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Has COVID-19 promoted or discouraged a European Public Sphere? Comparative analysis of the Twitter interactions of German, French, Italian and Spanish MEPSs during the pandemic

Abstract

This comparative research analyses the political discussion through social media of the top list German, French, Italian and Spanish Members of the European Parliament during COVID-19 crisis times. Through content analysis, the article focuses on Twitter behaviours during a pandemic crisis period (March 23 to April 23, 2020). The study that analyses up to 14 (first listed MEPs) Twitter accounts and a total N of 2101 tweets looks at clarifying if the COVID-19 pandemic has promoted or discouraged the growth of a European Public Sphere. The results show that audience involvement depended on certain online conducts of the MEP rather than on his or her constant activity. Those behaviours produced as well that the COVID-19 debate was mostly restricted to the political elite, who neither allow European civil society to take part in the discussion or communicate to the general public with the aim of shaping a European Public Sphere.

Keywords
European Union, European Parliament, social media, Twitter, political communication, public sphere, political discussion, pandemic, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Covid-19 and the EU Public Sphere*

The European Union faces nowadays another unprecedented crisis. After the so-called EU poly crisis (Tuñon, Oleart & Bouza, 2019; Tuñón & Bouza, 2021) during this decade: Euro, refugees and Brexit, the supranational organization faces a worldwide pandemic crisis. The EU performance through the Covid 19 crisis might offer a new milestone for assessing the efficiency of the European governmental institutional communication.

Indeed, Covid-19 pandemic has confined millions of citizens worldwide. This isolation has had many consequences at multiple levels: social, economic, educational, but communicative, as well, among others. As pointed out by Masip *et al.*, 2020, citizenship get more news and more frequently than before during the health crisis. That had led them to

maintain a critical attitude towards media coverage of the outbreak (conditioned by the media ideology, and reported in a sensationalist way, generating unnecessary social alarm), but to increase perceived knowledge on the subject, which in return leads to the adoption of preventive measures, as well (Igartua *et al*., 2020).

Therefore, it has been already argued about the impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Mainly, "the resurgence of the role of legacy media, especially television, and the fact that citizens who usually remain far from the information have reconnected with the news. Therefore, the existing inequalities regarding news consumption among citizens have been reduced, in part," and achievements in terms of democratic accessibility to public affairs, reached (Casero-Ripollés, 2020, p. 1). In addition, it has been also verified that the consumption of information about the coronavirus has been structured along four latent dimensions: "(a) specialized health information on the Internet, official websites, and obtained through health personnel; (b) through 'visual' social media; (c) through 'written' social media and face-to-face contacts; and (d) through the mass media" (Igartua *et al.,* 2020, p. 1).

Some analyses have already researched about the pandemic impact in social media in general and Twitter in specific. Analysing tweets about the disease has given insights into public reactions that may had help guide public information campaigns. Under a gender approach, Thelwall and Thelwall (2020, p. 1) have argued "that females are more likely to tweet about the virus in the context of family, social distancing and healthcare, whereas males are more likely to tweet about sports cancellations, the global spread of the virus, and political reactions." In addition, Pérez-Dasilva *et al*. (2020, p. 1), have linked the pandemic discussion in the Tweetsphere with the dissemination of disinformation. Their research highlighted that the USA dominated the conversation and that during several weeks' dissemination distracted from taking more effective action and actually preventing contagion. Moreover, among the stakeholders with the most prominent positions in the network, there was proved little presence of scientists and fact checking institutions that might have been useful to disprove disinformation.

At EU level, different academics such as Papagianneas (2017), De-Wilde *et al.* (2015), Michailidou and Trenz (2015), Barisione and Michailidou (2017), Caiani and Guerra (2017), Tuñón *et al.* (2019), or Valera-Ordaz and Sorensen (2020), had argued before the pandemic that the failure of European communication could only be reversed if the European Union substantially reformed its institutional political communication strategy. Moreover, it is crucial to seriously meet those capital affairs such us: the creation of a European public sphere, the identity crisis, the multilingualism, the Brexit campaign (or even the lack of it), the bottom-up communication, the own European branding or the challenge of the Euro-myths which have been recently denominated fake news, among others (Tuñón & Carral, 2019).

In order to relieve the increasing indexes of populism and Euroscepticism, the EU institutions must find new narratives to appeal the new generations. Among them, the performance of the European Parliament (EP) seems to be decisive. Indeed, it has been traditionally argued about the lack of political legitimacy of the EU (Follesdal & Hix, 2006). The so called democratic-deficit discourse generally points out the EP weaknesses within the EU decision making process despite its gradual formal powers increase. Although the latest EP elections showed the first turnover increase since the first elections in 1979, the 50.66% turnover is still significantly lower than the one usually registered in member states national elections.

The above-mentioned EU poly crisis (Carral & Tuñón, 2020; Tuñón, 2021) coupled with the well-known and academically discussed communication gap between the EU institutions and the citizenry has positioned the EU political and communication sphere under an inflection point. This happens within the aftermath of the Covid-19 and just after the 2019 EP

elections and the newly appointed van der Leyen Commission. Altogether ought to serve as a unique opportunity to renew the unitary message, in the light of new features of the audiences addressed.

Therefore, nowadays the own EU has the duty to make known its actions across different mediums, among which the online formula appears like crucial to connect the political actors with the audiences (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; López-Meri *et al.,* 2017, among others). This may be seen as one of the essential strategies of political communication of a supranational entity such as the EU (Papagianneas, 2017; or Tuñón, 2017). To do so, it is crucial that the EU communication strategies would give entrance as soon as possible to the emergent technological methodologies and, particularly, to the social networks.

Indeed, social networks seem to be the most effective tools at the time to interact with the youngest audiences due to their capacity to reduce the psychological and geographical barriers. At current, they are essential for strengthening bonds between politicians and citizens. Indeed, social media such as Twitter or Facebook, allow interactions and communication between citizens and political representatives (Lilleker & Koc-Mihalka, 2014). At EU level, the relevance lies in the capacity of engaging conversations between the EU citizenry and the Members of the EP (MEPs) to reduce the structural distance with the EU institutions and the democratic deficit, but promote a lively European Public Sphere, as well.

1.2. *Transnational Communication and Political Discourse in the EU*

While different academics have analysed political discourse in social media such as Twitter (Eom *et al.*, 2015; Kreiss, 2016; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014), we intend to translate this analysis into European transnational communication. In fact, the EU itself, along with its representatives, has a duty to communicate, through its various forums, to publicize its actions. Among them, online formulas are essential political communication strategies of a supranational entity such as the EU, as well.

While transnational approaches to the field of public relations and organizational communication or government information are not abundant, some conceptual perspectives such as branding, 'reputation' or 'symmetric communication' (Canel & Sanders, 2012, p. 93) are important tools in the search for alternatives to the current European institutional communication policies (Bouza & Tuñón, 2018).

Indeed, the latest European crises (euro, refugees and Brexit) have shown the failure (among others) of the EU's communication policy. That is why the sphere of institutional communication at supranational governmental level is currently in Europe at a turning point. In fact, it has been argued as obstacles to the homogenization of the European message: the lack of hybridization of communication in European public policies; and the intra and inter institutional multiplicity, disseminating different and counterproductive messages, but suffering from a lack of common strategy too (Papagianneas, 2017; or Tuñón, 2017). Crises, such as the Covid-19 one, could become into an opportunity at European level "to work on customized messages adapted for distribution, reception and impact on new characteristics of the audiences to and making room for emerging technological methodologies" (Bouza *et al.*, 2019, p. 259).

In addition, personalization is not outside the scope of European transnational political communication, an issue that has already received considerable academic attention. Political personalization implies an approach to the discourse focused on people, putting the intrinsic qualities of the speakers over the content or the ideologies of their discourses, that is, the form over the content (Sánchez-Murillo, 2005). On the one hand, the majoritarian mass media, essentially television, have promoted that personalization (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999), by facilitating, through audio-visual logic, the simplification of the message to increase its reach among the audiences.

However, social networks allow new forms of personalization of political leaders. In fact, one of the potentialities of a social network such as Twitter is to approach and therefore impact on the audiences in a more direct way and therefore reach much closer to them (López-García, 2016). Indeed, if personalization has at least two dimensions, individualization and privacy (van-Aelst *et al.*, 2012), both (the articulation of strategic communication around the candidate and the projection of his most personal facet), have been recently detected in the European approach of major European figures. For instance, the current French president, Emmanuel Macron, has been recognized as "a transnational political actor in Europe, whose political personalization makes him able to communicate through fragmented public spaces" (Bouza & Tuñón, 2018, p. 1245).

National organisations tend to concentrate on the national political arena rather than the EU level one (Karamichas 2007; Liebert, 2011; Poloni-Staudinger, 2008). Therefore, hybrid representatives such as the MEPs (EU representatives appointed through a national basis) working on EU affairs are required to frame EU issues coherently with the national political dynamics. In fact, Díez-Medrano (2003), argues that the "framing of Europe depends to a large extent on how 'Europe' is discussed at the national level, given that the political socialisation of citizens tends to happen at the national rather than European level" (Bouza *et al.*, 2019: 260). It is for this reason that our theoretical ambition is to bridge the literature on transnational communication and political discourse in social media in the EU with the literature on framing, which we understand as complementary.

1.3. *Online Communication, Social Media and Twitter*

Government communication and social movements campaigns can no longer be understood without the use of what are possibly the most successful tools of the present and future: social media (Bimber, 2014; López-Meri *et al.*, 2017). In fact, social media seem to be the most effective tools when interacting with younger audiences due to their ability to reduce the psychological and geographical barrier that distance institutions. Last decade has witnessed the proliferation of so-called online social media as customary and decisive instruments for content production and message transmission between senders and receivers (Duggan, 2015; or Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2016), a phenomenon known as 'user-generated content' Scolari *et al.* (2012). Even if it is still far from dethroning the social network most used at global scale – Facebook– (Duggan, 2015), the characteristics of Twitter, have made it the preferred social network for debate, political communication and for the social and scientific research, as well (Steward, 2017; Campos-Domínguez, 2017; López-Meri *et al.*, 2017).

In the field of political communication, Twitter can be used for different functions. In the framework of electoral campaigns different approaches have been verified: strategic communication of the parties and candidates (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012); campaign information and dissemination of political discourse (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011); promotion of voter participation and mobilization (Gainous & Wagner, 2014); or promotion and self-reference in relation to the campaign itself (Jivkova-Semova *et al.*, 2017).

However, not all research has been able to prove sufficiently the contribution of Twitter to effective interaction between political actors and citizens (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2016; Tuñón & Carral, 2019; Tuñón & Catalán, 2020). Some researchers even maintain that interaction is more addressed to journalists than to citizens (Graham *et al.,* 2014; or Jivkova-Semova *et al.,* 2017). Consequently, it should not be neglected one of the most frequently verified uses of Twitter, that of personalization or focus of discourse (mainly) on the issuing individual far above the content of the message issued. Precisely, some political communicators use Twitter to share details of their private lives (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Veerger *et al.,* 2013), in an attempt to humanize themselves before their audiences (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; or Bentivegna, 2015), even by means of an informal tone (López-Meri, 2016) or using humour

(Jivkova-Semova *et al.,* 2017), in a practice whose extension, frequency and effectiveness also depends on the geographic scope of application (Scherpereel *et al.*, 2016).

In addition, there is already a considerable volume of research on Twitter and the unexpected political change processes (led by social and/or protest movements) through the discussions generated, as happened in: the revolts in Iran (Rahimi, 2011); Egypt (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012); the Arab Spring (Chaudhry, 2014); the movement Indignados (Peña-López *et al.,* 2014) or Occupy Wall Street and others (Theocharis *et al*., 2015).

However, at EU level, there is a striking shortage of empirical studies addressing the European strategies in social media (Ruiz-Soler, 2018). Indeed, Twitter-based studies considering Europe have been conducted but only at the national levels or with reference to specific national topics: Austrian Twitter public sphere (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013); German discussion of #aufschrei (outcry) (Maireder & Schlögl, 2014); or the Norwegian Twittersphere (Bruns & Enli, 2018). Conversely, only few studies have addressed questions of the European Twittersphere transcending from the national lens (Maireder *et al*. 2014; Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2018; or Barisione & Ceron, 2017).

Moreover, research has shown that social media contributes to restructuring power relations by empowering civil society and political actors traditionally less involved in EU politics and by enhancing the politicization and contestation of EU issues (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017). Some of the existing research associates critical discussion on social media with the social movements promoting the politicization of the issue (see Barisione & Michailidou, 2017 on austerity protest; Ruiz-Soler, 2018 for the case of TTIP). However, this research focuses more on the discussions on social media as a digital movement (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017) and the networks that structure the discussion (Ruiz-Soler, 2018), while an unprecedented pandemic crisis situation. As long as we still know relatively little about the way in which EU representatives frame the EU in social media (a field rather unattended with some exceptions such as: Larsson & Kalnes, 2014: Alonso-Muñoz & Casero Ripollés, 2018; or Valera-Ordaz & Sorensen, 2020), the current research will address MEPs performance in the Twitter sphere during the COVID-19 crisis.

1.4. *Political Communication strategies through Twitter*

Digital developments have given the user community the power to decide the prosperity, popularity and visibility of political conversation (Mazzoleni, 2001). Politicians still maintain sufficient preponderance to choose which topics to settle on the agenda and which to omit. Moreover, they can even filter information or disseminate opinions contrary to what is part of the media agenda (Aruguete, 2017), but the notoriety of their speech depends on the level of engagement of the users, and their support to the cause (Carracedo-Verde, 2002).

Indeed, unlike the offline scenario, it is the connected society the one to grant a long or ephemeral path to political evolution (Mosca & Vaccari, 2011), which is implying a restructuring of the political communication system (Chadwick, 2006). Thus, on the other hand, the omnipresence of Twitter on the daily agenda has risen the political organizations and representatives need to be present and update, so that their digital behaviors already affect their ordinary lives actions and dialectical guidelines (Elías, 2015). Furthermore, these actors' own communication strategies adaptation to this medium indicates its relevance, especially during planning and campaign periods (Maarek, 2011; Bruns & Burgess, 2011, Vergeer & Hermans, 2013; Jungherr *et al.,* 2015; Tuñón & Catalán, 2020).

Active and regular management of their accounts fosters the stimulation of dialogue, the dissemination of the message and the political profile growing popularity (Larsson, 2015). Furthermore, their interactivity through mentions and hashtags gives rise to threads of conversation that, indirectly, promote "the creation of links between different users" (Larsson, 2015, p. 89), from which circles of support for might be reached. Likewise, participation –in the form of retweets (RTs), likes (favs) and comments– helps to reinforce

attention towards the account, giving it greater visibility so that followers increase and, therefore, influence (Sanjuán-Santoja, 2015).

Everything suggests that "the rules of the game have changed and now the key concept is conversation. The voter no longer only listens, but also speaks" (Rodríguez-Andrés & Ureña-Uceda, 2011, p. 31). However, many authors question this position, stating that, in reality, political actors do not take full advantage of the resources provided by social networks (Golbeck *et al.,* 2010; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Adams & McCorkindale, 2013, Kreiss, 2014; Gainous & Wagner, 2014). Although they put the seed of the debate with the publication of a first tweet, then they do not engage in conversation with users, not even with related profiles So that the use they make of the networks does not enhance the ultimate purpose of bidirectional communication.

In fact, in terms of political representatives communication strategies, the use of Twitter has been mostly noticed: a) as a mere self-promotion channel, mostly and very effectively used during campaign period (Jungher, 2014); b) to mobilize users and to encourage them to participate (Gainous & Wagner, 2014); and c) as a hook in order to capture the attention of conventional media and focus coverage on their figure, or to influence their publications by complaining or promoting their interventions in their networks (Stromer-Galley, 2014).

2. Methods, database and research questions

The contribution to the European Public Sphere and the interactions of European representatives with citizens through social media has been under analyzed. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the existing literature by quantitatively mapping MEPs social media behaviors. It focuses on their Twitter behaviors, providing a comparative approach to its performance during the pandemic through the intersection of different variables such as ideology, nationality, gender and age.

This work intentionally focused on a non-campaign period but a very special one, within the hardest impact of the pandemic in the European territory along March and April 2020. The aim was capturing MEPs contribution towards the European debate while a crisis period. Therefore, we have explored different research questions that will be useful to assess how social media were considered as a valid channel for EU representatives to contribute to the European Public Sphere during the pandemic. In specific, we will seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Did MEPs achieve higher success in terms of audience involvement when they carried out vaster communication strategies MEPs during the pandemic?

RQ2. Did MEPs engage into discussion with the European civil society about the COVID-19 debate shaping, therefore, a European public sphere?

With the objectives of studying the European representatives' political communication and contribution to the European public debate, and validating the proposed research questions, it will be followed a combined methodology (a quantitative and qualitative content analysis). Therefore, thanks to the observation and data recounting (data publication, number of tweets, RTs, likes, followers, sources, contents and functions), it will be possible to measure the frequency and the repercussion of the MEPs Twitter practices. Simultaneously, these variables will also allow us to know the grade of audience's reciprocity. Moreover, the latest point is related with the analytic part of the investigation since it will clarify the consequences of each MEP's online behavior.

As stated before, the European Parliament representatives social network practices "are significantly understudied in comparison with national political elites" (Valera-Ordaz & Sorensen, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, we have selected to focus on this group to fulfil the literature gap. In specific our sample consists of 14 MEPs Twitter accounts. We decided to focus on the four most populated EU countries: Germany, France, Italy and Spain. As long as these four

countries embody different political cultures, we expect this will enrich our results about the MEPs Twitter use for contributing to the EU Public Sphere discussions.

Since it was not manageable to work with data provided from all the MEPs from the above referred countries (Germany, 96; France, 79; Italy, 76; Spain, 59), we decided to select the head list of those parties that exceeded the minimum threshold of 10% of the valid votes in their respective countries in the last elections to the European Parliament on 26th May 2019. There were two different exceptions: a) some of the first listed never got their MEP seat (such as the Spanish MEP, Borrell, who was appointed High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), so we opted for the second listed; and b) Italy organizes the EU elections with five but not one circumscription and open lists, so we opted for the most voted candidate that effectively took his/her EP seat. Following the referred selection methodology and exceptions, our final case studies were:

Table 1: Selection of MEPs from France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

Country	Name	National Party	% Vote
🇫🇷	BARDELLA	Rassemblement National	23,34
🇫🇷	LOISEAU	La République En Marche	22,42
🇫🇷	JADOT	Europe écologie-Les Verts	13,47
🇩🇪	WEBER	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands / Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	28,90
🇩🇪	BARLEY	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	20,50
🇩🇪	KELLER	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	15,80
🇩🇪	MEUTHEN	Alternative für Deutschland	11,00
🇮🇹	BIZZOTTO	Lega	34,26
🇮🇹	PISAPIA	Partito Democratico	22,74
🇮🇹	GIARRUSSO	5 Stelle	17,06
🇪🇸	MONTSERRAT	Partido Popular	33,18
🇪🇸	GARCÍA	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	20,35
🇪🇸	GARICANO	Ciudadanos	12,30
🇪🇸	PALOP	Unidas Podemos	10,17

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding to the time frame, we deliberately placed the monitored period outside an election campaign, but within two important EP sessions on the EU responses towards the pandemic, just after the European outbreak and the lockdowns. So, we aim to get a broad and accurate picture of MEPs activities while a significant crisis period. In deciding our period of observation, we took into account the two special voting sessions held on the 26/03/20 and 16–17/04/20, so that the MEPs were actively involved. Nevertheless, we selected ranges before and after the plenaries because social network activity preparing and concluding the sessions was expected. Therefore, we selected dates ranged from March 23 and April 23, both included and up to 31 total days (one month).

In addition, it was decided to systematize the scenario by using a hybrid quantitative methodology made up of computational and manual procedures. In this way, the corpus is made up of 2101 tweets (among them 1060 own content and 1041 retweets) issued by up to 13 different accounts, since the Italian MEP from Lega, Mara Bizzotto, did not tweet during our selected period. The data collection was completed by the end of the period of study and carried out by using the tool *Twlets* (free and online). Subsequently, given the complexity of manually calculating results from such a number of tweets, the coded data was entered into the database of the IBM SPSS program (version 25), with which we have been able to cross–
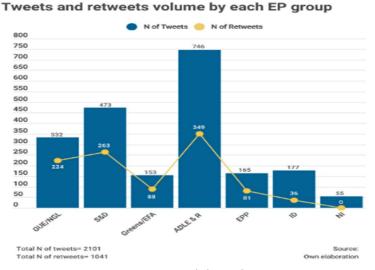
reference the variables to obtain the percentages and correlations that make up the core of this content analysis and which we proceed to present below.

Finally, a number of variables were used in order to shed light on our research questions. First of all, a number of descriptive background variables were highlighted for every MEP (name, country, national political party, EP group, age or gender). Secondly, regarding the MEP social network presence and popularity, were also coded variables such as: number of tweets, number of followers or number of likes and retweets. Lastly, some other variables, showing and describing the content of the political conversation, were coded too (number of own content tweets, accounts from retweeted content and finally most used and more successful hashtags).

3. Findings or results

3.1. *Tweet behaviours*

At first sight, we can answer to 'who have tweeted the most during the climax of COVID-19?' from different perspectives. According to a country classification, Spain heads with 1335 tweets in one month, tripling the amount of the second ranked, France, and typing six times more than Germany, which also counts with up to 4 MEPs profiles analysed. If we take a look to the EP groups, apart from a clear gap between Renew Europe (746 tweets) and the other organizations, it can be highlighted a tendency for the left-wing groups to tweet more frequent than right-wing ones (S&D, 473; GUE/NGL, 332), since none of the other four groups reached the barrier of 200 tweets. Finally, by examining each individual behaviour, we affirm that the Spaniard MEP from Renew Europe, Luis Garicano, tweeted the most during the given period (552). In fact, the 3 out of 4 Spanish profiles highly overpassed the average amount of tweets posted (161), meanwhile the Italian members, Giarrusso and Pisapia, or the German ones, Keller, Meuthen and Weber, barely or not even achieved 50 tweets in one month.

Graphic 1: Tweets and retweets volume by each EP group.
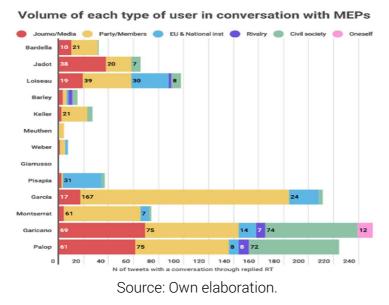

Source: Own elaboration.

Moreover, we confirm the same behaviours by studying the number of retweets carried out by the 13 MEPs. On the one hand, Renew Europe members are placed at the top again, posting one third of the total amount of retweets (349 out of 1041) and left-wing groups strengthened the above-mentioned tendency by publishing (S&D, 263; GUE/NGL 224) over the average number of retweeted posts (149). On the other hand, the communicative behaviour of the MEPs belonging to ID and NI groups reveals a quality acquired by populist parties, the

personification of the message, based on the concentration of the content in one voice. Indeed, Giarrusso has never promoted any other account other than his own, while Bardella and Meuthen (ID members) only retweeted 36 out 177 messages, what means that they gave rt in the 20% of the cases when the average retweeted content achieved the 42%.

3.2. *Registered users in conversation*

Taking into account the previous sample of retweeted posts (1041), we also explored the type of user the 13 MEPs entered in conversation with during the time period studied (Graphic 2). We decided to split the profiles into six categories: a) journalists and media, b) party (national and European) and members of it, c) EU and national institutions/officers, d) national and European rivalry, e) civil society (academics, trades, NGOs, celebrities, anonymous people) and e) reply to oneself. Thus, we first discovered the low interaction between Italian and German MEPs and journalists/media channels, since 3 tweets in a month –from Barley– is the peak of their relationship. Then, only a 1,9% of retweets dedicated to national and European rivalry (20 out of 1041) leads us to claim that an online debate between European deputies from different ideologies barely exists. It also calls the attention that Garicano was the only replying to his previous tweets and he did up to 12 times. Lastly, it is quite remarkable the opposite online strategies that have followed both EP groups leaders, Weber in EPP and García in S&D. The German MEP opted to scarcely appear on the social network during the crisis period, tweeting 20 times among which only the 20% were retweets of his colleges, whereas the Spanish MEP ranked in the top 3, retweeting up to 211 times, of which the 80% were talks through retweets with her political peers.

Graphic 2: Volume of each type of user in conversation with MEPs.

Source: Own elaboration.

3.3. *COVID-19 debate through hashtag analysis*

As the time span selected comprises the climax of the COVID-19 crisis, we chose to elaborate a hashtag analysis in order to know the concrete topics of conversation the MEPs tweeted about. In that way, the collection of hashtags allows us to distinguish three diverse discussion strands about COVID-19. First of all, it must be clarified that Italian MEPs, Pisapia and Giarrusso, have not used this tool to spread their messages. Therefore, counting out of 11 Twitter accounts, we found out that the 100% of profiles tweeted about the economic impact of the pandemic. The meeting sessions held in Brussels on March 26 and April 16 to discuss the recovery fund predominate in each MEPs' feed thanks to hashtags such as #coronabonds

143

or #eurobonds and #EUCO, #Eurogroup, #EPPlenary. Tracking by countries, Spanish MEPs wrote down about the financial aids three times more than the French ones (53 against 18 tweets), and making special mention to Palop, who published #AmpliarEscudoSocial so many times (14) as did German Eurodeputies altogether.
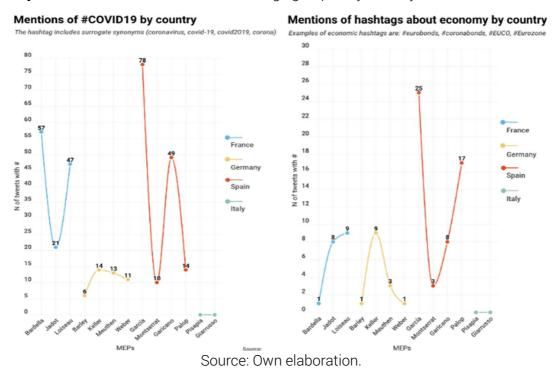
The second subject addresses the social perspective, since there was a tendency to conclude most of the publications with an encouraging slogan (#TodoSaldráBien, #Restezchezvous, #NoQuarantineforDemocracy). In fact, all hashtags called society to fight together against virus, as all were created around the word 'union' (#UnitedinSolidarity, #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos, #AhoraTocaLucharJuntos, #UnidosVenceremos, #Stronger Together). Regarding this topic, we observed certain conducts displayed next: according to political groups, Eurosceptic deputies from ID (Bardella and Meuthen) have not used slogans when tweeting, meanwhile the two MEPs from Greens/EFA reiterated #FlattentheCurve and left-wing groups, S&D and GUE/NGL, shared hashtags such #LeaveNoOneBehind, among others. It is also noteworthy the fact that MEPs randomly used until 20 different hashtags in several languages. In that sense, the behaviour of EPP and S&D leaders must be noticeable once again, because Weber became the only one to open his range of supportive action to German, English and Spanish speakers and García included more hashtags in her messages than anyone else –concretely, in the 83% of her tweets (254 out of 306).

Finally, the third topic goes towards a more informative space of debate. It ranges from a general update of the pandemic data to revindications about #masques and #tests and warnings about the fake news spread during the pandemic (#StopBulos, #Fakenews). Specifically, the hashtag #Covid19 –and surrogate synonyms (#coronavirus, #covid-19, #covid2019 and #corona)– is the most repeated word by all the MEPs, although here we found some common grounds. While German and Italian peers barely used it (44 and zero times, respectively), Spanish and French ones overpassed the hundred (151 and 125 tweets). However, despite the dichotomy which shows Spain and France at the top of each classification, the German MEP, Barley, got the highest viral tweet, with 9358 favourites and 1206 retweets (Image 1).

Image 1: Barley boycotted Adidas as a result of its decision to stop paying shops rents in the wake of the pandemic.

Graphic 3 1: Volume of mentioned hashtags grouped by country.

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Discussion

Given the whole data showcase, we figured out that an active presence on Twitter during the climax of the pandemic did not result in a greater impact on their audiences. Although Garicano, individually, or his European group, Renew Europe, posted and retweeted the most, they did not meet with the highest success. Nonetheless, some findings above-mentioned lead us to think that audience involvement depended on certain online conducts of the MEP rather than on his or her constant activity.

In that sense, we believe that one of these main conducts is found in the type of content users post on their feeds. According to the results of retweet practices, if we grouped by age, MEPs ranging 50-59 y/o and 40-49 y/o headed the ranking. This time, however, we focused on the foot of the classifications, from where we could read that the younger (20-29 and 30-39 y/o) MEPs were, the more own content they created about their COVID-19 concerns. Keeping track of this trend, we finally discovered a stronger correlation between MEPs and audiences. The more own content MEPs tweeted, the bigger engagement from their followers they received. For instance, men did not tweet as much as women (963 *vs.* 1138 tweets), however, boys have more followers than females do (655,2k *vs.* 244,8k) because they elaborated more own content proportionally to their total N of tweets about COVID-19 (58.88% *vs.* 43.32%). In terms of countries range, likewise, the ones who tweeted the most do not perform as successfully as they should do comparatively to their effort. A clear example is Spain *vs.* Germany, two countries whose populations reckon to be Europhile and which computed the same number of profiles, four each one, for this investigation. Although Spain published six times more than Germany (1335 *vs.* 213 tweets), German MEPs created the 77% of their content about the pandemic and are followed by 237.3k people, while Spaniards did in the 43% of the cases and only got to 156.4k followers.

Another conduct on which audience involvement could depend is the opening of the COVID-19 debate to the public. According to the results, during the period of time studies, it existed a closed discussion surrounding the European political elite which brought three negative consequences:

145

a) The representation of the European Union on Twitter carried out by MEPs during the key month of the pandemic was extremely low. Regarding this aspect, we do not refer to their presence on the online scope, but to the closer relationship that they, as representatives of the EU, should cultivate with determined actors. In fact, the conversation between MEPs and journalists and media channels occupied on average just the 20.03% of tweets by each EP group. Such a weaker connection with mass media does not incentive their promotion to the general public. In addition, we observed that the average percentage of messages dedicated to maintain a dialogue with civil society was only a 10'38% in each EP group. In short, each EP group devote on average barely a 1/3 of their publications to directly or indirectly (20.03% + 10.38%) tell users about COVID-19. Finally, taking into consideration the exposure which MEPs gave to the European institutions through the tool of RT, we assert that there is a clear gap between their individual and collective interests. MEPs of each EP group contributed by dedicating on average the 46.78% of tweets to the visibility of their national parties and to the common EU group, meanwhile they did it only in a 7% of the cases when it came to call the attention towards the supra- and national governmental entities. Indeed, the MEPs did not discuss with the public but only with the elites (Tuñón & Carral, 2019). Elites that were not supranational but fragmented: those of national spheres or those of the political parties themselves (Díez-Medrano, 2003; Bouza *et al.*, 2019).

b) The chance to strengthen a European Public Sphere during a hard time like the pandemic decreased due to the no application of the techniques that social networks offered to spread the message and engage audiences. Firstly, the lack of use of a popular tool like RT reduced the possibilities for the Italian MEP, Giarrusso, to introduce other European profiles to their followers. Moreover, mentions to other accounts through replied retweets to civil society only supposed the 8.28% of the total N of tweets, but what matters the most in this case is that open debate with political rivals did not arrive to the 1% (20 out of 2101 tweets), making inexistent the plurality of a European Public Sphere. Lastly, we can affirm that the scarce use of the hashtag the MEPs made implied the unfeasibility of a larger and enlightening conversation about COVID-19 (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), since by skipping the hashtag, they avoid creating multiple threads on Twitter. Indeed, 2/3 of profiles who have ever posted with a hashtag, did not include one in, at least, the 50% of their messages. Equally, 1/3 of MEPs used hashtags in less than the 20% of their publications and even an Italian Eurodeputy, Giarrusso, did never click on the RT button for the entire month studied.

c) A reduction in the interest of audience for the conversation about COVID-19. As users did not feel participants in the dialogue (Valera-Ordaz & Sorensen, 2020), the engagement rate during the entire month was minimum. Out of 13 profiles, up to 7 MEPs (Jadot, Keller, Meuthen, Weber, Palop, Pisapia and Giarrusso) could not get a tweet with an interaction higher than a hundred RTs and same quantity for favourites. Equally, only 3 tweets including a hashtag about COVID-19 –two by Bardella and one by Barley– overpassed the 1000 RT-favs, and even if we lowed the barrier to 500 RTs, only two more tweets and MEPs would enter in the list –one by Meuthen and another by Garicano.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, both research questions raised at the beginning of this investigation can only be answered by a negative statement. On the one hand, results have shown that there is no clear correlation in the hypothesis I, i.e., the more intense and vaster communication strategies MEPs carried out during the pandemic, the more success they did achieve in terms of audience involvement. Nonetheless, the study drove us to an alternative conclusion, which matches the grade of audience engagement with certain online conducts of the MEPs such as the type of content published, the number of actors involved in conversation or the grouping

of messages with the same topic under a hashtag thread. On the other hand, data demonstrated that in hypothesis II MEPs did not engage into discussion with civil society about the COVID-19 debate and, thus, we can hardly consider the existence of a European Public Sphere. The COVID-19 debate was mostly restricted to the European political elite, who neither allow civil society to take part in the discussion or communicate to the general public with the aim of shaping a European Public Sphere.

Our study has revealed some behaviours for which the social networks communication strategies of the MEPs from Germany, France, Italy and Spain did not work out at their maximum level. Within an understudied field, it endorses some recent analyses (Ruiz-Soler, 2018; Tuñón & Carral; 2019; or Valera-Ordaz & Sorensen, 2020) These conducts, however, have been examined from a general perspective. Possible future research could analyse deeper our hypothesis through a smaller case study or a comparative timeline of hashtags as well as study some ideas we mentioned along the text regarding concrete attitudes such as Eurosceptics parties (Bardella in France, Meuthen in Germany and Giarrusso in Italy) are the ones which created the highest percentage of own content. In addition, the inclusion of case studies from Eastern European countries is also foreseen in the framework of future research.

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