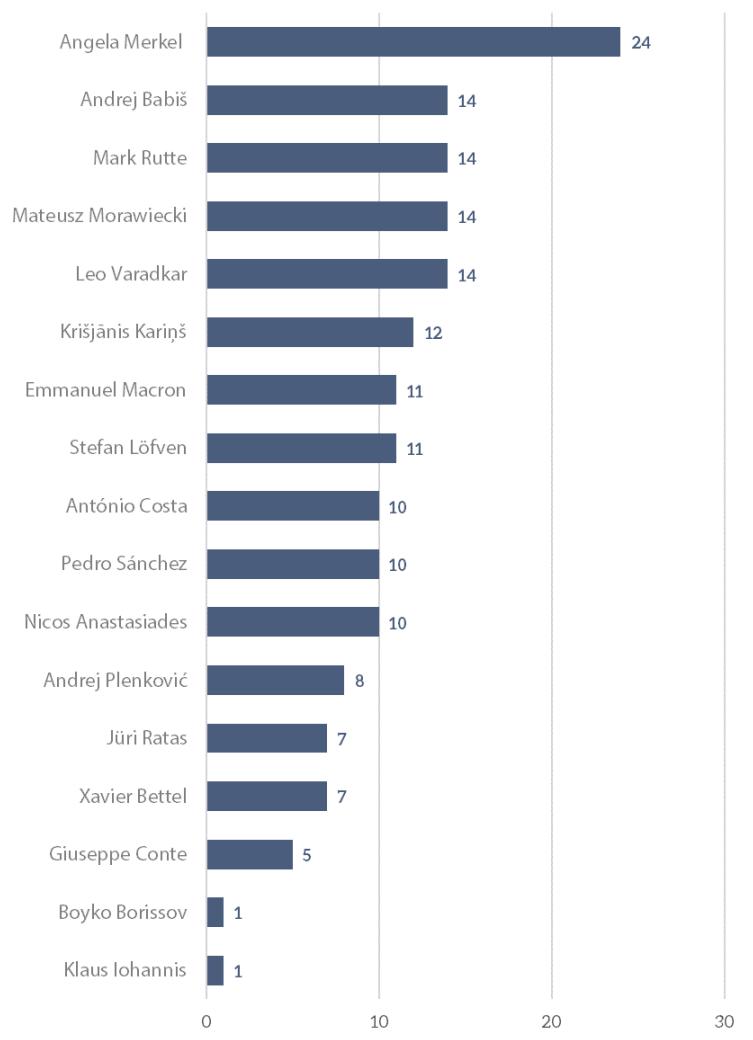


Source: EPRS.

In this case, therefore, 18 EU leaders would have held bilateral interactions with 10 or more EU leaders (4 of which with 20 or more), and only 7 would have had only 5 or fewer interactions with their peers. This also shows a number of changes in the ranking, with for example Charles Michel now coming second in the number of meetings and Sebastian Kurz changing from position ten to position three, which he shares with Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Juha Sipilä. However, extrapolating the data for EU leaders who did not hold office for the full 18 months tends to distort the comparison, in so far as EU leaders would not have continued the same rate of contact over a longer period of time. Charles Michel provides a good example in this respect: he held many bilateral meetings towards the end of his premiership, due to the fact that he was contacting many EU leaders in preparation for his new position as European Council President. Consequently, a comparison of only those EU leaders who were in office during the full 18-month period under observation is more accurate.

When considering only this last category of EU leaders, Figure 13 illustrates that all but three reported having contacts with more than 10 other EU leaders. Again, it appears that many of those EU Heads of State or Government from larger Member States do not show the highest number of bilateral meetings with other EU leaders, compared to leaders from smaller Member States.

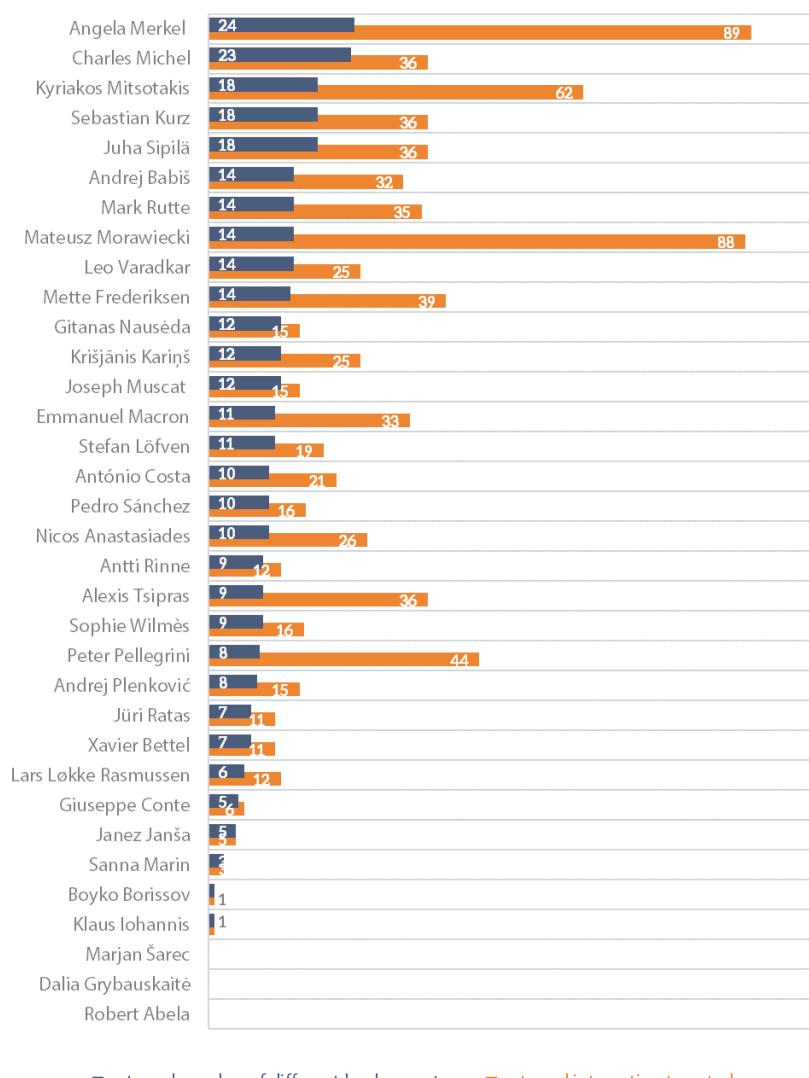
Figure 13 – Bilateral meetings between EU leaders who were in office during the full 18-month period



Source: EPRS.

Comparing communication on interaction with actual meetings

Figure 14 – Extrapolated data on EU leaders' meetings and their reporting on them via Twitter

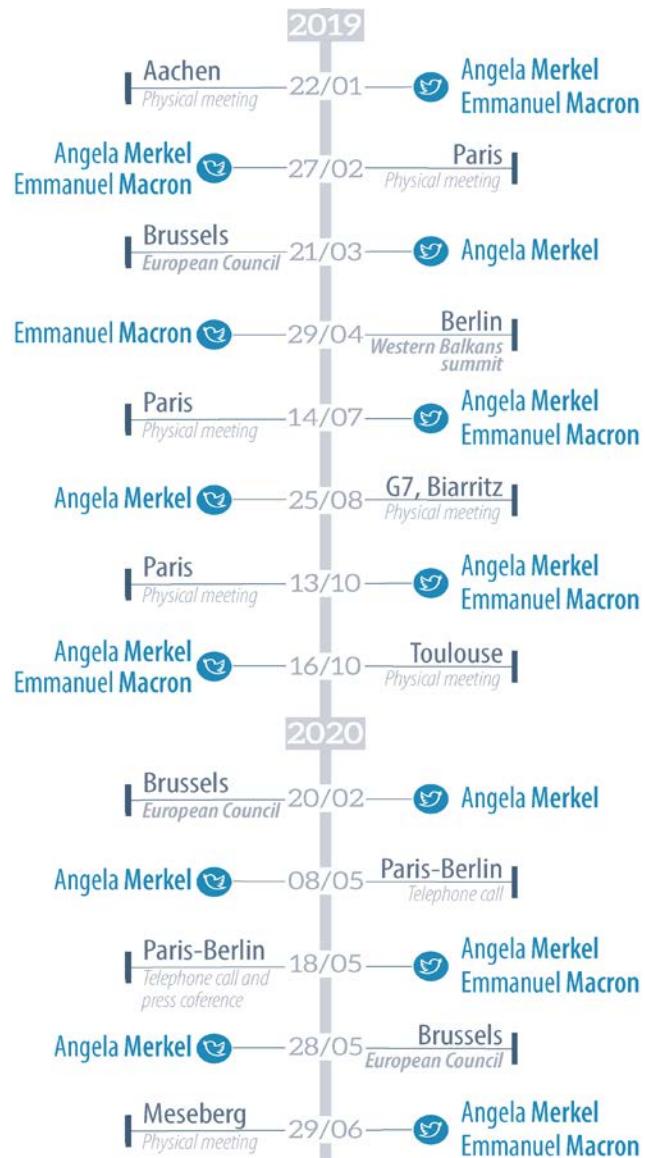


When comparing the total number of meetings per EU leader reported via Twitter, with the total number of tweets per leader on these meetings with other EU leaders, it is evident that this relation is not always proportional. The four EU leaders with most contact with other EU leaders (Charles Michel, Angela Merkel, Sebastian Kurz and Kyriakos Mitsokakis) were also among the top six leaders tweeting about these contacts. However, two of the leaders with most tweets on meetings with other EU leaders, Mateusz Morawiecki and Peter Pellegrini, held relatively few meetings. Others, such as Alexis Tsipras and Mette Frederiksen reported extensively about their meetings on the Twitter platform, but actually held relatively few meetings with their peers.

Source: EPRS.

German-French meetings

Figure 15 – Key Franco-German interactions as reported on Twitter by Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel



Source: EPoS

While there might be a difference in tweeting on Franco-German meetings related to EU issues, this analysis also indicates the close cooperation and coordination between Germany and France on European matters, confirmed in the very high number of bilateral meetings between them (see Figure 15), even without counting meetings in which other EU leaders participated.

The meetings between the German Chancellor and the French President, and outlined in Figure 15, were taken as a case study to assess if and how EU leaders tweet about their bilateral meetings in the same way. Between January 2019 and June 2020, there were 13 meetings (physical meetings, telephone calls, video calls) between the French and German members of the European Council, as reported via Twitter. Of these, eight specific bilateral meetings were held in their respective countries (including two phone calls), as well as five bilateral meetings on the margins of European Council or other meetings, such as G7 Summits. Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron held many more meetings together with third parties, such as in the Normandy format, the meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister during a G7 meeting and with the Chinese President at a meeting in Paris, which have been excluded from this analysis. However, Figure 16 shows that the two leaders reported on these meetings via Twitter to a different extent. While Angela Merkel tweeted on 12 of these meetings with Emmanuel Macron, issuing 30 tweets (30 % of her overall tweets on interaction with other EU leaders), the French President tweeted on only seven of them, issuing 16 tweets (which represents about 50 % of all his tweets on interactions with other EU leaders).

3. Tweeting frequency over time

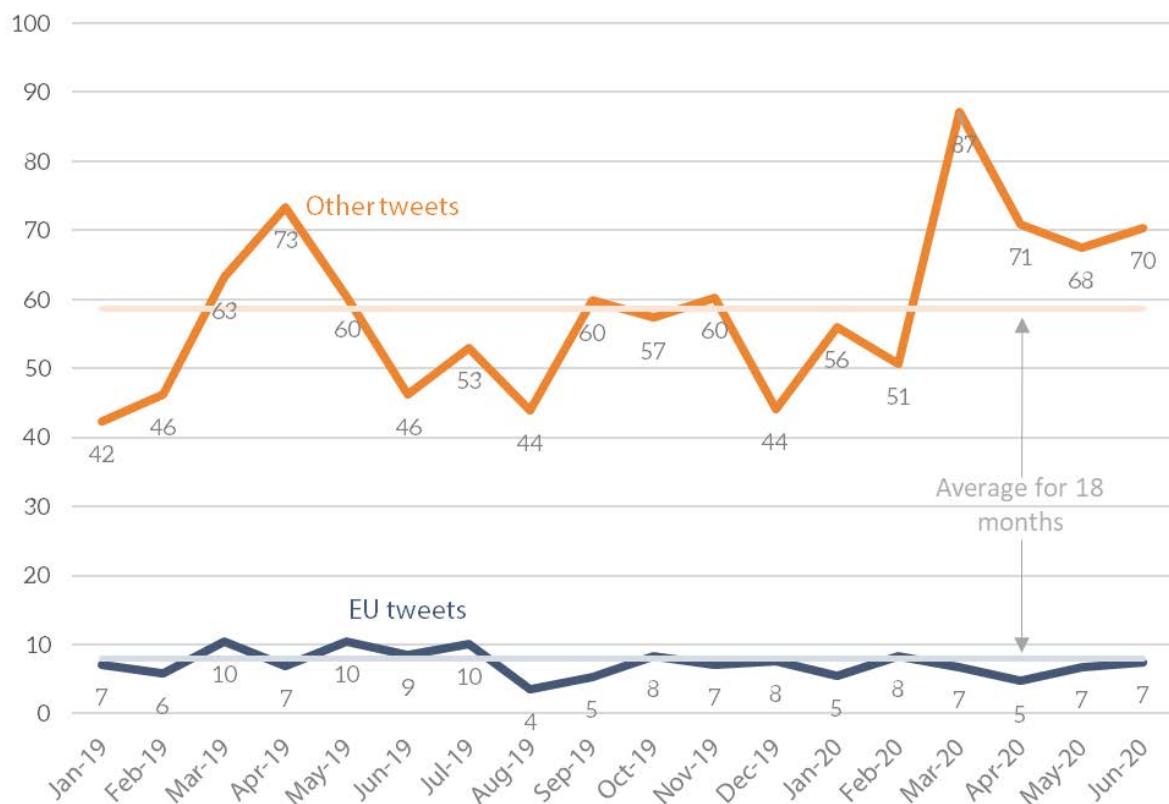
Differences in the Twitter activity of EU Heads of State or Government can be observed not only between the numerous issues or between EU leaders, but also within the same issue, depending on events over the 18-month period.

3.1. Average tweeting over time and key events

EU leaders tweeted on European issues an average of 207 times in total, per month (eight per EU Head of State or Government) from 1 January 2019 to 30 June 2020.

Figure 16 shows that non-EU-related tweets and EU-related tweets by EU leaders very often followed different trends. During some periods, the average of non-EU-related tweets declined, while the average of EU-related tweets increased (e.g. from April to May 2019), and the reverse (January to February 2019). In other periods, the frequency between total non-EU tweets and EU tweets were more aligned (June to September 2019). The most significant difference was from February to April 2020, which may be related to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. At the start of the coronavirus crisis, the average number of non-EU tweets peaked for the whole 18-month period, while tweets on EU issues were on a downward trend towards an absolute low. Even in the months to follow, EU leaders generally tweeted more than average, while their EU tweets were just about average. This shows that communication (via Twitter) was particularly focused on national issues and on a national audience, while EU tweets spiked at crucial moments during the 18-month period.

Figure 16 – Average EU leaders' total and EU tweets January 2019-June 2020



Source: EPRS.

Regarding the average of EU-related tweets, five peaks can be detected, in March, May, July, and October 2019, and February 2020, which can be clearly associated with an EU event or a series of EU events. Tweets in March 2019 were related to the March 2019 European Council and its preceding bilateral and multilateral preparatory meetings, and particularly to the issue of Brexit. In May 2019, EU leaders tweeted notably about the Sibiu Summit, the European Parliament elections and the 28 May meeting of EU Heads of State or Government on the assessment of the European election outcome. The above-average tweeting level in July 2019 can be associated with the nominations of the EU's new institutional leadership, and to a small extent to the Western Balkans Summit. Around the October 2019 European Council, bilateral meetings, many with the candidate for Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen or the President-elect of the European Council, Charles Michel, as well as the EU-27 endorsement of the UK Withdrawal Agreement, explain the high number of EU-related tweets in October 2019. The peak in February 2020 clearly resulted from the special European Council on the multiannual financial framework, as well as the preceding bilateral and multilateral preparatory meetings, and to a far lesser extent, the Zagreb Summit and Brexit. The average number of tweets on EU issues was lowest in the summer of 2019 and March-April 2020, due among other things, to the coronavirus situation and the related focus on national issues (see below). From May 2020, tweeting on EU issues increased again, due to the discussions on the MFF and the recovery package.

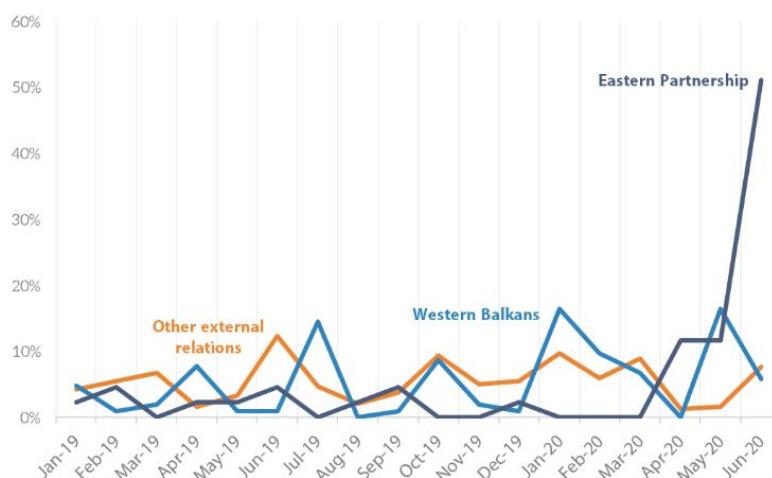
3.2. Tweeting on selected EU issues over time

This section assesses the Twitter activity of EU Heads of State or Government over time regarding issues or clusters such as external relations, the MFF, crisis management, EU representatives and institutions, institutional and crosscutting/horizontal issues. The Twitter activity of the EU leaders from those Member States which held the Council Presidency during the 18-month period were compared as a specific case study.

3.2.1. External relations

External relations as a cluster was mentioned by leaders steadily over time, with slight peaks in July 2019, January 2020 and May 2020, with tweets focusing on the Western Balkans issue.

Figure 17 – Average EU leaders' tweets on external relations, January 2019-June 2020



Source:EPoS.

These spikes are linked to the necessity of support for the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in view of the anticipated Western Balkans Summit, which was initially planned to take place in Zagreb, but was held virtually instead, as a result of coronavirus-related restrictions.

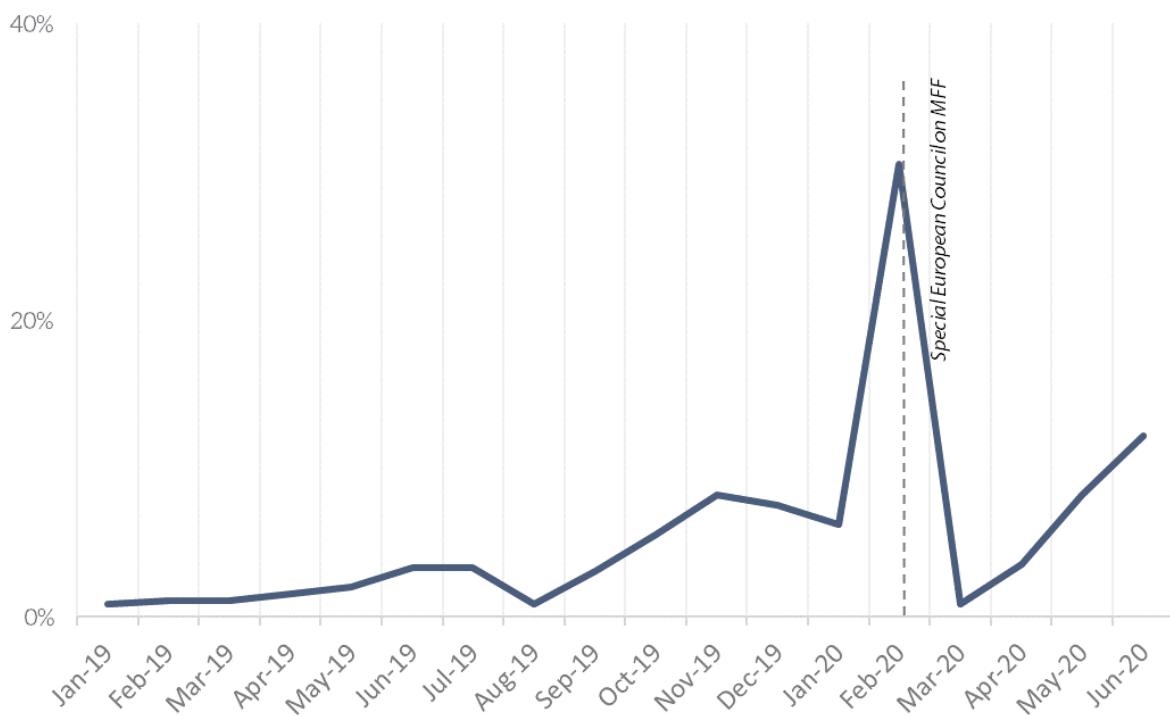
Tweets on the Western Balkans reached a significant level of attention in the aftermath of the first wave of coronavirus, when leaders committed to support the Western Balkans region and provide an EU perspective, in the video-conference held on 6 May 2020. As a separate external

policy issue, Twitter mentions of the Eastern Partnership also sky-rocketed in June 2020, as EU leaders mostly tweeted their determination to strengthen cooperation with Eastern partners after the 18 June video-conference. To conclude, it can be argued that significant peaks of activity on the external relations policy area are clearly associated with specific events, such as online meetings with strategic partners.

3.2.2. EU multiannual financial framework

While the MFF was a permanent element of EU leaders' tweets over the 18-month period, the special European Council meeting in February 2020 resulted in an absolute peak in EU leaders' Twitter output on the MFF. As a result of the failure of the summit and the start of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe, however, there was a sharp drop in tweets in March 2020. From April 2020 onwards, considering the link established with the recovery package, the submission of the Commission's new MFF proposal made in May 2020, as well as a first discussion in the [European Council video-conference in June 2020](#), EU leaders' tweets on the MFF increased again, reaching above average levels in May and June 2020.

Figure 18 – Average number of EU leaders' tweets on the MFF, January 2019-June 2020



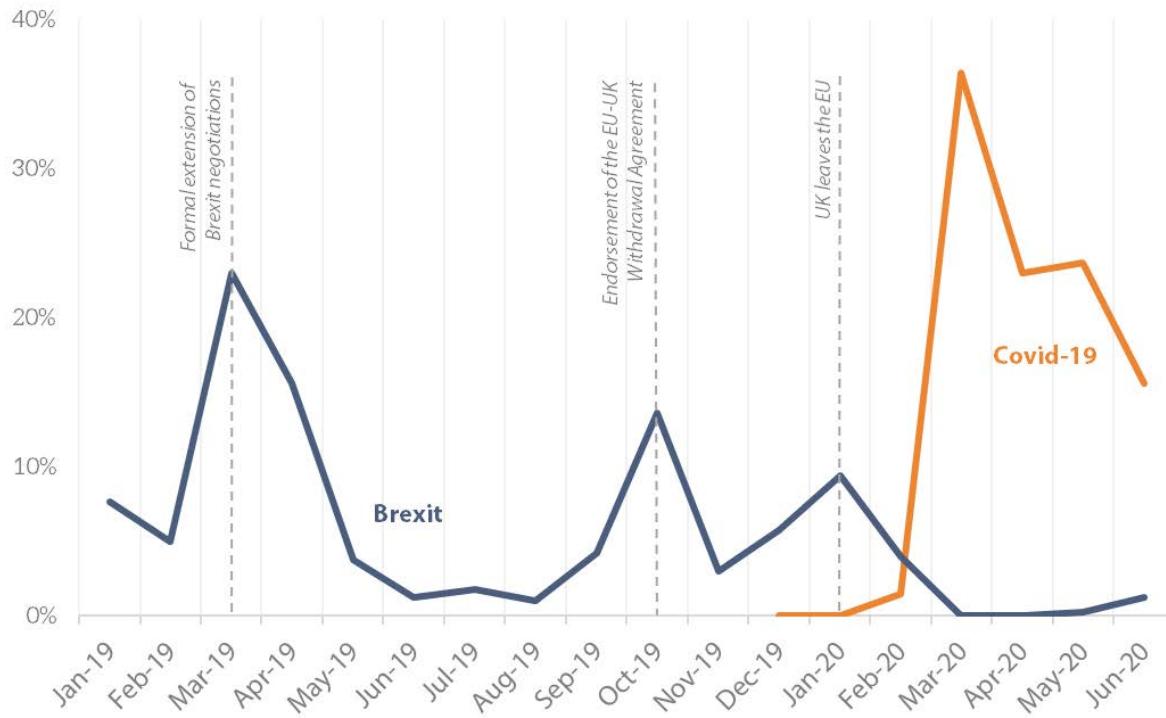
Source: EPRS.

3.2.3. Crisis management

When examining crisis-related tweets by EU leaders, on Brexit and the coronavirus, changes in frequency can clearly be identified according to events. Regarding Brexit, tweets by EU leaders reached their peak in March 2019. While still reaching peaks in October 2019, when the European Council [endorsed](#) the revised UK Withdrawal Agreement and approved a revised political declaration, and in January 2020, when the UK finally left the EU, the concentration of tweets on Brexit steadily declined, until nearly disappearing completely as an issue in EU leaders' tweets after February 2020.

The opposite trend is evident for tweets concerning coronavirus. Before February 2020, the issue was absent from EU leaders' Twitter output, but the number of tweets sky-rocketed subsequently, to peak in March 2020.

Figure 19 – Average number of EU leaders' tweets on Brexit and Covid-19, January 2019–June 2020

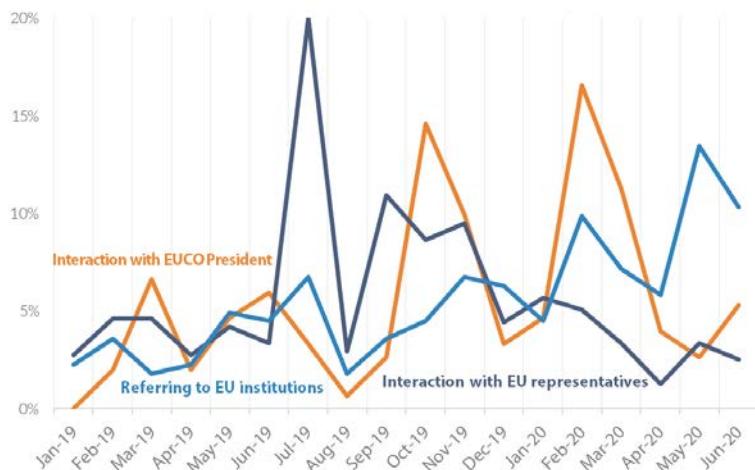


Source: EPoS.

3.2.4. EU representatives and institutions

While also experiencing peaks like other EU issues examined over time, leaders' tweets related to the 'EU representatives and institutions' cluster were a more constant subject of their Twitter communication than other EU issues, the latter being more clearly linked to (one-off) events, and often close to disappearing from leaders' Twitter discourse (see Figure 20).

Figure 20 – EU leaders' tweets on EU representatives and institutions, January 2019-June 2020



Leaders' tweets regarding interaction with EU representatives were particularly numerous in July 2019, when the European Council nominated the EU's new institutional leadership and the candidate for European Commission President announced her proposed members of the Commission College. Many tweets were aimed at congratulating the various politicians on their nomination or appointment.

Source: EPRS.

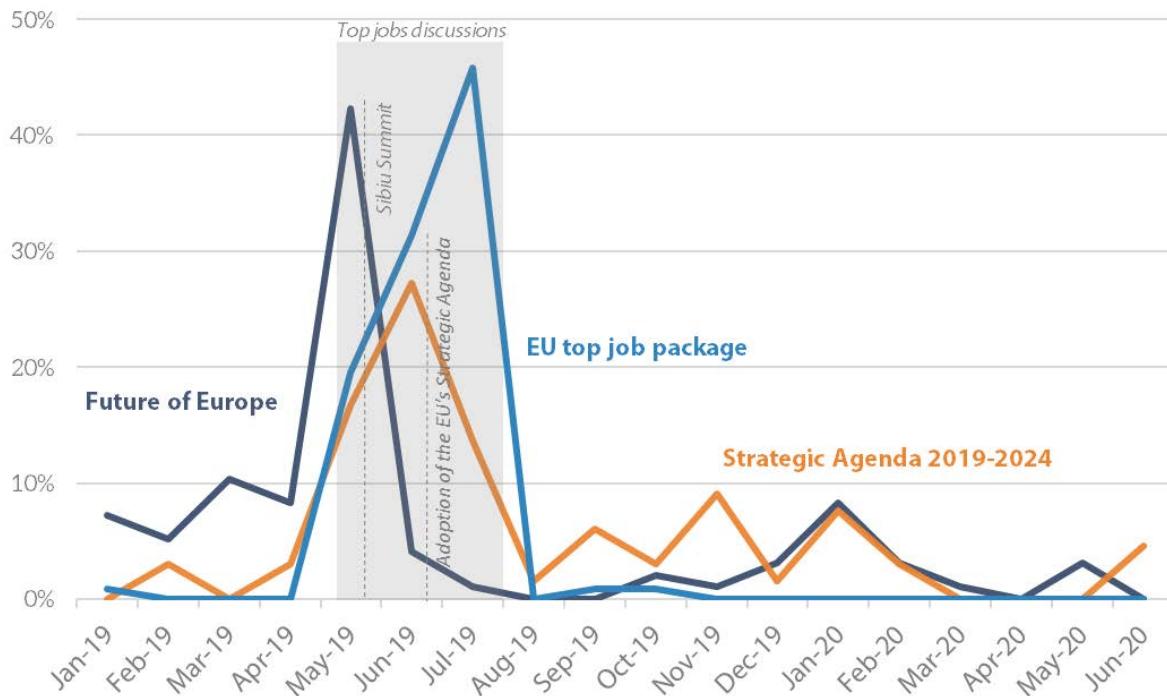
Tweets on other EU institutions (mainly the European Commission and the European Parliament) were particularly numerous in May 2020, when EU leaders commented on the Commission's work on the coronavirus crisis recovery and its new proposal for the next MFF, receiving widespread praise and consensus.

Regarding tweets on the European Council President, peaks are clearly associated with European Council meetings and related preparatory activities. One peak occurred in October-November 2019 and was linked to Donald Tusk's last meeting as European Council President on [17-18 October](#), with, in parallel, Charles Michel touring the EU capitals before taking over the office. The other peak was in February 2020 and was linked to the [special European Council meeting on the MFF](#) and the preparatory discussion on Charles Michel's proposal for the MFF.

When comparing the average monthly tweets on the European Council President during the months when Donald Tusk was European Council President (January 2019-November 2019, with 7.5 tweets a month), with those months when Charles Michel was President (December 2019-June 2020, with 10.4 tweets a month), a higher average number can be observed during the latter period. This could be explained by the fact that Charles Michel is more active on Twitter than was his predecessor.

3.2.5. Institutional and cross-cutting

Figure 21 – Average tweets on institutional and cross-cutting issues, January 2019–June 2020



Source: EPRS.

Strategic Agenda

The majority of tweets on the Strategic Agenda were issued between April and July 2019. This was to be expected, as numerous European Council meetings in that period dealt with the EU's five-year priorities, which were in turn connected to issues such as the 'Future of Europe' and the 'top jobs' package. After the adoption of the Strategic Agenda in June 2019, leaders' tweets on this issue rapidly decreased and many of the tweets afterwards referred to the European agenda rather than the Strategic Agenda specifically. A concentration of tweets was to be expected around the adoption of the document, but, as this strategy is supposed to guide the work of the EU over the next five year period, it is surprising to see how quickly it became 'yesterday's news'.

Future of Europe

The timeline of tweets on the Future of Europe debate shows a significant concentration in the first half of 2019. First, there were the final interventions of EU Heads of State or Government during plenary debates on the Future of Europe in the European Parliament. The peak between April and May 2019 can be explained by the elections to the European Parliament in May and the Sibiu Summit on 9 May, which produced a declaration. June and July still saw some tweets on the Future of Europe in connection with the adoption of the Strategic Agenda and the negotiation on the 'top jobs' package. During the rest of the period, the number of tweets on the subject of the Future of Europe was rather low, with the exception of January–February 2020, when some EU leaders tweeted on the Conference on the Future of Europe. This tends to show that the 'Future of Europe' is not in itself a topic on which EU Heads of State or Government are inclined to tweet, but rather that they do so only when other EU institutions (Parliament and Commission), or actors (think tanks), create occasions for the topic to be addressed.

EU 'top jobs' package

Like tweets on the Strategic Agenda, tweets on the EU 'top jobs' package were clearly related to an event, the nomination of the EU's next institutional leadership. Tweets on 'EU top jobs' were almost exclusively issued between April and August 2019. Between September and November 2019, a few more tweets continued, due to the Commissioner hearings held in the European Parliament, but afterwards this issue also disappeared from the tweets of EU leaders.

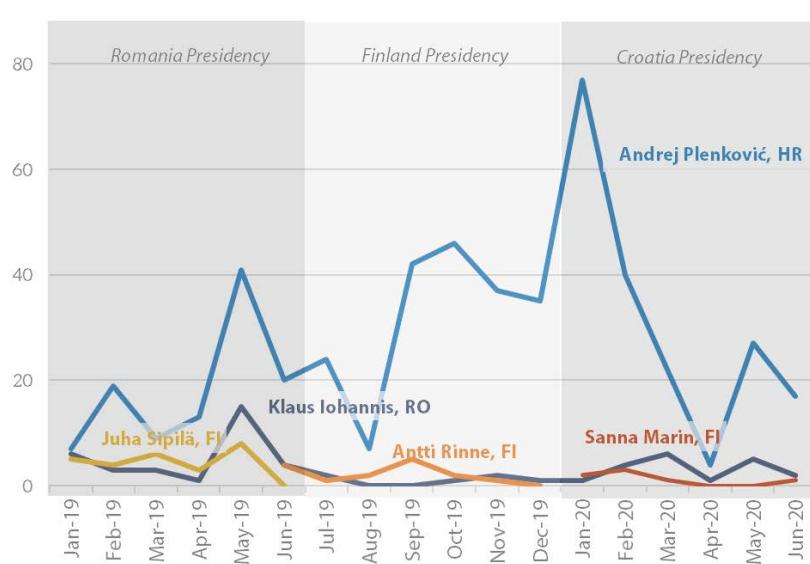
3.2.6. Council presidencies

As a case study, it is worthwhile considering the Twitter activity of EU leaders during the periods when they held the rotating Council presidency, compared to when they were not. The analysis illustrates whether and how the Twitter activity of an EU leader changes, due to their role as leader of the Member State holding the Council presidency.

During the 18-month period under observation, Romania held the Council presidency from January-June 2019, Finland from July-December 2019 and Croatia from January-June 2020. The comparison becomes most telling for Romania and Croatia as the same leader (Klaus Iohannis and Andrej Plenković respectively) represented their country in the European Council for the whole 18 months under observation. In the case of Finland, three different leaders were members of the European Council during this period, one before and two during the Finnish Council Presidency, although Sanna Marin took office only very late in the Finnish Council Presidency. It appears that differences in Twitter activity on EU issues cannot simply be directly associated with holding the Council presidency, but might also depend on personal communication styles and their adoption of social media.

As the 18-month period only covers the months during and after the Romanian Council Presidency, it is not possible to assess any fluctuation in the tweeting activity of Klaus Iohannis in the run-up to the Romanian Presidency. However, the data confirm significant higher level of average tweeting on EU-related issues during the Romanian Presidency than in the period afterwards. This is particularly striking during the Sibiu Summit, as well as in the period just before and just after, which saw a large number of tweets by the Romanian President.

Figure 22 – Average number of tweets by EU leaders who held the Council presidency, January 2019-June 2020



Source: EPRS.

Figure 22 shows that Andrej Plenković's tweets on EU issues steadily increased in the run-up to, and peaked at the start of the Croatian Presidency in January 2020. As for all EU leaders, Andrej Plenković's level of tweets on EU issues were very low in March-April 2020, but recovered in May and June 2020.

When looking at the averages of three six-month periods, Andrej Plenković tweeted an average of 18 EU-related tweets a month during the period furthest from the Croatian Presidency (January–June 2019). In the six months prior to the Croatian Council Presidency, his tweets doubled to 37 tweets on average (including during the very quiet summer months), and then, during the Croatian Presidency, the number of tweets remained at a monthly average of 32 tweets, despite the coronavirus crisis shifting EU leaders' attention to tweeting on national issues.

The data on Andrej Plenković and Klaus Iohannis shows that EU leaders' Twitter activity on EU issues can be strongly dependent upon whether a country holds the Council presidency, and also shows that they take this role seriously and try to communicate on Europe. This role starts already, as seen in the case of Andrej Plenković, in the six months prior to their Council presidency. Angela Merkel also provides a positive example in this respect, who, before taking over the role, [explained](#) the Council presidency and Germany's main priorities during these six months, notably regarding the coronavirus pandemic. Angela Merkel tweeted her messages in German, in [English](#) and [French](#), using subtitles for messages in German to reach a wider European audience, (for an overview of leaders' language use on Twitter see section 4.2 below).

4. EU leaders' strategies to attract and engage their Twitter audience

This chapter examines the methods applied by EU leaders' to engage and increase their (target) audience, and to assess if they are successful in doing so. Leaders' use of hashtags is considered, followed by an assessment of the languages used in their Twitter discourse, and lastly, an examination of the record of likes and retweets of a sample of five different EU leaders.

4.1. Use of hashtags

This section analyses EU leaders' use of hashtags and the most commonly detected keywords in EU leaders' tweets. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate whether and how many EU leaders use hashtags, as well as the kind of hashtags they insert when addressing EU-related issues.

According to Twitter, a 'hashtag' allows users to index keywords or topics used on the platform, and enables people to easily follow topics in which they are interested. The use of hashtags to join a conversation on Twitter gives a further indication of leaders' priorities. Furthermore, hashtags are inserted by users with the intention of targeting an audience or, as suggested by Alfonso-Munoz et al. (2016), to reinforce the establishment of ties between diverse users. In this context, EU leaders are therefore expected to be targeting their audience and favouring interactivity when a specific keyword appears in their tweets.

The overall analysis carried out for this study retrieved a total of 456 different hashtags, which were used 3 821 times by 34 EU Heads of State or Government, with some actors making more frequent use of them in their messages than others. Of these 456 hashtags, only the top ten had a substantial mention, whereas other hashtags were not 'viral' and were inserted in EU leaders' tweets fewer than five times. The top ten most frequently mentioned hashtags in EU leaders' Twitter discourse are: #EURO (408), #EU (246), #Merkel (227), #Brexit (203), #UE (120), #coronavirus (114), #Bruksela (110), #MFF (86), #EU2020HR²⁰ (79) and #V4 (57). The top five EU leaders engaging extensively in using hashtags, are Angela Merkel (496), Mateusz Morawiecki (409), Sebastian Kurz (392), Gitanas Nausėda (272) and Andrej Plenković (269). It might be expected that a leader such as Emmanuel Macron, who is widely followed on the Twitter platform, would also use hashtags in an attempt to reach even beyond his five million followers. However, surprisingly, the French President made use of just 12 hashtags in EU-related tweets over the course of 18 months, suggesting that some EU leaders do not feel the need to make use of a wide array of hashtags, given their widespread visibility and international recognition on Twitter. Compared to other EU leaders' active engagement in using hashtags, Mark Rutte is another Twitter user who presents a scarce trace of keywords in his tweets compared to the top five leaders, with only 79 hashtags detected in his personal profile.

It is worth mentioning that Angela Merkel heads the ranking as the most extensive user of hashtags among EU leaders (via her official spokesperson), also because her name is regularly included as a key word in the message and users can easily follow content related to Angela Merkel by searching her first name as a keyword. This shows the importance that leaders place not only on getting messages across to their target audience by having them as followers, but also that hashtags of their name also create interest and lead to further reach for their messages.

As the above numbers show, some leaders generally include the hashtag symbol before a relevant keyword, with Angela Merkel and Gitanas Nausėda often using from eight to ten hashtags in the

²⁰ This being the official hashtag for the Croatian Presidency of the Council.

same tweet. The main hashtags used in the period under research are #EUCO, #EU, #Europe, #Brexit, #MFF, #EUBudget, #EUGreenDeal and #coronavirus. In some cases, depending on the language of tweets, other language versions of hashtags are used, for instance #EU becomes #UE, #Brussels is transformed into #Bruksela or #Bruselas, in Mateusz Morawiecki's and Pedro Sánchez's profiles respectively. Using a word cloud generator, the #EUCO hashtag can be seen to be the most widely used hashtag among EU Heads of State or Government, who made considerable use of this acronym in the context of European Council meetings, either before, during or after. The #EUCO hashtag was used 408 times in total by EU leaders, but was never included in tweets by Boyko Borissov, Juha Sipilä or Leo Varadkar. While hashtags such as #EUCO or #MFF played a substantial role in leaders' overall use of keywords and were constant trends over time, other popular hashtags were linked to specific occasions and disappeared immediately after the event took place. This is particularly the case of the hashtags on #SouthEUSummit and #EULASSummit, which had a wide reach in January and February 2019. The #Brexit hashtag, for instance, was clearly connected to the European Council meetings and their focus on the topic, but displays a steadier pattern, as leaders would also insert this hashtag when discussing negotiations with EU representatives such as Michel Barnier. The #Bruksela hashtag appears 110 times, but was only used by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. As Mateusz Morawiecki made by far the highest number of total tweets on EU-related issues, this hashtag automatically appears as often in the overall picture. The #Bruksela tag, as well as #Malta and #Bratislava, are the most evident examples of hashtags linked to a geographic location, often related to an event or a meeting group, whether it is the European Council, Friends of Cohesion, South EU Summit or V4. When closely analysing hashtags connected to a specific event, #V4 was mentioned 20 times more than #SouthEUSummit and 40 times more than #FriendsOfCohesion in EU-related tweets, despite being primarily used by one of the V4 members, Mateusz Morawiecki. In contrast to the #V4 hashtag, another V4 leader, Peter Pellegrini, used the #Visegrád hashtag instead, but much less frequently than #V4. As displayed in the word cloud below, #EU2020HR is another trending hashtag that refers to the Croatian Council Presidency in the first half of 2020 and was mainly found in Andrej Plenković's tweets, either before or during the time the country held the rotating presidency. The cases described above show that popular hashtags retrieved in EU-related tweets were not necessarily employed by a majority of EU Heads of State or Government, but merely by the same person multiple times.

Figure 23 – Word cloud of all EU-related hashtags used by 34 EU leaders on Twitter



Source: EPRS.

4.2. Use of language by EU leaders on Twitter

Communicating in different languages on Twitter is another crucial element in assessing whether EU leaders are keen to discuss their topics within a broader and more linguistically diversified audience, or if their messages are mainly targeted to the domestic sphere. It comes as no surprise that EU leaders mainly tweet in their mother tongue, primarily as a means to reach national audiences. However, a considerable number of tweets in other languages was also traced when classifying tweets by type of EU issue in this study, with English being the most prominent language used by EU leaders to translate their original language tweets. This approach is particularly evident with Mark Rutte's (36%), António Costa's (29%) and Emmanuel Macron's (14%) Twitter accounts, in which translated tweets mainly concern topical and pressing issues. Research on leaders' use of social media confirms that Emmanuel Macron tweets mainly in French and that the percentage of translated tweets is rather low. However, a team evidently translates tweets into English for an international audience, quoting the original French tweets with the English version. This might lead to the conclusion that tweets in French translated into English would receive more attention, however, on the contrary, Emmanuel Macron's tweets in French gain greater numbers of likes and retweets (see section below). However, as Twitter has a built-in option for translating individual tweets, non-French speakers are easily able to understand tweets in French and can like or retweet easily.

On a larger scale than Emmanuel Macron, António Costa easily switches from Portuguese to English or French, particularly for tweets that concern the MFF, the coronavirus emergency and the Commission proposal on the Recovery Fund. The Portuguese Prime Minister also tweets in English when showcasing a bilateral meeting with another EU leader, while leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Jüri Ratas even employ the language spoken by the EU Head of State or Government they interact with, as demonstrated in a Portuguese language [tweet](#) by Emmanuel Macron in May 2019, regarding a meeting with António Costa, and a [tweet](#) in Finnish by the Estonian Prime Minister congratulating Sanna Marin on her appointment. Xavier Bettel communicates interchangeably in French and Luxembourgish, as both are official languages of Luxembourg, and appears to disseminate messages in English when a European Council or a bilateral exchange with another EU leader takes place. A similar strategy can be seen in Mark Rutte's tweets, some of which are issued in English when covering Brexit negotiations in the framework of the European Council or discussions with EU representatives or leaders. Curiously, the Dutch leader tweeted four times in French to report an exchange of views with Emmanuel Macron, while meetings with other EU leaders were mostly posted in English. When taking the vast array of tweets in English into account, this language was the sole medium of communication for certain EU leaders, such as Jüri Ratas, Gitanas Nausėda and Klaus Iohannis, who never tweeted in their native language over the entire 18-month period. In Klaus Iohannis' case, a potential explanation for such extensive use of the English language can be linked to the Romanian Council Presidency from January to June 2019, suggesting that the Romanian President tweeted in English as a means to reach people outside the national sphere.

When looking at the language used by all EU leaders whose country held the Council presidency, and their Twitter activity before and after the six-month period holding the rotating presidency, there was a linear pattern of language use over time. As already pointed out, Klaus Iohannis nearly always tweeted in English, with only three tweets in Romanian, independent of whether Romania was holding the Council presidency or not. Andrej Plenković also used the same language before and during the Croatian Council Presidency, but in his case, he always tweeted in his native Croatian. A different approach can be observed with the Finnish prime ministers, as Juha Sipilä communicated mainly in Finnish, but included tweets in English when Finland took over the Council presidency. Even during the course of the Finnish Council Presidency (July to December 2019),

Juha Sipilä's successor, Antti Rinne, used his native language extensively and issued only two tweets in English. Lastly, Sanna Marin, who took office just before the end of the Finnish Council Presidency (December 2019), followed her predecessors' communication style, favouring Finnish over English or any other EU language. This shows that holding the Council presidency does not necessarily lead EU Heads of State or Government to alter the language used in their tweets in order to reach a wider (European) audience.

Contrary to leaders who use other languages to communicate to a larger public of Twitter users, Mateusz Morawiecki tweeted exclusively in Polish, despite being the top tweeter of EU-related issues and an active user of the platform in general. This shows Mateusz Morawiecki's sole focus on his national audience, and the lack of ambition to address a more international audience. Moreover, the approach through which Mateusz Morawiecki merely addresses a national audience is particularly evident when he tweets in the context of European Council meetings: the use of the word 'we' in a way that makes clear that he speaks on behalf of the Polish people and is defending their interests is symptomatic. A striking example is the December 2019 European Council meeting, at which Mateusz Morawiecki declared that 'we have determined by all means very good solutions for Poland – from a financial and legislative perspective' or 'we have led to the development of a climate strategy that is very favourable for Poland'. Other leaders, such as Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron also use the word 'we' in their messages, but with another meaning, referring to the EU in general or to EU leaders as a group, stressing unity and leaders' cohesion at the same time. Examples include when the German Chancellor reported on 'a commitment by the European Council that we want to achieve climate neutrality' or the French President announced that in June 2019 'at the European Council, we adopted a Strategic Agenda for 5 years'. Another example of tweets that greatly underline leaders' unity and their willingness to look beyond their own Member State and in which 'we' is understood as Europe as a whole is that posted by Angela Merkel, who [declared](#) that, in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, this 'crisis knows no border, and so our answer as an EU must not stop at national borders'. Regarding the Chancellor's language use on Twitter, the majority of Angela Merkel's tweets were also in her native German, but one particular message, related to the Eurogroup's response to tackling the coronavirus crisis, was published in four other languages, [English](#), [Italian](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#). As a result, it could be argued that some leaders normally target a national audience by tweeting in their native language, but that, at the same time, they aim to reach an international public when the topic is crucial to the leader in question. In addition, leaders who stressed that something was 'at stake' at the European level and therefore employed more languages were Emmanuel Macron and Pedro Sánchez, who called for citizens' active engagement in the European elections and for the protection of democratic values in 22 and 7 European languages respectively.

Concerning the tone of language used in tweets, most leaders were rather neutral, neither exposing a positive or negative view on the EU or the European Council. Some, however, did not merely portray EU-related issues in a neutral way, but often gave a personal assessment of a particular issue. A number of examples include, Pedro Sánchez, who criticised Charles Michel's EU budget proposal, defining it as disappointing; or Andrej Babiš, who expressed disappointment over the negotiation stalemate on further EU enlargement, thus providing a firm opinion on a highly debated topic. Another example is Mateusz Morawiecki, who fiercely accused the euro currency of being the main source of problems and responsible for the high level of fiscal deficit in Italy, Greece and Spain. In this context, Mateusz Morawiecki is the EU leader with a more openly developed critical stance towards the EU on Twitter and assesses the results of European Council meetings by expressing his feelings, for instance blaming the EU and other Member States for 'putting Poland in a corner' during the 'top jobs' negotiation in July 2019. Likewise, when Poland was exempted from reaching climate neutrality in the December 2019 European Council conclusions, he [stated](#) that 'it was a good summit for us'. Giuseppe Conte also criticised the EU on Twitter, when he declared that 'Europe needs a

critical contribution, where people should understand the embedded problems within the institutions and should therefore provide a constructive but critical approach'. Nonetheless, Giuseppe Conte also showed full support on other issues and, for example, proudly congratulated the European Central Bank for taking strong and bold measures against the coronavirus economic shock, barely [containing](#) his happiness as Europe 'scored a victory'.

4.3. Likes and retweets of EU leaders' tweets

This section examines the likes and retweets of five EU leaders' tweets. The objective of this section is to analyse the outreach of EU leaders, to see if they reach their (target) audience on European issues. By considering users' likes and retweets in world leaders' profiles, this part of the study also aims to draw a comparison with people's engagement with EU leaders' profiles.

According to the guidelines provided by Twitter, 'likes' are used to show appreciation for a specific tweet, while a 'retweet' indicates that a Twitter user has reposted the tweet on their personal Twitter feed and shared it publicly with their followers. Furthermore, literature on Twitter's usage demonstrates that retweets create a direct form of interaction, as well as the potential to intensify message virality.²¹

Due to the vast amount of tweets retrieved during the coding process, a limited analysis was carried out on leaders' likes and retweets from the Twitter public. The selection of EU leaders' profiles is based upon the number of their followers and the key role played at the EU level, therefore assuming a significant engagement and a number of virtual interactions by national audiences.

Based on these criteria, the European Council members' accounts selected are: firstly Emmanuel Macron, whose Twitter account reaches 5.7 million followers, heading the ranking of the most-followed EU leader amongst all 34 leaders. Pedro Sánchez's account (1.4 million followers), Mark Rutte (1.1 million), Angela Merkel (959.6 million), and Giuseppe Conte (770.3 thousand) follow. Despite ranking as the most popular EU leaders on Twitter, the total followers of the five EU leaders taken into account in this section are far fewer than those following world leaders such as Donald Trump (85 million), Jair Bolsonaro (6.6 million) and Justin Trudeau (5.1 million). As politicians use Twitter mainly to target national audiences, these numbers also need to be considered in relation to the size of a country. While not assuming that all followers are from that country, a correlation can be established: the United States of America, for example, has 328 million inhabitants, so Donald Trump's 85 million followers theoretically represent 26 % of the population. Justin Trudeau would have around 14 %, Emmanuel Macron's 6 million followers correspond to around 10 % of the population, Mark Rutte 6.5 %, and Jair Bolsonaro 3 %. From this perspective, EU leaders perform comparatively well on the Twitter platform.

The research for this study revealed that Emmanuel Macron's EU-related tweets earned, on average, 2 754 likes and were reposted 642 times from January 2019 to June 2020; Giuseppe Conte's tweets had an average of 2 942 likes and 517 retweets, Pedro Sánchez had 1 340 likes and 464 retweets on average, while there was substantially less involvement with Mark Rutte and Angela Merkel's accounts, with 202 likes and 49 retweets for Mark Rutte and 141 likes and 66 retweets for Angela Merkel. Curiously, when comparing Giuseppe Conte and Emmanuel Macron's accounts and follower numbers, it appears that Giuseppe Conte gains on average more likes for his EU-related tweets than Emmanuel Macron, despite the latter having far more followers. This particular finding confirms the widespread thinking that a high number of followers does not necessarily result in

²¹ See Munoz et al., 2016.

more viral tweets, with a great amount of likes and retweets, as it is not necessary to follow a Twitter account in order to view, like or retweet a message.²²

It could also be argued that Giuseppe Conte started to gain greater recognition on Twitter during the coronavirus pandemic, following his resounding request for financial instruments to be put forward for countries in fiscal difficulty, including Italy. Similarly, Pedro Sánchez's profile gained an increase in likes and retweets as the coronavirus crisis unfolded in March 2020, with tweets ranging from 4 000 to 8 000 appreciations and 1 000 retweets.

The majority of tweets made by the group of five leaders with a high number of likes are mainly in French, followed by English and German. Despite Emmanuel Macron's aim to address his tweets to an international audience by translating the same tweet from French into English or German, the audience's engagement drops significantly when comparing tweets in these three languages. For instance, Emmanuel Macron tweeted in French about the Treaty of Aachen signed with Angela Merkel in January 2019, earning more than 9 000 likes for his post. The tweet was then translated into English and German, obtaining around 2 000 additional likes. This reduced number of virtual interactions could be explained by the strategy to tweet first in Emmanuel Macron's native language and then in other languages, leading the Twitter public to demonstrate appreciation for the first tweet in its original language, and to ignore the same tweet in other languages. The same explanation applies to Giuseppe Conte and to Pedro Sánchez, whose tweets quoting the original tweet with the English version get fewer likes than those in Italian and Spanish respectively. Tweets by these EU leaders are also released after the message in their mother tongue, and fail to reach widespread attention from an international audience.

A different online audience behaviour can be seen in Mark Rutte's Twitter account, where certain tweets in English received more interactions than those in Dutch, even if the latter was posted before the translated version. This trend is particularly evident when Mark Rutte met EU leaders/representatives and aimed at engaging with a broader audience by tweeting in English. Two significant examples cover bilateral meetings with [Giuseppe Conte](#) and former European Council President [Donald Tusk](#), with the first tweet gaining 311 likes and the second around 70 likes. In comparison to the translated versions, the original tweets are less impactful in terms of audience engagement, with 95 and 55 likes respectively. Despite detecting several English tweets with a greater number of likes, Mark Rutte's most-liked EU message, on a bilateral meeting with Emmanuel Macron to debate the Recovery Fund and MFF in late June 2020, was tweeted in Dutch, with almost 1 500 likes and 170 retweets. Its French version was the second-most-liked tweet out of 141 total EU tweets, however it did not reach the same widespread consensus, receiving 1 309 likes and 249 retweets.

On a different note, when looking at the total number of likes in tweets during press conferences on the results of European Council meetings, there is an evident and drastic drop in engagement, with Emmanuel Macron, Mark Rutte and Pedro Sánchez getting, on average, 743, 43 and 282 likes. However, the videos attached to these tweets often attracted thousands of views, suggesting that the number of likes alone under-value the true reach of tweets with informative video content, as also stressed in the literature.²³

While in general tweets related to national issues receive more audience engagement, surprisingly, some of Emmanuel Macron's tweets on climate policy in an EU context are more popular in terms of likes and engagement than the tweets on the same topic but with a national connotation. A striking example is the [announcement of the EU Green Deal](#) implementation after the

²² See Rufai and Bunce, 2020.

²³ For example Rufai and Bunce, 2020.

December 2019 European Council, for which the French President got more than 2 000 likes and 600 retweets. On the contrary, tweets on the more recent Citizens' Convention in late June 2020 received far less attention, with around 400 likes and 100 retweets.

Tweets that received most likes are those that contain a strong and impactful message in terms of communication and language use. For instance, Giuseppe Conte's 28 March tweet, released just before the European Council video-conference to address the coronavirus outbreak, gained 28 881 audience appreciations and more than 4 000 retweets, when he stated that 'the European Union has an appointment with history and history does not wait The #Coronavirus emergency response must be strong, vigorous and cohesive. I will fight for Italian citizens until the last drop of sweat'. A similar message was tweeted by Pedro Sánchez on the wake of the 28 March European Council video-conference, calling for solidarity and a prompt response by EU Member States, gaining 17 573 likes and 4 023 retweets in total.

Curiously, one of both Pedro Sánchez's and Emmanuel Macron's most-liked tweets concerns migration and disembarkation of migrants on Italian and Spanish shores, although they cite different events occurring in late July 2019 (the *Bruno Gregoretti* and Open Arms cases). Migration was not a topic on which the French and Spanish Prime Ministers particularly focused in their Twitter activity, but nevertheless, their messages on this highly sensitive issue at the EU level resounded among their audience.

To conclude, this analysis of the methods and success in engaging with target audiences shows that some leaders can count on a relatively large number of followers, especially in the case of Emmanuel Macron, Pedro Sánchez and Mark Rutte. However, compared to other world leaders' follower numbers, such as Donald Trump, EU leaders clearly have fewer followers; but, when taking population size into account, they do reasonably well on Twitter. To understand whether EU leaders managed to convey EU-related issues to a broader public, the analysis of hashtag use shows that EU leaders used this tool in varying ways. Indeed, it can be seen that some hashtags ranked in the top ten, not because they were deployed by many different leaders, but because they were used by one single leader. The low use of targeted hashtags by some EU leaders to join the conversation empirically demonstrates a general lack of capacity by leaders to enhance their outreach so as to engage with people on Twitter who are not already following them. A similar conclusion of a limited attempt in reaching a wider audience can also be drawn with regard to the use of language in EU tweets, as most EU leaders favour their native language, and make use of English only to address pressing topics, with the exception of Jüri Ratas, Gitanas Nausėda and Klaus Iohannis, whose profiles aimed solely to target an international audience. Therefore, the limited use of foreign languages in EU leaders' tweets show that EU Heads of State or Government holding a Twitter account did not maximise their full potential with a view to reaching out to an audience beyond the national sphere; they primarily address their messages to their domestic public and do not use effective virtual engagement methods widely. Lastly, the same conclusion applies to likes and retweets, as many tweets by EU leaders often failed to reach 500 likes, which, according to the literature available,²⁴ can nevertheless be considered as viral tweets. Despite evidence of tweets in which followers and non-followers showed their support for certain EU leaders' messages, the conclusion is that EU Heads of State or Government do not mobilise their audience widely when addressing EU-related issues. In an attempt to analyse public engagement on Twitter through hashtags, language use, likes and retweets, it can certainly be said that many EU leaders still do not interact broadly with their audiences, much less exploit 'the interactive potential of Twitter because they do not perceive this platform as a channel to dialogue with the citizenry'.²⁵

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ See Alfonso-Munoz et al, 2016

Conclusions

The innovative research carried out in this study aimed at investigating the Twitter activity of the members of the European Council in order to assess whether they utilised the tool effectively to achieve their joint objective of better communicating to their citizens on Europe, as stated in the 2016 Bratislava Declaration. To evaluate if, how, and on which European issues members of the European Council tweet, in particular in relations within the European Council, this study examined 31 004 tweets by 34 EU Heads of State or Government issued between January 2019 and June 2020, and classified the 3 722 EU-related tweets according to a selection of 45 different EU issues.

The evidence shows that, while there are substantial differences between EU leaders' Twitter activities, most of them are present on Twitter today and are using the platform as part of their communication strategy to convey their political views at national and European levels. As could be expected, EU leaders are generally much more engaged in domestic politics than on European issues; one positive finding of the study is, however, that EU-related tweets correspond on average to nearly 20 % of all EU leaders' tweets collected as part of this research, with Peter Pellegrini and Klaus Iohannis even reaching around 40 %. This outcome shows that, for most EU Heads of State or Government, Europe does play a significant part in their Twitter communication. While some leaders use Twitter extensively in general, notably Mateusz Morawiecki and Pedro Sánchez, their use of tweets to communicate on European issues is proportionately rather limited. At the same time, however, some of those using Twitter less intensively tweet, in general, on a higher percentage of EU issues.

When examining the tweets on EU issues in detail, the analysis shows that EU leaders tweet a lot about events, whether forthcoming, ongoing events or when reporting after the event. These events include European Council meetings, bilateral meetings with other EU leaders, group meetings with other EU leaders, as part of a regional group, interest network or political alliance, as well as meetings with EU representatives, such as the President of the European Commission, Commissioners and the President of the European Parliament. When tweeting about these meetings, EU leaders often mention the main agenda points of the discussion and stress the key takeaways for them, especially in the case of European Council meetings.

The data illustrate that the highest number of tweets by far was dedicated to the issue cluster grouping 'policy' areas and that the policy issues most tweeted upon were external relations, the multiannual financial framework and climate policy. When looking at individual EU issues, the category of 'interaction between EU leaders' was the subject of the most tweets.

The research also provides a unique overview of the number of bilateral meetings (physical, telephone or by video) between EU Heads of State or Government over 18 months, reported via Twitter, and highlighted the varying degree of leaders' communication on such meetings. The analysis shows that Angela Merkel reportedly met by far the greatest number of her peers, but also pointed to those EU leaders who apparently did not use the opportunities to exchange views with other EU leaders. It also identifies cases where a high number of tweets on bilateral meetings concerned one specific European Council colleague, such as tweets from Mateusz Morawiecki, who dedicated two thirds of his tweets to bilateral meetings with Andrej Babiš, or Emmanuel Macron, who devoted half of his tweets on EU issues to meetings with Angela Merkel. Moreover, the research shows that the communication on meetings reported on Twitter was not always in proportion to the number of meetings actually held, with some leaders issuing a large number of tweets on a smaller series of meetings, such as Mateusz Morawiecki or Peter Pellegrini, who have held relatively few meetings with other EU leaders. The Franco-German case study presented in this analysis also

highlights differences between EU leaders' reporting, with each leader presenting the outcome of the same bilateral meeting in different ways.

A surprising finding is that tweets concerning the European Council President were rather limited, while EU Heads of State or Government tweeted more often on their interaction with other EU representatives. This might be linked to the fact that the study did not look into the retweets of EU leaders' tweets, which may include many messages regarding the European Council President.

When examining tweets regarding European Council meetings, the analysis demonstrates that nearly all EU leaders used Twitter to report from European Council meetings, although the attention paid varies significantly between the different types of European Council meetings, with formal meetings the subject of a lot more tweets than video-conferences. However, individual EU Heads of State or Government rarely report on more than one or two European Council decisions, but mostly on issues close to their national interest. Surprisingly the term (European Council) conclusions was hardly mentioned and none of the EU leaders actually provided links through which interested citizens could find the complete conclusions of a European Council meeting.

When assessing the Twitter activity of EU leaders over time, evidence points to monthly changes and shows that non-EU-related tweets and EU-related tweets by EU leaders very often follow different trends. The most significant difference was when the coronavirus pandemic broke out in Europe, as the average of non-EU tweets reached its peak for the whole 18-month period at that point in time, while tweets on EU issues were trending down towards an absolute low. The analysis also shows that spikes in Twitter activity on individual EU issues are often observed around meetings of the European Council, as well as other milestone events.

While hashtags are frequently used by nearly all EU leaders as a method to engage with their audience, many of them are linked to specific events or geographical locations; nevertheless, the top ten hashtags used by leaders include either a direct reference to Europe or are related to key pressing matters at EU level, such as Brexit and the MFF.

The study also identifies a number of missed opportunities and unused potential for EU leaders to better communicate on Europe with European citizens via Twitter. One of the shortcomings in their communication on the EU via the platform appears to lie in the lack of explanation of the EU and of European issues provided by EU leaders in their tweets. While it could be argued that the length of a tweet limits the possibility to explain complex issues, EU leaders can always insert a link, video or website to provide more details. A positive example, which might be worth mentioning as a best practice, are podcasts, such as those released by Angela Merkel, [explaining](#) a forthcoming European Council meeting, explaining EU policies such as [climate policy](#) or [clarifying](#) the functioning of the EU on central topics, such as the response to the coronavirus pandemic. This is particularly relevant when important processes are taking place at EU level, such as Brexit or the Future of Europe debates, as well as in the framework of the adoption of the long-term political priorities of the EU, such as in the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024. Most leaders could have explained these key moments to EU citizens in more depth, and outlined better their political views, thus leaving room for improvement in their communication strategy for the future.

Moreover EU leaders do not effectively introduce their audience to the European Council conclusions in their EU-related tweets, especially following a European Council meeting. This is a missed opportunity for people to gain a better and more detailed understanding of the major decisions taken by EU leaders and of the core objectives for EU action decided jointly amongst Heads of State or Government.

Holding the Council presidency clearly leads to an increase in Twitter activity by EU Heads of State or Government, as evidenced by Andrej Plenković and Klaus Iohannis. This would have been an ideal

moment to broaden the use of languages in EU leaders' Twitter activity, to reach a wider audience. However, this possibility was not exploited fully. In general, were EU leaders to tweet in more languages, they could maximise their outreach and connect with an audience beyond the national sphere, thus providing an additional means to transmit their countries' views and priorities to other Member States and their citizens.

While the #EUCO hashtag has established itself as a reference point for the European Council, EU leaders could use more specific EU-related hashtags promoted by EU institutions' social media channels, such as #EUGreenDeal or #NextGeneration, as a means to reach broader audiences. In this context, the Council Secretariat could, for instance, provide hashtags related to the different activities of the European Council, for example #StrategicAgenda or #Leaders'Agenda; these could then be used by the members of the European Council to create a community of followers for the European Council and its individual members. This could also contribute to an increase in the likes and retweets they gain for their tweets, since EU leaders do not seem to manage to engage their followers regularly on their EU-related tweets.

As the research was limited to an 18-month period, further research could examine EU leaders' Twitter communication in the context of other key moments for the EU and the European Council. In particular, the month of July 2020, during which leaders' Twitter usage certainly intensified due to the discussions on the MFF and Next Generation EU, would be worth assessing in more detail. Additionally, as the analysis of likes and retweets only considered five EU leaders, future research could expand the scope of this study, to collect likes and retweets regarding all EU leaders; this would provide a more complete picture of citizens' engagement with EU leaders on Twitter. Finally, further research could also consider EU leaders' own retweets, thereby providing an indication of the type of EU-related tweets, including those from the European Council's Twitter profile, its President, or other EU Heads of State or Government leaders, which they deemed worthy of sharing.

REFERENCES

- Alonso-Muñoz, Laura, Marcos-García, Silvia and Ripollés-Casero, 'Political Leaders in (Inter)Action. Twitter as a Strategic Communication Tool in Electoral Campaigns', *Trípodos*, número 39, 2016.
- Barberá, Pablo and Zeitzoff, Thomas, 'The New Public Address System: Why Do World Leaders Adopt Social Media?', *International Studies Quarterly*, 2018.
- Drachenberg, Ralf, 'Charles Michel as President of the European Council: The first 100+ days', EPRS European Parliament, 2020.
- Enjolras, Bernard, 'How leaders use Twitter and does it matter? The case of Norwegian national politicians', *International Conference Democracy as Idea and Practice*, 2014.
- Redek, Tjaša and Godnov, Uroš, 'Twitter as a political tool in EU countries during the economic crisis: a comparative text-mining analysis', *Drustvena istrazivanja*, 2018.
- Rufai, R. Sohaib and Bunce, Catey, 'World Leaders' usage of Twitter in response to the COVID19 pandemic: a content analysis', *Oxford University Press*, 2020.
- Soedarsono, K. Dewi, Mohamad Bahtiar, Akanmu Diekola Muslim and Khoirunnisa Putri Perdini Idola, 'Political leaders and followers' attitudes: Twitter as a tool for political communication?', *Journal of Critical Reviews*, Vol 7, Issue 8, 2020.

Over recent years, the members of the European Council have, in a number of landmark declarations such as the Bratislava Declaration, pointed to the need to improve communication with citizens, as part of the process of building greater trust and confidence in the European Union and its institutions. As social media, and notably Twitter, have become an important part of politicians' communication strategy generally, this study looks specifically at how EU leaders in the European Council communicate on Europe via Twitter.

This EPRS study explores provides an overview of the activity on Twitter of all members of the European Council over an 18-month period – in just over 31 000 tweets posted between January 2019 and June 2020 – covering a very wide range of issues. The study identifies the European topics that EU-27 leaders tweet about – their own interactions, external relations and the EU budget – and it explores the ways in which they communicate and engage with their target audiences, as well as pointing to differences of approach between them. EU-related tweets represent on average about a fifth of all EU leaders' tweets, with a greater emphasis on meetings as such than on substantive policy issues.

This is a publication of the European Council Oversight Unit
EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

