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Arguing through quotations

The case of European Commission press releases

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This paper analyses and evaluates the use of arguments in which quotations are employed to convince the addressees of the acceptability of a proposed action. Based on the European Commission's press releases, a communicative practice in which quotations are typically employed, the study demonstrates that quotations function as weak authority arguments that are not likely to be accepted by the addressees if they are not further supported by other argument types.

Keywords: press releases, quotations, authority arguments, European Commission

1. Background, research question, goal

The European Union (EU), as one of the most complex international organizations, is involved in a remarkable diversity of public relation practices. It makes serious efforts to live up to its mission of being 'close to the citizens' (see De Wilde 2019) by informing them about the latest decisions and plans, and trying to convince them of the value of EU's actions. The Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM) of the European Commission (EC) optimistically mentions as a mission statement of its strategic plan for 2020–2024 that "DG COMM [...] brings Europe closer to its citizens" (European Commission 2020:5). This bold claim may be in need of some proof, but it testifies that EU institutions and the EC in particular, take issue with the citizens as part of their communication strategy.

To do so, the European Commission enacts daily an impressive number of press releases. A look at the website of the EC reveals thousands of press releases per year. Such a prominent communicative strategy is employed by the EC to keep Brussels journalists and European citizens informed about the EU priorities, initiatives and solutions to current problems (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019). As an EC spokesperson explains (interview DG COMM, 21 November

2019), press releases represent the most direct link between the EC and the Member States on the basis of which the journalists in Brussels construct news items for the audience in their own country. After all, media in general, and press releases in particular, have significant political power, even if less direct and coercive than other means (Meyer 1999: 621). Through press releases, the EC has taken one of the most visible roles in communicating to its citizens about its actions by trying to maintain the position of a communication center of the EU's institutional set-up (Meyer 1999: 623), outlining publicly the priority issues set by itself.

In this paper, I will focus on press releases issued by the EC to accompany recommendations to Member States. Recommendations, though non-binding, are legal instruments particularly favored by the EC for their simplicity and rapid adoption procedure, enacted when the EC has reduced or no competences to enact legislation, such as in the case of health issues, education, digitization, etc. Accompanying recommendations by press releases is seen as a suitable and easy way to explain to the journalists about the value of EU action. The main idea is that journalists will transmit the information to the national press and thus keep citizens in the Member States informed (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019).

Press releases are therefore an integral element of the overall attempt to raise public awareness about the EU as a whole, and the values and policies of the EC in particular (European Commission 2020: 8). The choice for the communication by the EC is based also on the significant role played by this institution as initiator and monitor of legislation, mediator among the other EU institutions, while at the same time one of the most contested in its relationship with the European citizens, constantly seeking support to push forward its own proposals (see Gimmelikhuijsen, De Vries and Zijlstra 2018).

As a spokesperson of the EC explains (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019), press releases associated with recommendations have two functions. The first function is to inform the journalists, and hence the national authorities and the general public in the Member States, about the most recent actions of the EC, and keep the addressees up to date with the political priorities of this EU institution. The second function is argumentative, as the EC attempts to convince the addressees of the added value of Commission's actions (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019).

Despite their significant number and fundamental informative and argumentative roles, little if anything is known about the main characteristics of the press releases accompanying recommendations, let alone about their discursive quality and potential impact on addressees. The EC officials rely on the high number of readers accessing the press releases in order to judge their effectiveness as a communicative practice (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019). By looking

at the number of clicks, EC officials conclude that press releases accompanying recommendations are oftentimes read. Yet little is known about the argumentative features of press releases accounting for their potential effects. It is the major challenge of this study to explain the strategic design of EC's press releases by conceptualizing them as argumentative communicative practices with a view to pave the ground for ultimately improving their quality and increasing their effectiveness.

This study will delve closely into two aspects. First, I will define and conceptualize press releases accompanying recommendations, their different claims and impact. I will reconstruct and interpret the argumentative pattern at the heart of the press releases accompanying recommendations in order to bring to light their specific argumentative structures and argument types. Second, I will show how the argumentation in press releases accompanying recommendations is designed strategically to convince Member States (and implicitly their citizens) of the acceptability of a certain course of action. I will show that authority arguments through quotations take a central strategic role in the design of press releases employed to convince addressees of the acceptability of EC actions. Finally, I will evaluate the quality of the main argument types and its implications for the acceptability of press releases.

By proceeding in this way, this study recasts the issue of the quality of EC press releases as one of persuasion. It contributes to a better understanding and examination of press releases in at least two ways. First, with its focus on argumentation, the research goes beyond the current exclusive concerns for the informative character of press releases (see Jacobs 1999; Catenaccio 2008; Pander Maat 2008; Lindholm 2008; Sissons 2012), and provides valuable knowledge into an overlooked but omnipresent and highly influential aspect of press releases in the context of EU communication. Second, the study paves the ground for EU drafters of press releases to devise such communication instruments based on sound and effective argumentation with a high potential to convince. By giving a critical appraisal of the strategies employed by the EC, this study contributes to understanding which factors influence the argumentation at the core of press releases and how these can be better designed.

2. Approach

This study relies on a research methodology combining a conceptual analysis with a fine-tuned qualitative-empirical account to secure a comprehensive and insightful investigation of press releases. The conceptual analysis is based on insights from argumentation studies, by making use of tools for the analysis and evaluation of the main justificatory reasons advanced in press releases. The the-

oretical framework is based on the pragma-dialectical approach (van Eemeren 2018) in which argumentation is conceived as part of a communication process in which the arguer (the EC) is viewed as trying to comply with critical norms of soundness while attempting to persuade the addressees in the communicative practice in which they are arguing (press releases). The existing tools allow for a systematic reconstruction of the standpoints and arguments employed in press releases, the implicit premises on which the arguments are based, the reconstruction of the specific argument types, and the evaluation of the quality of the argumentation based on soundness assessment criteria.

The qualitative-empirical research follows a triangulation logic combining data collection, analysis and interpretation with semi-structured interviews. The data includes 145 press releases enacted by the EC in the period 2017–2020, collected from the website of DG COMM (https://ec.europa.eu/knowledge4policy/organisation/dg-comm-dg-communication_en). The selected press releases cover a wide range of policy areas including those traditionally regulated through recommendations (such as state aid and competition), areas only recently regulated in this way (such as environment), and areas featuring recent crises (such as migration and border management, fight against terrorism, financial and banking sector, digital technology). This selection rationale permits generalization, and guarantees consistency of data analysis and findings.

To increase the accuracy and reliability of research results, and ensure the soundness of the conclusions drawn from analysing and interpreting data, data analysis is combined with in-depth semi-structured interviews with relevant Commission experts. Three interviewees have been carefully selected in view of their knowledge and practical experience regarding press releases. They have been identified through contacts with DG COMM (purposive sampling) where such communicative practices are enacted. The three interviewees, whose identity is not revealed in this paper for reasons of privacy, include two high officials of DG COMM closely involved in the communication activities of the EC and a spokesperson involved in the daily enactment of press releases on behalf of DG COMM. The interviews took place on November 21, 2019 at the EC headquarters in Brussels.¹ The main topic of discussion concerned the officials' insights into the factors influencing the effectiveness and quality of press releases, and their own practices with Brussels journalists who are reporting back to the Member States.

1. The interviews have been carried out by Corina Andone together with dr. Bart Garssen from the University of Amsterdam. During the interviews, notes have been taken on the basis of the discussions, and these notes have been systematized and saved in a protected document.

3. Press releases accompanying recommendations

3.1 European Commission's recommendations

Recommendations, enshrined in Art. 288 of the Treaty for the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), have no legally binding force. Yet despite a lack of legally binding force, these instruments have been particularly significant in recent EU law, accounting until recently for more than 10% of decision-making (Stefan 2013).² Most recently, recommendations are commonly enacted in times of crisis, in areas such as migration (C(2019) 7131 final), advanced digital technologies (C(2019) 2335 final) and the recent COVID-19 crisis when the number of recommendations has exceeded any reasonable expectation. Due to their flexibility and capacity to do justice to the complexity of EU affairs, recommendations have become favored instruments of governance, giving rise to “new forms of governance based on the desire of the participants to agree, through collective deliberation, on procedural norms, forms of regulation and shared political objectives, while preserving a diversity of solutions and local measures” (Terpan 2015).

Recommendations issued by the EC may produce notable practical and legal effects. In terms of practical effects recommendations may serve in interpreting provisions of directives and regulations, and also as the basis for enacting national legislation (Andone and Greco 2018). Stefan (2013) convincingly shows that they also provide the basis for judicial review, have been used by the parties in litigation, and have often served as an aid in the interpretation of hard law provisions (see Coman-Kund and Andone 2019). In terms of practical effects, EC recommendations contribute to policy changes at Member State level, such as putting social and time pressure for cooperation and coordination at national level (Stefan 2013).

The press releases accompanying these recommendations are also non-binding in nature (Opinion of Advocate General Villalón in Case C-62/14), but they “suggest a certain interpretation of the [...] instruments, which the addressees are pressured to follow” (Coman-Kund and Andone 2019: 188). Such documents oftentimes send ‘a clear message to the Member States as to what actions are expected’ and underline ‘consistent principles to be applied through the EU’ (Coman-Kund and Andone 2019: 188). They are presented to the journalist community in Brussels for the purpose of having them picked up by the press and transformed into positive news stories at Member State level (interview DG

2. The most remarkable use of legally non-binding instruments has been developing since 2020 in relation to COVID-19 pandemic. In these special circumstances, 62% of decision-making at EU level is based on legally non-binding instruments (Stefan 2020).

COMM, 21 November 2019). In this way, the EC attempts to ultimately reach the public at national level.

True, while press releases may not be read directly by the citizens, something which the EC is fully aware of (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019), their arguments reach the citizens indirectly through press articles based on the original press releases (see Sissons 2012). In this way, press releases are seen by the Commission as a way of generating publicity and promoting its own image and good reputation (see Catenaccio 2008), particularly by emphasizing the added value of EU action (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019). Engaging indirectly with the public in this way is seen as a ‘communication service’ (see Strategic Plan 2020–2024, DG COMM) which ensures that ‘simple, clear and understandable messages’ (European Commission 2020: 9) focusing on the Commission’s priorities are communicated. As the interviews with EC officials reveal (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019), the EC is particularly interested in defending a positive image of itself and sees press releases as a good opportunity to explain and defend its own policies from its own perspective. Being aware that Member States are rather critical of its activities, the EC attempts to rectify that image by transmitting the information it would like to see picked up in the Member States. In this way, press releases have an informational role (due to transmitting information) and a persuasive role (due to their argumentative character).

3.2 Argumentative pattern of press releases accompanying recommendations

Just like press releases in general (Jacobs 1999; Catenaccio 2008; Lindholm 2008), those enacted by the Commission to accompany recommendations have a standardized form following mainly guidelines provided in the ‘Style guide for press releases’ (2003). They typically start by providing information concerning a recent urgent priority of the Commission, either coming from the citizens (such as winter-summer time) or established through a list of political priorities (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019). Moreover, and most importantly, the press releases include argumentation justifying the positive actions proposed by the Commission in an attempt at convincing the Brussels journalists that they are newsworthy by having an impact on national affairs, and ultimately convincing the citizens that EU action is positive. Being the core EU policy initiator and implementation watchdog, the Commission seeks public support to push forward its own proposals and to be able to implement EU legislation and non-legislation more smoothly (Gleissner and De Vreese 2005: 325).

Officials from DG COMM (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019) explain that press releases detail on the latest initiatives of the Commission to

solve a problem, while they also underline the added value of the EU, and in particular of the EC, in solving that particular problem. The press releases always mention that action undertaken by Member States in the past to solve a particular problem, such as self-regulation, is not sufficient. Therefore, press releases underline that the EU, through its recommendations, delivers benefits to the citizens by providing effective action which could only be achieved at EU level, rather than national, regional or local level. Thus, central to the argumentation of press releases are three main elements: (a) an indirect criticism regarding the Member States' reduced/ineffective capacity to solve a vital problem; (b) the centrality of the need for EU action; and (c) the benefits for EU citizens.

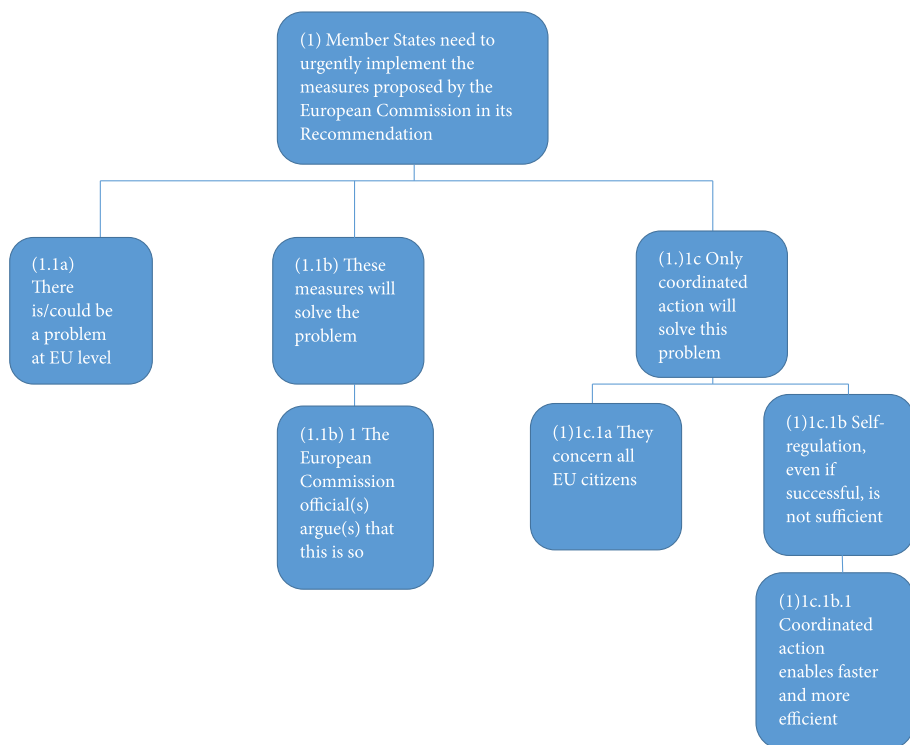
This main line of arguing accords perfectly with the awareness of the Commission, as explained in its latest Strategic Plan 2020–2024 (European Commission 2020: 4), that trust in institutions needs to be gained and maintained through media. Particularly at a time when trust in public institutions, such as the Commission, is at one of its lowest levels (EU barometer 2018), press releases emphasize the importance of policy initiatives by the EC for the citizens, and that this institution seeks to obtain support for its citizens-based proposals (van den Brande 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen, De Vries and Zijlstra 2018).

To provide support for its initiatives as presented in recommendations, the Commission includes in every press release a quotation of the commissioner in charge of the priority at issue in which the aim of the recommendation and the potential benefits are outlined. Interviewed EC officials confirm this adopted practice (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019) in which the Commission quotes one or more officials in a high position, whose competence is sometimes reinforced by referring to more competent institutions, such as the Council of the EU and the European Parliament.

The pragma-dialectical concept of argumentative pattern (van Eemeren 2016, 2017) enables the identification of the constellations of particular argumentation structures and argument types as they are presented in defense of a particular type of standpoint. Such combinations are seen as being instrumental in reaching the goal of a communicative practice, in this case the goal of press releases to convince journalists and citizens of the necessity and desirability of EU action.

Two aspects are taken into account. First, the European Commission's *Style guide for press releases* (2013), the European Commission's *Strategic Plan 2020–2024. DG Communication* (2020), and the insights obtained from interviews with EC officials (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019) provide valuable insights into the pattern characterizing press releases of the European Commission which accompany recommendations. Second, the selected corpus of press releases is annotated for standpoints and arguments on the basis of which their prototypical combination is brought to light.

The figure below represents the argumentative pattern of press releases in which the main implicit standpoint urges Member States to urgently implement the measures proposed by the EC. In support of this standpoint, three coordinative arguments are advanced that point at the existence of a problem at EU level, that the proposed measures will solve the problem, and that only coordinated action is desirable. While the fact that the measures will solve the problem is further justified through the act of quoting (argument in bold), the third argument is in turn supported by the fact that all EU citizens are concerned and self-regulation by Member States is not sufficient, because faster and more efficient action can be obtained through coordinated action.



4. Using quotations as authority arguments

The argumentative pattern indicates a central place for quotes in EC press releases. Although fairly short, the quote(s) provide(s) the arguments pointing at the urgency, necessity, desirability and efficiency of implementing the course of the proposed action. An illustrative case is the press release of the EC accompa-

nying Recommendation 2011/711/EU asking “EU Member States to step up their efforts, pool their resources and involve the private sector in digitizing cultural material.” This press release requires Member States to develop concrete solid plans for digitization, and most importantly, “to adapt national legislation and strategies to ensure the long-term preservation of digital materials.” In order to support this highly demanding proposal, the EC quotes Neelie Kroes, at the time Commission Vice-President for the Digital Agenda:

- (1) Europe has probably the world’s greatest cultural heritage. It cannot afford to miss the opportunities offered by digitisation and hence face cultural decline. Digitisation brings culture into people’s homes and is a valuable resource for education, tourism games, animation and the whole creative industry. Investing in digitisation will create new companies and generate new jobs.

The features of the widely used argument based on quoting warrant examination as to their form, strategic role and function and their quality, and how this affects the acceptability of the overall press release. Instead of appealing to other potentially more convincing forms of arguing, such as scientific appeals indicating the need for action in a specific area, press releases of the EC rely centrally on the words of its officials.

But do these words carry real probative weight? How is the quote presented to warrant decisions? While being presented as credible authorities, the officials do not provide expertise in the sense of scientific knowledge, but rather argue for action at EU level, making it look as a rational way of accepting the recommendation made by the EC, mostly by revealing or giving the impression of presenting the causal link between digitization and culture preservation as a fact (bringing culture into people’s homes, creating new companies, etc.). As Cummings (2010:170) rightly explains, appeals of this kind “can give rise to presumptively warranted claims which [...] may become the basis of objective knowledge claims [...]” particularly compelling when “objective knowledge from other sources is lacking or unavailable in inquiry and when decisions and other courses of action cannot be postponed until such knowledge becomes available.”

4.1 Strategies of quoting

Unlike the usual act of quoting in which a quoter takes the source text and shifts it from its original context to a new context (Bublitz 2015: 4), in press releases a high EC official provides a quote for the specific purpose of the press release (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019; see Sleurs, Jacobs and Van Waes 2003 for the concept of pseudo-quotations). The head of a DG or the President/Vice-President of a unit/subunit of the EC take a central role. For instance, the Vice-President

of the Digital Single Market is quoted in the case of the press release accompanying a recommendation regarding tackling illegal content online (IP/18/1169), and the Vice-President of the Digital Agenda is quoted in the case of the press release accompanying a recommendation regarding the use of 5G networks (IP/20/123). These officials draw the reader's attention to specific aspects of the proposal in explicitly or implicitly providing an evaluative perspective.

Since the EC always proposes actions and wants these to be acceptable for the EU citizens, the officials underline the positive aspects with regard to the proposal made by the institution they represent. Thus, the quote contains an implicit evaluative claim through the use of a positive variant of pragmatic argument in which a course of action is recommended for its favorable consequences (an action of type X needs to be carried out, because it will lead to positive results of type Y). This is in line with Fetzer's recent explanation (2020a: 4) that quotes "are intended to secure the joint construction of discourse common ground and thus felicitous communication between the [...] participants." In discussing forms and functions of quotations in a political context, Fetzer (2020b: 91) argues that quoting is not a conventional speech act bringing about a change in the world, but rather a speaker comment on how he/she intends the speech act to be taken. In the case of press releases accompanying recommendations, the EC wants the quote to be seen as reassuring that its actions are most suitable to solve a current or potential problem which cannot otherwise be solved at the Member State level.

By supporting the view that EC recommendations need to be implemented by the Member States, the quote plays an argumentative function. It can be interpreted as an argument from authority, since, as officials from DG COMM explain (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019), the person whose views are quoted is considered/presented as the authority on the matter at issue. It is not for nothing that the stylebook for press releases contains provisions pointing at rendering authority as an integral part of press releases through quotes by a high official. This is all the more necessary in the specific case of press releases accompanying recommendations. Since these instruments are legally non-binding, the EC tries to render the recommended actions acceptable to the Member States and their citizens by pointing at the authority of those who are apparently most knowledgeable, and therefore credible, in the eyes of the addressees.

In quoting, an appeal is made to the quoter's own authority as high official. This specific use of the argument from authority allows addressees (national authorities, journalists, citizens) to bypass a direct examination of the evidence on an usually controversial issue, particularly by giving the impression that the quoted person embodies genuine expertise in a certain area (see Cummings 2015: 67). Further, the authority of the quoter is reinforced in the press release by reference to other authorities, such as the European Parliament, the Council,

various EU agencies, etc. The effect of this combined authority appeal is to give the impression on the part of the addressee that there is consensus regarding the (potential) problem to be solved (such as digitization) and the solution offered (in all cases to harmonize efforts at EU level by changing legislation in all Member States). In the case of the Recommendation 2011/711/EU, for instance, an explicit reference is made to Comité des Sages:

- (2) The Recommendation builds on the conclusions of Comité des Sages (high level reflection group) in bringing Europe's cultural heritage online, established in 2010.

In the case of the recommendation regarding the cybersecurity of 5G networks (C(2019) 2335 final), the press release points at a call from the European Council to adopt the recommendation, and the EU Cybersecurity Agency as providing insights concerning 5G threat landscape mapping.

The use of arguments from authority through quoting is intended to increase the acceptability of the proposal made by the European Commission. More specifically, “arguments from authority emerge in political decision-making as a way to justify the causal relation between a course of action that is being proposed and a desired goal” (Andone and Hernández 2019: 203). DG COMM relies on arguments from authority in order to make the consequences of the proposed actions acceptable. Instead of arguing directly for what will be obtained by means of the decision of the EC, an argument from authority is provided. In other words, it is considered that the premise of the pragmatic argument claiming that an action of type X leads to positive results of type Y is warranted by quoting a high official.

This use of authority arguments is all the more prominent in the case of recommendations concerning matters that involve risks. In the case of risk technologies, for example, as the famous case of 5G networks under debate, issues of serious public health and security arise. There is a lot of uncertainty attending new technologies, arguably because they have not been in use for a long period of time to determine with certainty their impact and effects on the population. We know from previous cases (e.g., the mad cow disease, genetically modified food) that mistrust is the default position of the addressee as soon as a risk situation appears (see Cummings 2010, 2015). Arguably, there is mistrust in the EU institutions (attempting to harmonize at all costs) coupled with the perceived failure of regulatory institutions to act in the public interest (such as EU agencies) (see van den Brande 2017). Being aware of the fact that it is mostly a matter of trust, the EC puts forward several competent persons whose competence is reinforced by other competent institutions (such as the European Parliament and the Council). Such is the case with the press release of 29 January 2020 to encourage Member States

to put key measures on 5G in place no later than 30 April 2020. The press release includes no less than three quotes following each other (bold in original):

- (3) Margrethe **Vestager**, Executive Vice-President for a Europe Fit for the Digital Age, said: “We can do great things with 5G. The technology supports personalised medicines, precision agriculture and energy grids that can integrate all kinds of renewable energy. This will make a positive difference. But only if we can make our networks secure. Only then will the digital changes benefit all citizens.”

Margaritis **Schinus**, Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life, said: “A genuine Security Union is one which protects Europe’s citizens, companies and critical infrastructure. 5G will be a ground-breaking technology but it cannot come at the expense of the security of our internal market. The toolbox is an important step in what must be a continuous effort in the EU’s collective work to better protect our critical infrastructures.”

Thierry **Breton**, Commissioner for the Internal Market, said: “Europe has everything it takes to lead the technology race. Be it developing or deploying 5G technology – our industry is already well off the starting blocks. Today we are equipping EU Member States, telecoms operators and users with the tools to build and protect a European infrastructure with the highest security standards so we all fully benefit from the potential that 5G has to offer.”

By presenting the views of several high officials, the EC is likely to increase trust in its actions not only by pointing at the officials’ competence, but also by giving the impression of objectivity, fairness, consistency, as well as openness and honesty, concern and care. These are important facets for creating trust in public institutions (Cummings 2014: 1048). Precisely because trust is increased in this way, the addressee might no longer perceive a real risk, especially because a confident and apparently well-informed solution is being proposed. Thus, while people rely on trust to guide judgment on risky matters, once trust is achieved, risky matters tend to no longer be perceived as such, but rather as ground-breaking and advantageous technology.

4.2 The quality of the quote

Thus far, the point has been made that argumentative quotes in press releases work as authority appeals which may create trust in addressees. In this way, recommendations for taking key measures, especially concerning controversial and risky matters, are more easily accepted. A question arises, nevertheless, as to the quality of such quotes and their impact on the overall acceptability of the press releases of the EC.

It has been explained in the previous section that in order to provide an appropriate defense of a key political decision, the EC justifies the causal connection between the proposed measures and the desired goal by directly quoting a high official. In doing so, the pragmatic argumentation (arguing for the positive consequences of a course of action) is complemented by an authority argument. This latter argument type carries its own probative weight in the final decision-making (see Andone and Hernández 2019:201). A statement concerning the necessity of adopting key measures is considered true/acceptable, because a certain high official (seen as an expert) endorses that statement.

The authority of the different officials that are quoted in the press releases of the EC is invoked. The officials occupy a central role in these public communication documents in an effort to reassure the EU citizens of the necessity and desirability of certain measures being taken. Particularly in cases of high public concern, such as the effect of illegal content online, the introduction of 5G networks, or health-related issues such as COVID-19, there is considerable public anxiety in response to the problem. In an effort to quell this anxiety, statements of high officials are presented in which they underline the need for urgent EU action. By appealing to a high official, his/her expertise is invoked. The officials' name (always written in bold), position and institutional affiliation are mentioned to signal that they have expertise relevant for the recommendation they support. Their professional standing, always directly related to the policy area in which the recommendation is made (interview DG COMM, 21 November 2019), may be taken to indicate experience and knowledge in that policy area, so well developed to the point that it is complete (see Cummings 2015:74). It implies, as Cummings (2015:73–74) convincingly shows for similar cases, “substantial specialization within a field of study” which may go beyond error.

As things stand, there is little, if any, reason to assume that given their professional background, the quoted high official does not have relevant expertise in the context at hand. One may raise questions, however, about the impartiality of the high official, despite the intended neutrality of the quote (see Sleurs, Jacobs and Van Waes 2003). The high official acts on behalf of an institution whose proposed actions he/she can only support. In this sense, the quoter is closely involved and has a “personal interest” in the matter at hand. Due to his/her role in the EC, the high official will always provide arguments in support of taking certain measures. His/her own words provide a justification which is not necessarily unsound, but certainly weaker than in the case of offering insights from other experts, such as scientific insights.

In cases in which, as explained earlier, the words of the high officials are reinforced by pointing at consensus with other EU institutions, the justification may be stronger, but it may also become weaker. The addressee may interpret the need

to refer to consensus at the level of EU institutions as an attempt at manipulating addressee perception. The view that the authority arguments employed in press releases is rather weak is reinforced by the fact that the choice for the high official by DG COMM may be seen not necessarily as a choice for the most competent authority, but rather as a choice for a high official endorsing a certain point of view. One should bear in mind that recommendations are enacted by the EC when there is disagreement with the Member States concerning the existence of a certain problem, including the solution to it. Therefore, choosing a specific high official from the EC may be a handy choice, but not necessarily the most acceptable in the context at hand.

In evaluating the quality of the arguments presented in the quote, it is necessary to take into account also other aspects than the authority of the high official. The argumentative pattern outlined in Section 4 indicates that quotes are oftentimes employed to counter an implicit counterargument. The most common counterargument refers to self-regulation at national level. The EC is aware that, particularly when it comes to risky matters, Member States already have in place a number of measures which they had imposed themselves in order to solve existent or potential problems (self-regulation). In fact, this is one of the main reasons why there is a disagreement with the Member States. The latter believe that they have done enough in order to solve a certain problem, and more demanding measures, such as those proposed by the EC, are not necessary. To counter this counterargument, the quote most often underlines the need for more and for more urgent action in order to counter other problems and complications that may arise. Such imagined scenarios take the form of fear appeals, pointing at serious threats to security, public health, safety, fundamental rights. Such is the case, for instance, in the press release of 1 March 2018 accompanying a much contested recommendation for tackling illegal content online ((C(2018) 1177 final) (see Case C-16/16P) (bold in the original):

- (4) Vice-President for the Digital Single Market Andrus **Ansip** said: “Online platforms are becoming people’s main gateway to information, so they have a responsibility to provide a secure environment for their users. What is illegal offline is also illegal online. While several platforms have been removing more illegal content than ever before – showing that self-regulation can work – we still need to react faster against terrorist propaganda and other illegal content which is a serious threat to our citizens’ security, safety and fundamental rights.”

The reference to devastating consequences in the absence of immediate action being taken by Member States is commonly employed to encourage compliance with the proposed measures by appealing to fear rather than giving concrete argu-

ments to support the main claim. Except for pointing at serious negative consequences, the high officials do little, if anything, to prove their point. In the rest of the document, the press release does not compensate for this lack of justification by providing more arguments. This way of arguing may look persuasive, as it invokes terrible things that no one would like to see happening. But the fear appeal is fallacious by pointing at negative consequences which are not supported by arguments (Walton 2000). Moreover, simply pointing at negative consequences is not an argument to take urgent action (which involves disproportionately high costs for the addressees). It is also not an argument for why taking EU action is actually needed. On the contrary, the EC mentions that other less invasive options, such as self-regulation, have already been applied by Member States, while in other cases it leaves completely aside any discussion of these other options. In other words, the use of authority arguments is abused by failing to bring in real proof in need of harmonized action at EU level by rather arguing for the necessity of doing so because the EC finds it necessary.

5. Conclusion

Unlike previous research, which concentrated exclusively on the informative nature of press releases, this study has focused on the core argumentative component of these communicative practices. In this way, the study recasts the issue of press releases as one of persuasion, and contributes to a better understanding of their strategic design.

The argumentative analysis of press releases of the EC has brought to light an argumentative pattern in which the EC gives an indirect criticism regarding the Member States' reduced or ineffective capacity to solve a certain problem, it underlines the need for EU action and it mentions the benefits for EU citizens. The analysis indicates a specific combination of argument types, namely pragmatic argumentation, authority arguments and fear appeals. Together, these three argument types are intended to provide support to the main standpoint underlining the necessity of EU action at Member State level. Moreover, the analysis of the argumentative pattern reveals a specific combination of coordinative and subordinative arguments for an adequate defense of the standpoint through the technique of quoting. By using this argumentation structure, the EC makes one single attempt at defending the standpoint, which is reinforced with more layers of arguments for a strong defense.

The argumentative evaluation of press releases of the EC has demonstrated that, although the argumentative pattern may structurally be strong enough to convince the addressee of the necessity, desirability and acceptability of EU

action, it may fall short in its presentation. Thus, the quote is based on weak reasoning forms, in which the argument from authority may not be most acceptable due the position and role of the quoted Commissioner. Likewise, fear appeals, which should induce urgent action, are weakened by pointing at negative consequences which are not supported by arguments. Together, these argument types are likely to reduce the acceptability of the pragmatic argumentation that is central to the argumentative pattern.

Through an argumentative analysis and evaluation, this paper raises issues about the design of press releases for public communication by organizations such as the EC. Acknowledging the important role of their informative component, the study draws attention to sound and effective argumentation, which despite its fundamental role and high potential to convince, is very much neglected by EU drafters of press releases. The paper suggests that the practice of spreading information for the public cannot concern only the provision of information. Just like any other practice of public relations, the ultimate goal is to persuade the addressees to form and maintain a positive view of the EC and the added value of its actions. It is therefore imperative for EC communicators to pay closer attention to the quality of argumentation as a reliable means of inducing compliance from addressee. Despite being an overlooked aspect, argumentation remains an omnipresent and highly influential aspect of current EU public relations. By giving a critical appraisal of the current argumentative strategies employed by the EC in press releases accompanying recommendations, this study enables a better understanding of the factors accounting for such persuasive messages.

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