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European Institutional Discourse Concerning the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Social Network X

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Abstract: The outbreak at the end of February 2022 of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—and the Russian–Ukrainian hostilities that began in 2014 with the Euromaidan—has led to numerous dramatic episodes from both a humanitarian and an informative perspective. In this context, social media have been filled with rhetoric and narrative mechanisms, both from civil society organisations and from European media and institutions, in their eagerness to define their position within the dialectical battle. This research aims to address organisational communication in the European Union during the first year after the invasion, taking as its object of study the publications of four institutional bodies: European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, and European External Action Service. For this purpose, a content analysis of tweets was carried out, as well as in-depth interviews with specialised actors in institutional communication and disinformation at the EU level. Overall, the results show that the parallel narrative of the Commission, the Parliament, the Council, and the EEAS has been quite similar and lacks significant divergences, reflecting coherence and coordination in the communication strategies around the Ukrainian war, although there are interesting findings on the interaction of the institutions with the media and other civil society actors in communicating this international crisis via social media.

Keywords: EU communication; European Union; Ukraine; Russia; institutional communication; European institutions; hybrid wars; disinformation; social media

Citation: Ruiz-Incertis, Raquel, and Jorge Tuñón-Navarro. 2024. European Institutional Discourse Concerning the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Social Network X. *Journalism and Media* 5: 1646–1683. https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia5040102

Academic Editors: Concha Pérez Curiel and Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Received: 24 September 2024
Revised: 21 October 2024
Accepted: 29 October 2024
Published: 7 November 2024

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1. Introduction

Institutional communication plays a fundamental role in the global political landscape, especially in situations of crisis and international conflict. In this context, the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which definitively erupted on 24 February 2022, has generated a series of communicative challenges for European institutions.

As the so-called digital era progresses, social media has become a key channel for the dissemination of information and the construction of discourses. For governmental bodies and community institutions, X has evolved into a strategic platform for conveying messages, establishing positions, and responding to the demands of an increasingly connected and discerning audience. However, the Russian–Ukrainian conflict presents new challenges in terms of communication, given its impact within Europe and the necessity to address sensitive issues such as disinformation, geopolitical tensions, and the internal repercussions within the European Union (hereafter, EU).

To date, institutional communication at the governmental level, both within the EU and in the multilevel arena, has been largely underestimated in terms of systematic analysis and study, particularly concerning predominantly European issues. Even in the overlapping fields of International Relations, Comparative Politics, and Political Communication, the approaches and methodologies employed have not favoured an exhaustive exploration of this subject, as noted by Tuñón and Carral (2019, p. 1221).

Therefore, this research aims to make a modest contribution to the field of institutional political communication, focusing on the supranational perspective of the EU and employing a hybrid methodology that combines quantitative techniques, such as content analysis, with secondary qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews.

The present study specifically addresses how European institutional communication has been conducted during the first year following the onset of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, focusing on the publications of various EU institutions on this issue on the social network X, namely, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Given that it is a relatively recent event, little has been written about communication strategies from the perspective of this war at the heart of the European continent (Vahdat-Nejad et al. 2023; Benabid 2022; Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024). There are numerous previous studies on European affairs, organisational communication, polarisation, new wars, and crisis communication, but it is indisputable that—using previously designed methodologies and building on a solid theoretical framework—new relevant conclusions can be drawn regarding the narratives constructed around Russia, Ukraine, and, ultimately, the future that awaits the EU.

The threat of disinformation and Eurosceptic arguments, which give rise to the so-called euromyths, have compelled institutions to adopt alternative strategies to engage with the citizenry through their communication policies. This post-truth era (Valadier 2017; Sánchez-Illán 2021; Thompson 2020) has also led to the so-called hybrid wars, as a consequence of foreign interference in a turbulent geopolitical landscape. These occur especially during democratic processes such as electoral processes (Bennett et al. 2017), but also in critical cases such as the one at hand. Other examples are the subsequent polycrises in the 21st century: refugees, financial, political, and institutional.

The eruption in late February 2022 of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Russian–Ukrainian hostilities, which began in 2014, has resulted in numerous dramatic episodes, both from a humanitarian and informational standpoint. In this context, social media has been inundated with ideological rhetoric and narrative mechanisms, originating from civil society organisations as well as European media and institutions, in their efforts to define their stance within the dialectical battle.

The choice of such a specific timeframe responds to the need to thoroughly analyse the EU's discursive formulas during a significant period, such as the first year of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine (the end of which was not foreseeable at the time of writing this text), according to a series of parameters that will be detailed in the subsequent sections.

2. Literature Review

2.1. European Online Communication: A Shift from Conventional Institutions to the 2.0 Ecosystem

In recent decades, the coverage of European affairs has gained substantial relevance in the public sphere, largely due to the tendency to differentiate between communications originating from respective national governments and those emanating from "Brussels." The latter tends to be associated with negative connotations depending on its convenience and impact; when European policies fail to achieve the desired effect, governments—either directly or indirectly—blame supranational bodies, whereas, when outcomes are favourable, "they tend to claim credit and scarcely acknowledge the support provided by the EU" (Tuñón and Elías 2021). Furthermore, the number of fake news and rumours associated with the European project has exponentially increased in recent years, particularly in response to the management of the COVID-19 crisis, leading to a context of dual pandemics—health and disinformation (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres 2020).

Since the early 2010s, the EU has been a pioneer in addressing institutional communication via the internet and social media, which has materialised in the promotion of the European public space through a bidirectional and unmediated conversation, fos-

tering transparency and streamlining communicative processes that are usually highly bureaucratic, as many successive studies concluded (Morante 2014; Rivas-de-Roca 2019; Lozano 2022b; Sádaba and Salaverría 2023). A certain media-institutional collaboration has already existed in the coverage of European topics, with cases such as Euronews, Euroactiv, Euradio, European Data News Hub or the European Newsroom, although there remains a need for a well-connected and properly coordinated pan-European communication network, as will be explained later on.

In any case, to address the challenges arising from the lack of knowledge and disinformation regarding European matters, it is imperative to tackle issues such as the identity crisis or the branding problem of the EU, which oscillates between its limited visibility in citizens' everyday lives and the negative perception in public opinion fueled by the rise of Eurosceptic populism and resulting in more skepticism as a consequence (Pérez-Curiel 2020; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2023); the EU's deficient communication policy; the limitation of information sources and the 'precarious' coverage of EU affairs in media outlets not based in Brussels; the complexities of multilingualism in communicating relevant information; and some failed media solutions to bring the EU closer to its audience (Tuñón 2017).

Indeed, experts and academics (Bennett et al. 2017; Higgins 2019; Pérez 2022; Tuñón and Bouzas 2023) concur that communication or storytelling remains one of the significant unresolved challenges in constructing a European narrative, or even various European narratives, considering the complex multicultural landscape that Europe is. It is widely regarded that the EU has a "good story, but it fails to narrate it attractively" (Battista et al. 2014). Despite the recent progressive professionalisation of European communication services, thanks to the efforts of international journalists specialising in the EU—who manage a continuous and sometimes overwhelming flow of information across various platforms, such as websites and social media—the goal of delivering a single and clear institutional message remains unachieved (Tuñón 2021b).

Undoubtedly, it must be recognised that different digital environments and tools are crucial for reaching citizens and conveying reliable yet engaging and relatable information. Vilanova (2014) argued a decade ago that EU-related information can no longer be conceived vertically; instead, it is horizontal now. In other words, we are facing a new paradigm in the field of institutional communication, with new formats, audiences, channels, and message formulation mechanisms, oscillating between textual and audiovisual elements (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

As with any new phenomenon, it must be analysed to identify weaknesses and where improvements can be made. Therefore, it is also necessary to promote interaction with various civil society actors to establish synergies that not only contribute to strengthening the European public sphere but also foster public diplomacy and the general image of the EU abroad, especially in times of crisis such as the present (Bennett and Kneuer 2024; Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro 2024). Consequently, the coordinated action of communication offices of EU-affiliated bodies through powerful channels like social media—Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.—or websites is deemed indispensable for connecting with new audiences and engaging them daily in complex issues that concern and affect them (Gleason 2018).

2.1.1. The Role of EU Communication Offices in the Digital Era

Nowadays, information has ceased to be a mere communicative instrument and has transformed into a product with inherent value, both symbolically and corporately. In light of this reality, public institutions must also respond accordingly. Hence, for years, the EU as a whole, and not just its Member States, has been striving to bring the administration closer to citizens. Communication offices are a fundamental tool for this.

Although the internet has not completely altered the dynamics of their work, it is gradually changing the daily relationship between communication offices and the media. In the very beginning of digital communication strategies' development, the internet offers

communicators the possibility to address their audiences without exclusively relying on traditional communication channels. Communication offices can now interact and convey messages to journalists and citizens through the web (Canel and Sanders 2012).

This has led to the emergence of online communication offices, which transmit messages to citizens more directly (although the mediation role of platforms is still there) by establishing links with them, allowing the users to interact with the content they publish and the messages they share through comments, likes or reposts, for example. By using social media, Rodríguez-Guillén (2013, p. 23) notes that "any receiver can select, decode, and transform information to disseminate it from their virtual space to other receivers, as if it were a media outlet."

In this regard, European authorities have decided to keep citizens properly informed about decisions made at the community level (Kent 2013; Clark 2014). This measure arises from the recognition of the existing gap between the EU and its citizens. This gap is considered a significant obstacle to the proper development of a supranational entity that, in many cases, remains largely invisible and even incomprehensible to a significant portion of its population. The use of a new pseudo-mediated digital space "offers the possibility of developing new communicative processes, or simply transferring the traditional ones to the new instrument or communication channel" (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013, p. 33).

Institutional communication is experiencing its golden age thanks to platforms like Twitter, where users follow political events and foster debate through continuous interactions with other social network users, mentioning and referencing politicians' accounts (Jiménez-Alcarria and Tuñón-Navarro 2023; Barisione and Michailidou 2017). According to Freelon and Karpf (2015), "Twitter facilitates the judgement of decisive moments in political debates and actions." This characteristic demonstrates a shift towards a more participatory culture among receivers, enabled by new technological tools. From the perspective of cyberdemocracy, studies such as Sierra's (2012) demonstrate that new online communication formulas "offer unexplored possibilities for decentralised governance, cultural and socio-economic enhancement and development".

However, organisational communication does not follow similar premises in all contexts. In practice, "the use of Twitter presents uneven adoption across different countries and communities, with Spaniards and Italians being the most active users compared to Germans and Belgians" (Scherpereel et al. 2016, p. 1222). As previously mentioned, the proliferation of social media plays a decisive role in content production and message transmission between senders and receivers (Duggan 2015; Quan-Haase and Sloan 2017). Although Twitter is still far from surpassing Facebook as the social network with the most global users (Duggan 2015), its characteristics have made it the preferred platform for political debate and communication, as well as for social and scientific research in these fields (Tuñón and Carral 2019).

2.1.2. Dynamics and Strategies of European Institutions on Social Media

The European Parliament was the first institution to address the existing information deficit, followed by the European Commission. Both institutions swiftly took action, in theory and practice, to remove the barriers between the supranational organisation and its citizens and to promote a sense of European identity among the public. This gave rise to what is known as the Europe of Information, where information and communication are used as essential tools to foster a sense of belonging to a supranational entity and to generate a European consciousness, giving rise to the so-called *Homo Europeus.*

The apathy shown by citizens towards European political activity seems to reflect the general disinterest in politics, as participation in national elections in different countries does not differ significantly from participation in European elections. However, according to this same author, the EU's information and communication policy is yielding results, largely due to the implementation of new technologies in this field.

In disseminating a message to EU citizens, institutions must consider the inherent difficulty in ensuring that the message has a uniform impact across Europe. This is primarily

due to the cultural diversity existing within the Member States. As Rodríguez-Guillén (2013, p. 101) explains, while some institutions have more intensively used social media, it is essential that all of them continue to foster an increasingly active presence in this area. The four institutions face a new horizon through which they can develop tools that allow them to evolve into an online cabinet 2.0 or even 3.0, thereby promoting interaction and proximity with European citizens (Bennett et al. 2017; Hänska and Bauchowitz 2019; Gleason 2018).

In summary, it is crucial that the EU's communication policy adjusts its guidelines to incorporate emerging technological methodologies, particularly social media (García-Gordillo et al. 2023; Kent 2013). Furthermore, although academic research in the field of public relations and organisational communication is limited, especially concerning government information, some conceptual perspectives could be applied fruitfully.

According to Canel and Sanders (2012, p. 93), concepts such as "branding," "reputation," and "symmetrical communication" could be valuable and essential tools in the search for alternatives to current institutional communication and information policies in Europe. If the EU seeks to become closer to European citizens, its institutions must continue to evolve in the same direction, "achieving greater interaction through the online 2.0 office" (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013, p. 101).

Based on the analysis of various legislative documents on communication policy, authors such as Rodríguez-Guillén (2013) conclude that EU institutions have sought to change their communicative approach. They have transitioned from a highly institutionalised communication style focused merely on the transmission of information to a more interactive communication approach that allows for a two-way dialogue between citizens and institutions (Fazekas et al. 2021). The objective is "to achieve more coherent and integrated communication that is accessible to citizens and promotes an associative approach" (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013, p. 62). This involves strengthening ties not only among local, regional, national, and European authorities but also among citizen associations.

Communication policy must be well-defined and integrated, and efforts must be made to reach not only the media but also citizens and other organisations, including companies and civil organisations. Between 2004 and 2014, the Barroso Commissions aligned themselves with the aforementioned generic policies and renewed the call for cooperation, both internally within the Commission and interinstitutionally, as explained in the report *Communicating Europe to citizens and media*.

The communication team of the European Parliament acknowledges the importance of finding a balance between presenting topics that are of interest to the media and those that are strategic for the institution (Canel and Sanders 2012). Authors such as Olsson and Hammargård (2016) conclude that the European Commission has room for improvement in its social media communication strategy, particularly through greater involvement from directorates-general, directors-general, and institutional staff. This would help convey a closer and more dynamic image. On the other hand, the European Parliament stands out as the institution that has best adapted its communication to social media, although it must continue to make progress in areas such as tone and multimedia content. Additionally, it is deemed essential for the Council to continue its communication policies but with greater coordination and increased visibility online. This entails, to begin with, a more active presence on social media (Kent 2013).

2.2. Hybrid Warfare: Between Conflict and Disinformation

Hybrid threats constitute one of today's significant challenges across various domains. Consequently, they have become integral to the official documents and security strategies of many states. Both the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have taken serious measures to counteract activities related to these hybrid threats. Although their definition remains flexible to accommodate their volatile nature (Colom-Piella 2014), for the EU, the concept of hybrid warfare, or "asymmetric warfare," aims to capture "the mix of coercive and subversive activities, conventional and unconventional methods—diplomatic,

military, economic, technological—that can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives just below the threshold of formally declared war" (European Commission 2016, p. 2).

However, as Lesaca (2018) asserts, digital and communicative disruption has solidified as an effective weapon of war, which needs to be defined and identified as a distinct discipline from offensives and cyber-attacks. Disinformation campaigns thus fall within the scope of hybrid warfare and involve the design and dissemination of rhetorical mechanisms aimed at generating influence through social media, as well as progressively manipulating public perception with false or misleading information (Patel et al. 2020). From this perspective and framework, disinformation campaigns affect various closely linked domains—a total of 13, as identified by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, including the cyber, social, political, administrative, and cultural domains (Arcos and Smith 2021).

While NATO acknowledges that deception has served military interests since time immemorial, its influence has exponentially increased to become a key element of modern hybrid warfare, facilitated by the speed and intensity of communication enabled by the Internet. Deception is an illegal practice in peacetime but a legal means of warfare. This contradictory division exists only in theoretical terms, as contemporary hybrid wars unfold in a blurred and complex territory where being at war or not is a matter of nuances, as noted by Suárez-Serrano (2020).

The two world wars turned the media—gradually including the press, radio, and television—and public opinion into international actors capable of influencing the outcome of armed conflicts. Since then, the success of military operations has depended almost as much on the management of public opinion as on the work of armies on the ground. In fact, the European Parliament refers to this process as "information warfare," asserting that it is a historical phenomenon as old as war itself, although its categorisation did not become widespread until the 20th century, during the Cold War.

Currently, asymmetric warfare involves "a powerful propaganda machinery and massive information operations through alternative channels" (Colom-Piella 2014, p. 13). Castells (2009) considers that the main communicative change at the beginning of the 21st century was the advent of what he defines as "mass self-communication media."

Castells' reflections suggest that communication has altered how elite power functions, as the Internet has made it accessible for anyone to speak on whatever they consider important. In this sense, digital social communication platforms and digital marketing techniques "have reconfigured the way public opinion is created and have altered the roles traditionally assigned to political and administrative institutions, media, and citizens" (Lesaca 2018, p. 166). In other words, the triangular relationship between the main communication agents has been modified.

The same author argues that, since humans make decisions based on their frames—processes of constructing reality through meanings and interpretations of the world—and the information available through symbolic interpersonal interactions and various media, information can be deliberately used for malign activities that produce cognitive, affective, and behavioural effects.

Due to the systematic prohibition of violence in international relations following the promulgation of the United Nations Charter, the use of the term "war" is generally avoided. Instead, euphemisms with more diffuse and incomplete connotations, such as "conflict" and, more specifically, "armed conflict" or "military conflict" are employed (Herráez 2016).

Thus, our digital communication environment and the social tools we use daily for legitimate purposes are also being exploited by hostile authoritarian actors and/or their representatives on a scale that has even interfered with democratic processes, such as in the case of interference in various elections. Almost imperceptibly, they erode trust in institutions, polarise society, and generate animosities between states and their international partners (Arcos and Smith 2021; Kelly 2022; Bennett and Kneuer 2024).

One of the primary hybrid strategies involves the dissemination of disinformation by external or internal actors through the aforementioned ad hoc campaigns (Bennett et al. 2017; Tuñón 2021a). In the field of institutional and political communication, fake news is integrated into orchestrated plans that use technology and artificial intelligence to craft segmented messages that progressively manipulate discourse through propaganda techniques.

Specifically, "computational propaganda" refers to "a set of practices executed by computer programs to persuade people of the merits of ideas, individuals, or initiatives on social networks and other digital platforms" (Redondo 2017). Its articulation, Rodríguez-Fernández (2019) asserts, has become widespread in recent years, pushing governments to develop specialised teams to counter the strategies of so-called professional cyber troops.

2.2.1. The Era of Post-Truth and Disinformation in Europe

In the era of "information disorder" (Bennett and Livingston 2018), social media has decentralised the production of information, deconstructing and reconfiguring the concepts of truth and objectivity (Alonso-González 2021). Today, numerous information dissemination channels converge, with social media standing out as platforms that "self-distribute" informational content (Castells 2009). Thus, audiences themselves decide what to consume and how to do so, assuming a role traditionally held by the mainstream media, creating an environment of informational overabundance (Keane 2013).

However, social media has also become the public space where fake news is most widely disseminated (Vázquez and Pulido 2020; Pérez-Curiel 2020), serving as the breeding ground for the proliferation of fabricated news, graphic manipulations, conspiracy theories, and intentionally decontextualised content (Salaverría et al. 2020). People have seen a multiplication of the messages they receive daily, yet many of these messages are false, "either due to the non-deliberate spread of erroneous content or as a result of the premeditated dissemination of intentionally misleading messages" (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023, p. 18). In response, recent research highlights that the ecosystem surrounding these platforms exacerbates the adverse effects of disinformation, extending its reach (Lelo and Fígaro 2021; Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

In this context, Elías (2021) argues that the novelty of digital platforms lies in their design, which exploits the cognitive biases of the public, being based on algorithms that determine what is visible and what is not, thus facilitating the manipulation of public opinion. These mechanisms disseminate disinformative content to those audiences most susceptible to trusting and sharing it, owing to their strong belief systems. In other words, the potential of social media to spread disinformation increases its social relevance while solidifying its role as a primary source of information (Gottfried and Shearer 2016), particularly today, when public opinion is increasingly polarised (Lewandowsky et al. 2017).

Experts such as Casero-Ripollés et al. (2023) suggest that a reformulation of the pan-European journalistic model would be pertinent, given that we live in a reality marked by disinformation, fake news, and other hybrid threats. As Duch-Guillot (2021, p. 159) emphasises, disinformation is countered with information, "but information cannot come directly from an institution, a government, or a parliament. It must always come through quality media."

Fake news is as alarming as the lack of information, for it is in ignorance that falsehoods find fertile ground to proliferate. Both disinformation and ignorance have been major challenges for EU communication since the 1980s (Grill and Boomgaarden 2017).

Numerous initiatives and legislative tools at the European level aim to ensure that people can participate in a truly democratic system through free and informed decision-making without interference and illegal manipulation, such as interference or conspiratorial currents (Bennett and Kneuer 2024). Sánchez-Illán (2021, p. 144) notes that intentionality and planning are key in what could be termed a new "disinformation ecosystem," where falsehoods "have become mass dissemination artefacts through the all-powerful social networks." Political unrest and polarisation contribute to the manipulation of the masses

through new information and communication technologies, "which now serve, more effectively than ever, the always effective appeal to emotion rather than reason, in line with Goebbels' established doctrines" (ibid., p. 145).

We are, ultimately, living in the full era of post-truth, a concept as reiterated as it is ambiguous. Post-truth or emotional lies is a relatively recent term defined by some authors (Tuñón and Elías 2021; Sánchez-Illán 2021; Kelly 2022; Rivas-de-Roca 2020) as an intentional distortion of reality, where objective facts have less impact than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs. Its goal is to shape public opinion and influence social attitudes.

The Brexit referendum, for instance, was the result of decades of media coverage with an exclusionary and sensationalist focus, portraying the Brussels elite as a threat to the sovereignty and economic prosperity of the United Kingdom (Tuñón 2021a). This anti-European disinformation campaign was considered one of the longest in contemporary history, dating back to the late 1970s, and its translation to other countries embracing EU secession could only be combated with a responsible press "that does not belong to monopolies, is not distorted by political power, or does not fall into journalistic populism in search of clicks" (Duch-Guillot 2021, p. 161).

Faced with the growing problem of disinformation, European public authorities have adopted a dual approach. On the one hand, they have implemented legal measures to establish a stronger legal framework to address the intentional dissemination of disinformative content (Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro 2024). Through this more defined and stringent legal framework, the goal is to create a safe environment in which digital platforms assume their corresponding responsibilities (Higgins 2019; Bennett et al. 2017).

In 2018, the European Commission promoted the creation of an independent high-level group, composed of forty professionals representing social networks and technology companies, fact-checkers, media, academics, and civil society members, tasked with drafting the Report of the Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (European Commission 2018b). From a European institutional perspective, this group was charged with "defining and quantifying disinformation, as well as studying possible legal mechanisms and countermeasures to combat it" (Tuñón et al. 2019, p. 247).

Although this report was non-binding, it had a significant impact on a subsequent communication from the European Commission titled "Tackling Online Disinformation" (European Commission 2018a). In it, the creation of a more transparent, reliable, and accountable online ecosystem was proposed based on a code of good practice, among other measures (Higgins 2019). Appropriately, in December 2020, the European Commission published a proposal for a Digital Services Act that defines a clearer framework for transparency and "accountability for online platforms tailored to their role, size, and respective impact in the online ecosystem," as a response to emerging digital risks (European Commission 2020).

On the other hand, a model of shared responsibility has been promoted, wherein citizens are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to face the threat of disinformation. Launched in December 2020 following the development of the proposal on digital services, the European Democracy Action Plan was conceived to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU. This model promotes active citizenship capable of evaluating the quality of information received and massively shared on social networks, as agreed by Sádaba and Salaverría (2023, p. 27). In conclusion, the EU is progressively consolidating a model of combating disinformation based on a multi-level set of solutions.

2.2.2. The Importance of Communication in Times of Crisis: The Russian–Ukrainian Case

Researchers such as Herráez (2016, p. 305) argue that "it is sufficient to analyse those military milestones regarded as manifestations of hybrid warfare, such as the case of Daesh and its actions in Syria and Iraq or Russia's interventions in Ukraine" to understand that the scope of new conflict paradigms is vast. The case of the Islamic State exemplifies the effective adaptation of "mythological narratives" to the new digital informational context,

integrated by various communicative agents (Lesaca 2018). Consequently, asymmetric wars often present actors, actions, and situations that differ significantly from one another.

Kasapoglu (2015) suggests that Russia's new hybrid warfare techniques began to be applied in 2008 with the war between Russia and Georgia, although they gained particular prominence with the Euromaidan mobilisations in Ukraine and during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014. This assertion is supported by Davis (2015), who contends that since 2008, Russian media have employed distinct narrative strategies aimed at different audience segments: some aimed at garnering international support for Russia's attempts to achieve a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Ukraine, and others targeted at internal and pro-Russian audiences within the country, promoting sentiments of nationalism and victimhood using ideological resources such as "otherness."

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence acknowledges in a report prepared in 2014 that Russia "has demonstrated its willingness to modernise Soviet-era tools and adapt them to the complex current informational environment." This NATO report also considers that information and communication campaigns were central to Kremlin operations in Ukraine.

Indeed, the systematic use of disinformation within strategic narratives has led the European Commission to classify them as "a serious threat to institutional integrity and democratic life, and consequently, to intensify its focus and fight against them" (Tuñón and Bouzas 2023). The exposure of European citizens to continuous disinformation practices represents a significant challenge.

In this context, the European Commission had already highlighted in 2018 how a range of national and third-country actors were using mass dissemination of falsehoods to increase distrust and create social tensions, which could severely undermine our online security It also stated that actions by these external actors—specifically pointing to Russia—could pose hybrid threats to internal security, particularly if combined with cyberattacks (Tuñón and Elías 2021).

In this regard, a report of activities developed by the European Commission (2019) reflects that, during the weeks leading up to the European elections that year, there were deliberate attempts to undermine the credibility of the European Parliament, encourage voter abstention, and provoke voter radicalisation (De Miguel 2019). Gullo and Tuñón (2009) conclude that Russia is behind most false or misleading information related to the EU, tactics used to destabilise the European project in favour of Russian geopolitical interests. The most recent example is the ongoing situation between Russia and Ukraine, where numerous disinforming rhetorical mechanisms have been detected as an alternative weapons of war (Tasente et al. 2023).

In this regard, the EU's interest in disinformation has led to a particular concern regarding the vulnerability of democracies and the European project to manipulation by foreign powers, specifically the Russian Federation. The key actor in developing this perspective has been the European External Action Service (EEAS), whose initial intervention was informal, involving the development of the East StratCom Team and the EU vs Disinformation campaign in 2015. This communication team collaborates with fact-checkers and foundations to expose the dissemination of false news by Russia in the Eastern states of the EU's neighbourhood policy (Tuñón et al. 2019; Tasente et al. 2023).

On the other hand, the 2020 health pandemic, as a historical moment of crisis, also posed a challenge for the EU in terms of combating hybrid disinformation strategies. Numerous community initiatives were thus proposed to strengthen the defence against "sharp power" threats from certain countries intending to create an atmosphere of confusion and cynicism in which so many different narratives existed that distinguishing truth from falsehood became impossible (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres 2020; Tuñón and Elías 2021; Bennett and Kneuer 2024).

Crisis situations have always been interpreted within the European narrative as the ideal moment to oscillate between action and reaction. García-Campos (2017, p. 23) points out that there is a kind of "crisis-stimulus" correlation, understood "either as a reaction by

states in times of political or economic instability, or as a response to external threats that challenge internal stability, generating incentives and opportunities for greater integration."

Majone (2014, p. 217) summarises this in the "bicycle theory," according to which "the process must keep moving forward, especially in times of crisis, to prevent the bicycle from falling." This author considers that the European discourse is accompanied by an integrative dialectic, whereby a period of stability is followed by one of conflict "whose resolution results in the strengthening of institutions and/or community policies" (ibid.). This assertion seems to be true, in that the whirlpool of polycrises that have engulfed Europe in the last decade, such as the euro crisis, the refugee migration crisis, or Brexit—is remedied with more European solidarity, not less, but also with greater coordination among member states, not less (García-Campos 2017).

In the face of such a scenario of communicative disruption in the digital age, international institutions and bodies must direct their efforts towards developing strategic crisis communication plans that meet current demands. The gradual replacement of traditional nation-states by models of "virtual states" constitutes, according to Lesaca (2018), the ideal environment for the emergence of new power actors who, in most cases, do not prioritise the respect for democratic rights and freedoms of citizens.

Therefore, if hybrid conflict unfolds concurrently on the battlefield and in social media timelines such as Twitter or Facebook, supranational organisations and the media must be present to launch an offensive that protects citizens' right to accurate information and, consequently, safeguards public interests.

3. Materials and Methods

In this section, the research objectives and hypotheses, along with the successive stages that constitute the research itinerary, will be explained. Given the study's subject matter and the work's purpose, it has been decided to primarily employ the quantitative technique of content analysis, supplemented by the additional qualitative technique of in-depth interviews. The development of the previous state-of-the-art and theoretical framework of the study has been made possible through meticulous prior literature review efforts, which have, therefore, involved the development of the critical literature analysis technique.

3.1. Research Objectives

The general objective of this research, given its descriptive nature, is to analyse European storytelling on social media during times of international conflict and hybrid wars, as well as its capacity to generate relevant conversations among the various actors that shape public opinion. To this end, the specific case study of the Russian–Ukrainian war will be examined through the X publications of four EU institutions.

Thus, a series of aspects (variables) related to the form, content, and reach of the tweets will be analysed to subsequently determine whether the EU institutions act in a coordinated manner during crises and conflicts, employing a uniform tone and language or, conversely, develop divergent communication plans on key points.

3.2. Hypotheses

According to the objectives described and as previously outlined, the following five hypotheses are proposed as the starting point for this research:

H1. *EU institutions favour a politico-symbolic narrative over an administrative-procedural narrative regarding the ongoing international conflict.*

H2. *The fight against disinformation and the promotion of citizens' literacy in European affairs play a crucial role in the conception of communication strategies on social media by EU institutions during times of hybrid wars.*

H3. *EU institutions' posts on X concerning the Russian–Ukrainian war adopt a highly professionalised audiovisual format.*

H4. *The communication of European institutions primarily consists of interpersonal interactions with international bodies and leaders in their posts but only establishes a digitally intermediated relationship with media outlets, academics, or civil society organisations in very specific instances.*

H5. *The posts on the official accounts of the EU institutions achieve high levels of engagement, considering their large number of followers.*

3.3. Analysis Development

Following previous studies in political and/or organisational communication (Wolter et al. 2017; Giglietto and Selva 2014; Hoffman and Fodor 2010; Niciporuc 2014; Congosto 2015; Calvo et al. 2017; Marcos-García 2018; Tuñón and Carral 2019, among others) that pursued similar objectives, the tweet or post on X was selected as the primary unit of analysis. After all, it is content analysis that underpins the core of this research. Each tweet published by the official account of a European institution or representative aims to engage with a niche audience (followers) or a potential audience (prospective followers). Simultaneously, each tweet can also be analysed using a series of parameters that allow for a detailed study of its form and content.

3.3.1. Selection Criteria

When selecting the X accounts to be studied, it was deemed essential to include in the corpus three of the quintessential community institutions: the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council. These institutions form the backbone of the European institutional framework and the core of the communication strategy from Brussels. The Council of the EU was excluded from the selection due to its rotating presidency, which means that it does not communicate with the public through a single account on this social network but rather changes channels periodically, depending on the country leading the Council each semester.

Moreover, the Court of Justice of the EU, the European Central Bank, and the European Court of Auditors were excluded, as these institutions primarily focus on legal or economic matters. Instead, the European External Action Service (EEAS) was included, a body based in Brussels with offices worldwide that constitutes the EU's diplomatic service. Although not a community institution per se, it is equivalent to the Union's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, playing a crucial role in foreign policy and having been actively involved in covering the Russian–Ukraine conflict from the perspective of organisational communication.

Regarding the sample, 886 posts from four official EU accounts on X will be analysed. The main objective is to establish a comparison between the communication approaches adopted in the digital environment by the community institutions in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the analysis will explore whether these rhetorics converge or diverge in essence from those of other EU institutions.

3.3.2. Procedure for the Execution of Content Analysis

To conduct the content analysis of tweets published on the selected accounts within the designated period, a coding scheme has been developed based on a series of analytical variables. These variables, to be subsequently detailed, were chosen from those employed in prior descriptive studies on political and organisational communication on social media, specifically X, such as those by Tuñón and López (2022), Montes-Sáez (2021), Carral and Tuñón (2020), Tuñón and Bouzas (2023), and Jiménez-Alcarria (2021).

Firstly, tweets corresponding to the study period (a full year) were automatically downloaded using the T-Hoarder tool, which combines the REST, Search, and Streaming APIs of Twitter (Congosto et al. 2017). As Magallón-Rosa (2019, p. 235) describes, T-Hoarder operates "through a methodology known as t-hoarder_kit, an open-source tool used since

2012, and which meets the requirements of objectivity, transparency, and knowledge-sharing." The download of tweets allows for the retrieval of information such as the date and time of publication, tweet content, link to the tweet, number of followers, language, retweets, and likes (Magallón-Rosa 2018).

Additionally, the use of the Twitonomy tool has proven valuable in gaining an overview of the general usage trends of the selected X accounts during the research time-frame: how many tweets are posted on average per day and month, how many users are mentioned, how many retweets and "likes" are given and received, how many hashtags and links are included, etc.

Once the data was downloaded and imported into a spreadsheet, it was cleaned and corrected to obtain the desired sample and proceed to coding. The fundamental filtering parameters were that the tweets were published in English, thus favouring the international scope of the research since it remains the principal working language of European institutions even after Brexit (Basurto and Domínguez 2021). Furthermore, the tweet copy or text had to include at least one, if not several, of the following key terms:

- Ukraine
- Russia
- Ukraine's
- Russia's
- Ukrainian
- Russian
- Ukrainians
- Russians
- Kyiv
- Kremlin
- Kiev
- Putin
- Zelensky
- Zelenski
- Poland
- Hungary
- Mariupol
- Donetsk
- Luhansk

These terms were selected based on their relevance after conducting a superficial examination of a sample equivalent to 10% of the total number of tweets in the dataset. This preliminary study confirmed the frequent use of these words when the tweet content addressed topics related to the situation between Russia and Ukraine.

Finally, the coding, analysis, and extraction of results (tables and figures) were conducted using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics.

3.3.3. Single-Case Study Analysis

This research adopts a single-case study analysis (X posts concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine) by applying a set of variables to eight study objects or sub-cases, namely, the official accounts of EU institutions.

According to Landman (2003), a single-case study is considered comparative if it employs concepts applicable to multiple study objects, develops concepts relevant to multiple study objects, and/or aims to make broader inferences. It is important to acknowledge that the inferences drawn from single-case studies are necessarily less robust than those drawn from comparisons of multiple or many study objects. Nonetheless, these analyses are valuable for examining a range of comparative issues. Moreover, single-case studies provide contextual descriptions, develop new classifications, generate hypotheses, confirm or refute theories, and help explain deviations identified through comparison with other previous or subsequent cases.

One of the objectives of comparison is contextual description. Single-case studies that solely describe or interpret political phenomena have been referred to by various terms: "theoretical" and "interpretative" (Lijphart 1971, p. 691) or "configurative-ideographic" (Eckstein 1975, p. 96). Strictly speaking, such studies are not comparative, but they are useful for comparison because of the amount of information they provide directly and indirectly. Thus, single-case studies that provide new classifications are indeed useful for comparison, as they are highly practical for generating hypotheses for theories that have not yet been fully specified. As "plausibility probes" (Eckstein 1975, p. 108), they suggest that the generated hypothesis should be tested on a broader sample, either explicitly or implicitly.

As previously noted, these single-case studies do not prove or refute a theory but merely confirm or disconfirm its applicability to other study objects. In fact, deviating objects are particularly useful for theory generation, as such deviation invites further investigation into overlooked alternative explanations and necessitates reevaluating how the study's key variables were originally operationalised.

3.4. Research Variables and Categories

To operationalise the aforementioned hypotheses through the quantitative technique of content analysis, the variables shown in Table 1 have been established.

Table 1. Classification of variables studied to operationalise the hypotheses of the research. Self-elaboration.

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Control Variables
Digital Communication of European Institutions on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on X @EU_Commission @Europarl_EN @EUCouncil @eu_eeas	Narrative level in tweets about the Russia–Ukraine conflict	Predominant topic Keywords (Hashtags) Purpose
	Interaction level in tweets about the Russia–Ukraine conflict	Formal and hypertextual strategies Mentions Quotations
	Engagement level in tweets about the Russia–Ukraine conflict	Retweets/RT Likes Quoted tweets

All of the variables are nominal, as they involve a distinction between different categories without defining any specific order among them.

The dependent variable of the narrative level primarily refers to the narrative and persuasive elements deduced from the analysed tweet content, hence the selected indicator variables. As for the interaction level, this research will focus on the hypertextual elements used in tweet composition—which largely constitute its format and content—as well as mentions and quotations of other accounts belonging to actors within the international community.

Both dimensions—the narrative and interactive—along with the level of engagement, form the basic foundations of any institutional communication strategy via an X account. In this regard, the level of audience engagement is measured by the number of retweets, likes, and quoted tweets each post had at the time the sample was analysed. Quoted tweets (tweets that add a comment to the original post) replace the subvariable or control variable "Comments" used in other social media studies. This decision was made because, due to recent changes on X, it was deemed impossible to count them automatically, and manual counting was consistently inaccurate. In any case, this technique was effectively employed in research such as Jiménez-Alcarria and Tuñón-Navarro (2023) and Scherpereel et al. (2016).

Therefore, the code (extensively detailed in Appendix A) was designed with dependent variables and detailed categories to systematise the execution of the tweet content analysis.

The categories established for coding each of the variables have been appropriately defined following methodological criteria of exclusion, exhaustiveness, homogeneity, relevance, clarity, and productivity.

3.5. In-Depth Interviews

Additionally, as a secondary technique, in-depth interviews were conducted with specialists in European affairs communication and public opinion. These interviews were carried out after reviewing the literature and applying the quantitative content analysis method, aiming to corroborate the research findings and provide supplementary insights to the factual data obtained through the other techniques. Consequently, quotes and extracts from these interviews are predominantly included in the "Discussion" and "Conclusions" sections, using INT plus an ID number assigned to each interviewee.

This procedure has allowed for methodological triangulation in the research, incorporating contextual information of interest to enhance the understanding of the subject matter through a holistic perspective. The interview method is considered effective for gathering expert opinions and perspectives on emerging phenomena (Tracy 2013), thereby broadening knowledge on the subject or providing additional context to the study.

Consistent with previous studies on communication and disinformation within the EU context, these interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questions were framed according to organisational and practical criteria recommended by other scholars (Campos-Domínguez et al. 2021; Hernández-Sampieri et al. 2010). To improve interaction and conversational experience, efforts were made to conduct these interviews in person, where possible, or otherwise via telematic means.

Some researchers assert that the interview is the qualitative research technique that grants participants the greatest freedom during interaction. This allows the interviewer to obtain responses through an informal conversational climate, avoiding the rigidity of a standardised form. Thus, it creates a comprehensive human encounter between the interviewer and the informants (Sanmartín-Arce 2000), resembling spontaneous verbal interaction (Gaitán and Piñuel 1998).

The eight interviewees (whose profiles are described in Appendix B and identified with ID codes along the article) are professionals specialising in various fields that intersect with the subject of this research. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed using Trint Advanced online software (for interviews conducted in English) and a programming code based on voice recognition technologies (for interviews conducted in Spanish). This code enabled the processing of audio files and utilised advanced algorithms to automatically convert spoken content into written text, thereby saving the researcher time and effort by facilitating the analysis and search for specific information within the transcriptions.

4. Results

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, and the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

4.1. European Commission (@EU_Commission)

The European Commission's profile exhibits the highest frequency of posts during the analysed period, with a total of 344 tweets, accounting for 23% of the total sample. The potential reach of these tweets is further enhanced by the account's significant follower base, exceeding 1.8 million. In this regard, INT-3 notes that the European Commission aims not only to engage with the existing social media audience but also to attract a broader one: "In a crisis like the one we are currently experiencing, it is crucial to monitor the topics of conversation, identify trends, and diversify our presence across all possible channels within the social ecosystem: X, LinkedIn, Telegram, Mastodon. . . We strive to convey a

consistent political message across all platforms, in line with the actions of the Parliament and the Council."

4.1.1. Narration Level

At the narrative level, regarding predominant thematic areas, the campaign to support Ukraine ranks first among the European Commission's posts during the studied period, comprising over a quarter of the sample (25.5%). Following this, in second and third place are tweets addressing issues stemming from the energy crisis (17.4%) and those explaining the actions taken to sanction Russia (13.9%). Topics such as disinformation or the displacement of the Ukrainian population receive considerably less coverage from the institution, with less than 5% of the posts.

In this regard, to reinforce the thematic focus of the posts, various aspects of tone and form have been employed, most notably the evident use of common hashtags or tags. Nearly half of the tweets include hashtags that express solidarity with Ukraine (43.8%), such as #StandwithUkraine, #EUSolidarity, #WithUkraine, or #SlavaUkraini. In contrast, 33.6% do not include any hashtags in the text of the post. In third place are hashtags referring to the energy crisis (9%), with #LightUpEurope being the most prominent.

Concerning the intended purpose or function of the coded sample, out of the 344 posts from the European Commission, 152 are aimed at providing conclusions on measures taken by the European executive to address the consequences of the conflict (44.1%). As shown in Figure 1, in second position are posts that aim to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people through the promotion of symbolic acts, such as artistic displays or the projection of the Ukrainian flag on the façades of Commission buildings, as well as those whose primary function is to call for action from society and/or other institutions regarding a specific issue (11.9%). In third place, we find tweets intended to openly condemn the actions of the Kremlin (10.4%), often with explicit mention of Putin and the Russian army.

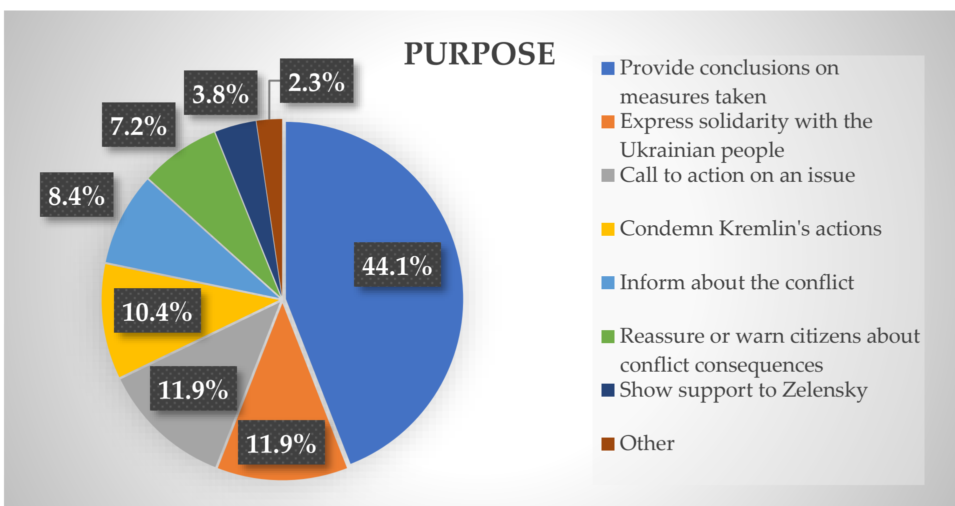

Figure 1. Purpose or function attributed to the tweets published by the official account of the European Commission, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

4.1.2. Interaction Level

On the other hand, focusing on the level of interaction, the format adopted by more than half of the European Commission's tweets (53.6%) is predominantly text combined with a link to its own website or social media channels, along with other multimedia elements that enhance the post. Audiovisual formats also prevail, representing more than 40% of the sample: 23.2% of the posts on X include images, infographics, or animated GIFs, while 18.6% incorporate videos or audio clips of varying lengths.

Regarding mentions of other accounts to foster conversation between political and civil society actors, a significant percentage (66.7%) of the tweets do not include any reference

to external profiles. In distant second and third positions are mentions of other European institutions or leaders (17.1%)—such as the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen—with the aim of mutual engagement, as well as references to political representatives from countries beyond the Member States (7.5%).

In the same vein of interaction, quotations were also considered, specifically those tweets that quote their own account or external accounts, adding additional text to comment on the original post. A significant portion of the sample (73.9%) does not follow this pattern, indicating that the Commission generally does not share prior content on this social network. The remaining 26% consists of tweets quoting other institutions or EU leaders (25.8%), with a negligible 0.3% referring to other political leaders.

4.1.3. Engagement Level

Concerning the level of engagement, it is important to consider the retweets, likes, and quoted tweets associated with the European Commission's posts on topics related to the conflict. Regarding Figure 2, more than half of the tweets garnered fewer than a hundred reposts, with 49.3% receiving between 26 and 100 retweets, 21.4% exceeding this range and reaching up to 200, and 10.4% reaching up to 300. Notably, 7.2% of the posts achieved over 500 retweets, which is a remarkably high level of engagement.

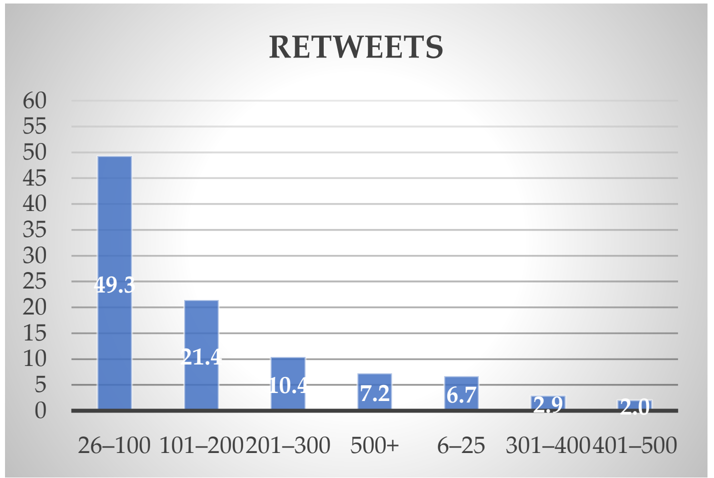

Figure 2. Retweets on posts published by the European Commission, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

However, followers are more inclined to interact through likes. Almost 30% of the tweets received over half a thousand likes, while a significant proportion (22.3%) did not surpass 200. Approximately 16% of the posts garnered between 201 and 300 likes.

Finally, in terms of comments on the Commission's posts, engagement is measured through the count and percentage calculation of quoted tweets (original tweets with additional commentary). Over 50% of the tweets received between 6 and 25 quotes, 20% received between 26 and 100, and 18% had between 1 and 5 quoted tweets, representing a minimal percentage.

4.2. European Parliament (@Europarl_EN)

The 111 posts from the main European Parliament account during the studied period represent 8% of the sample. This figure is comparable to the communication output on X by its president, Roberta Metsola. However, the Europarl account boasts over 970,000 followers, double the number of Metsola's followers, yet still falling short of the reach held by its sister institution, the European Commission.

According to INT-2, what sets the European Parliament's communication strategy apart from those of other bodies is the freedom in tone and style, which he considers an advantage: "The Parliament has opened up a bit more to a youthful tone in recent years

because we are now on Instagram, LinkedIn, X, Facebook, and on TikTok, we've been cautioned about Chinese interference, but otherwise, we would exploit it further. We are on all platforms and try to experiment with all formats."

4.2.1. Narration Level

Narratively, the aid campaign for Ukraine once again takes the top spot among the European Parliament's tweets throughout the first year, accounting for more than a quarter of the sample (see Figure 3). Additionally, 20.7% of the posts focus on meetings with international powers or intergovernmental forums where the agenda includes matters related to the conflict. In third place are tweets concerning the escalation of the invasion or attacks on territories in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, such as Poland (13.5%). Other key issues, such as Russian disinformation and propaganda, Ukraine's potential EU membership, or migration movements caused by the war, receive less than 5% of the Parliament's attention.

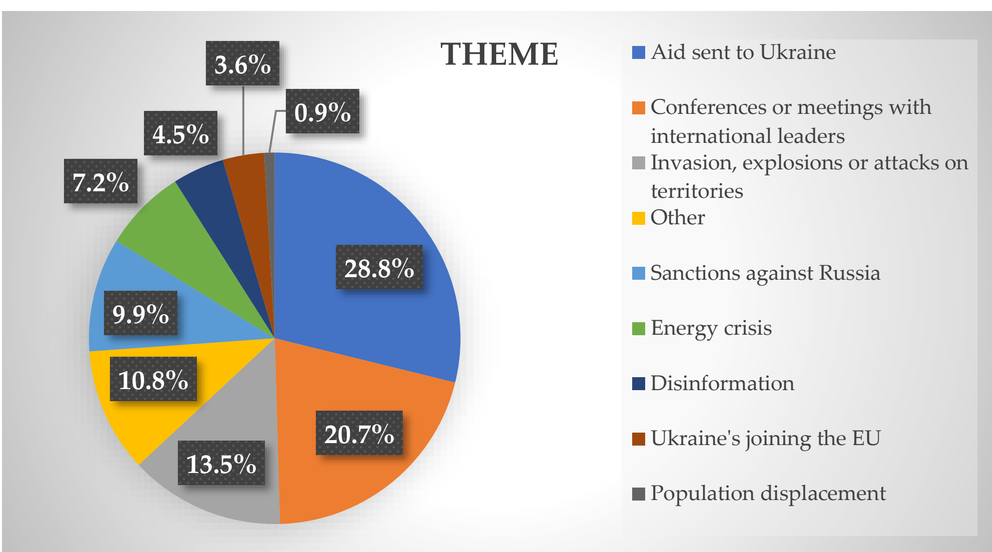

Figure 3. Predominant topics in the tweets published by the official account of the European Parliament, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

Regarding the use of hashtags, more than half of the tweets (52.3%) do not include any in the text. Of the remaining 47.7%, nearly 30% are used to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people, while 11.7% incorporate more general tags about the Russia–Ukraine conflict, such as the names of countries or invaded or attacked cities in English.

In relation to the purpose or attributed function of the coded sample, of the 111 European Parliament posts included in the total sample, 30.6% are aimed at drawing conclusions on measures taken at the European level to mitigate the war's consequences. On the other hand, the second and third most frequent types of posts are those providing information on the conflict's progression (22.5%) and those conveying a message of solidarity with the moral and mortal victims in Ukraine (19.8%).

4.2.2. Interaction Level

Regarding the level of interaction, nearly 40% of the European Parliament's tweets follow a format of text combined with a link to their own website or social media accounts, accompanied by other multimedia elements such as images or videos (see Figure 4). Notably, video emerges as the primary resource in 27% of the Parliament's posts, while images or infographics are relegated to fourth place, behind the basic use of text without any complementary audiovisual resources (15.3%).

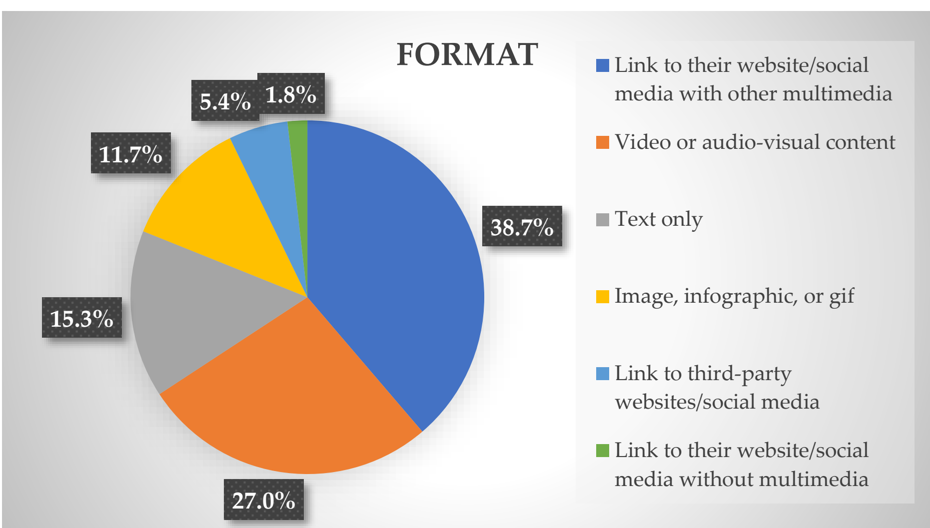

Figure 4. Format of tweets published by the official account of the European Parliament, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

In terms of establishing interaction with other accounts, nearly two-thirds of the sample (62.2%) do not include any mentions of other accounts as part of the tweet. However, 22.5% of the posts refer to other European institutions and representatives, such as the Parliament's President, Roberta Metsola. Mentions of political leaders from countries within and outside the EU make up 12.6% of the sample. Mentions of other actors listed in the coding for this variable are practically nonexistent.

Regarding quotations, more than half of the European Parliament's tweets (specifically 52.3%) are not identified as quoted tweets from their own or other accounts with subsequent comments. Of the remaining half, 45% are tweets from other EU institutions or leaders, such as President Roberta Metsola or European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, while only 1.8% are quotations of tweets from international political leaders.

4.2.3. Engagement Level

Moving on to the analysis of the level of engagement, nearly 60% of the European Parliament's studied posts receive fewer than 100 retweets (with 23.4% garnering between 6 and 25 reposts, and 36.9% receiving between 26 and 100). In contrast, 13.5% of the posts exceed 500 retweets, which is a significant figure for an institutional publication.

Regarding likes, the distribution follows a pattern similar to those in European Commission posts: 37% of the posts accumulate more than 500 likes, while 44.1% receive between 26 and 200 positive interactions from X users.

Finally, quoted tweets are examined, where the frequency is again lower than the other variables of engagement. Nearly 38% of the posts have fewer than 5 quoted tweets; 28% have between 6 and 25 quoted tweets; and 24.3% have between 26 and 100 quoted tweets.

4.3. European Council (@EUCouncil)

The European Council's posts within the selected study sample total 186, accounting for 13% of the overall sample, thus ranking third in terms of prevalence. The main account of this institution has over 752,000 followers on X.

4.3.1. Narration Level

At the narrative level, tweets concerning the Russia–Ukraine conflict predominantly address sanctions against Russia (23.7%) and conferences or meetings with global powers (23.1%). The third most notable theme is the aid packages sent to Ukraine (20.4%).

In this context, the most frequently used hashtags in these posts refer to messages of solidarity with Ukraine (43.5%), such as #StandwithUkraine, #EUSolidarity, #WithUkraine,

and #SlavaUkraini, as well as more generic tags related to the invasion of Ukrainian territories (28%). Nearly 12% of the tweets do not use any hashtags.

The main purpose or objective of more than half of the institution's posts is to communicate to the public the conclusions regarding measures adopted in response to the situation (53.2%), following the trend observed with the European Commission. Second, there are informative messages about the progress of the conflict (14%), while 7.5% encompass posts with functions other than those proposed in the coding of this variable, as illustrated in the following figures.

4.3.2. Interaction Level

Regarding the format of the tweets, an overwhelming percentage (around 80%) includes, in addition to the base text, a link to their own website or a previous X post, along with other multimedia elements. At a considerable distance, in second and third place, are the audiovisual formats: video and image or infographic represent 7% and 6.5% of the European Council's sample, respectively.

In terms of interaction, 81.7% of the institutional posts do not include mentions of other accounts, as Figure 5 shows. Those that do reference external X profiles correspond to 7.5% for international organisations such as the UN or UNHCR, and 4.8% for European and non-European political representatives.

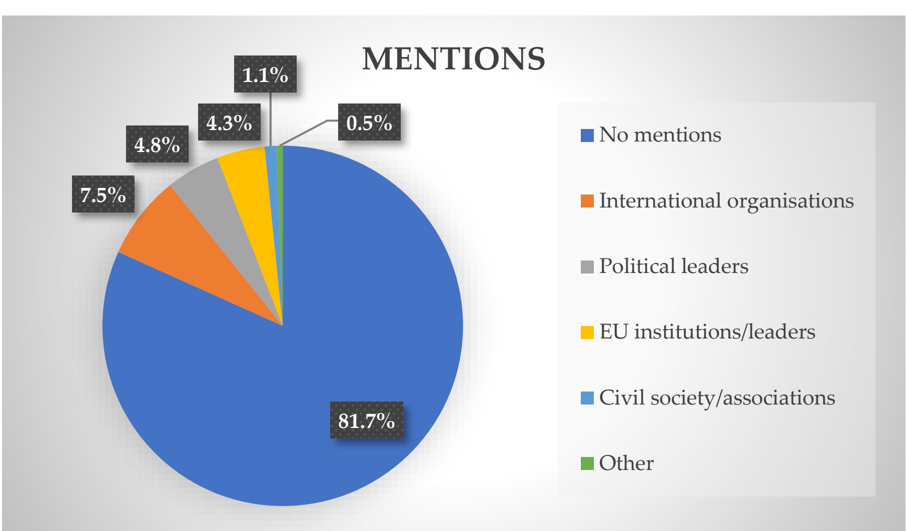

Figure 5. Mentions of other accounts in tweets published by the official account of the European Council, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

A similar situation is observed regarding quotations: nearly 75% of tweets are not based on previous content with an extra commentary, and the remaining percentage consists of quoted tweets from the European Council itself, its President Charles Michel, or other EU institutions and leaders (25%).

4.3.3. Engagement Level

Regarding audience reactions to posts on X, the number of retweets ranges from 6 to 25 for 42.5% of the posts, from 26 to 100 for 34.4%, and exceeds 100 retweets for 7.5%.

Additionally, more than half of the posts accumulate between 26 and 100 likes (51.6%), while 15.6% surpass 500 likes, and at the other end, 12.4% receive fewer than 25 interactions on the platform.

Finally, in terms of engagement, an examination of quoted tweets reveals that three-quarters of the European Council's sample (over 77%) do not exceed 25 interactions of this type, with 10.8% receiving no quotations at all, as shown in Figure 6.

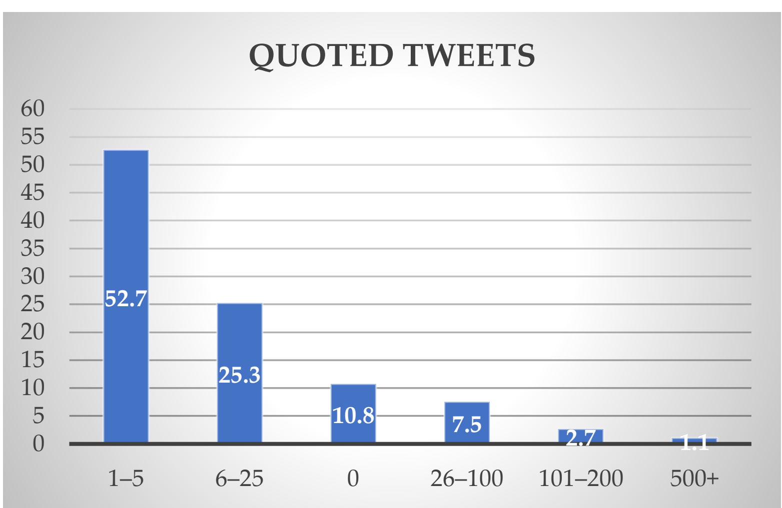

Figure 6. Quoted tweets of the publications of the official account of the European Council, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

4.4. European External Action Service (@eu_eeas)

Out of the total 1466 posts analysed, 245 tweets belong to the institutional account of the European External Action Service (EEAS), representing 17% of the sample and positioning it as the second most prominent account within the study. The reach of these posts is further determined by its more than 445,000 followers on X.

4.4.1. Narration Level

The predominant theme in the tweets from this institution is meetings with international powers, both public and private, to discuss matters related to the war (35.3%). In second place are posts explaining milestones of the invasion, such as explosions or attacks on Ukrainian territories or neighbouring areas (22.9%), followed by factual information about the aid packages sent to Ukraine (14.3%).

These topics are often reinforced by incorporating hashtags related to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, whether they are more specific or more generic (see Figure 7).

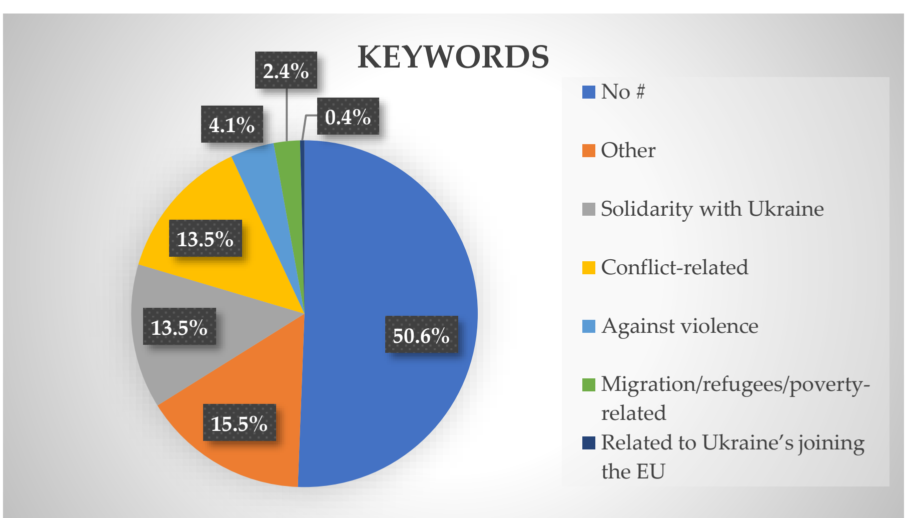

Figure 7. Hashtags included in the tweets published by the European External Action Service, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

However, 50% of the EEAS tweets do not use any hashtags, while 15.5% use other hashtags not directly related to the theme of the war. In contrast, hashtags that express

solidarity with Ukraine or include symbolic terms about the conflict each represent 13.5% of the total.

Regarding the third variable at the narrative level, nearly a quarter of the tweets (23.3%) aim to inform about the progression of the conflict, and another 23% summarise the conclusions of measures taken to address its consequences. The set of posts calling for action on specific issues, such as the energy crisis, disinformation, or shortages affecting the population, constitutes 18% of the EEAS's institutional messages on X.

4.4.2. Interaction Level

In terms of interaction, there is a notable predominance of audiovisual formats. Sixty-three posts (25.7%) include a link to the institution's website or social media along with other multimedia elements, such as images, infographics, or video clips. Tied for second place with 25% each are tweets with text plus a link to other pages without additional multimedia resources and those featuring an image, infographic, or GIFs. Lastly, the use of pre-recorded or streaming video or audio is around 10%.

EEAS's posts are among the most neutral observed: 37.6% of these do not include interaction options with other X accounts through mentions. Of the remaining percentage, 23.3% of references are to EU institutions or representatives, and over 17% are to other international organisations.

Similarly, the use of tweet quotations, whether from its own or external sources, is not common in the EEAS feed. 54.7% of the posts are not quoted, while of the remaining percentage, 43% are from EU institutions and leaders, and 1.6% are from other actors not specified in the code.

4.4.3. Engagement Level

Regarding the level of engagement, 40.4% of the tweets have been shared between 26 and 100 times. More than a third of the posts (34.3%) accumulate between 6 and 25 retweets, and 12.7% exceed 100 retweets. Only 2.4% of the posts receive more than 500 retweets, the highest category considered when coding this variable.

As shown in Figure 8, the largest percentage of likes also falls within the 26 to 100 range (35.1%). Conversely, nearly 20% of the EEAS's posts receive more than 500 likes, which is close to the 18.4% at the other end of the spectrum, with fewer than 25 likes.

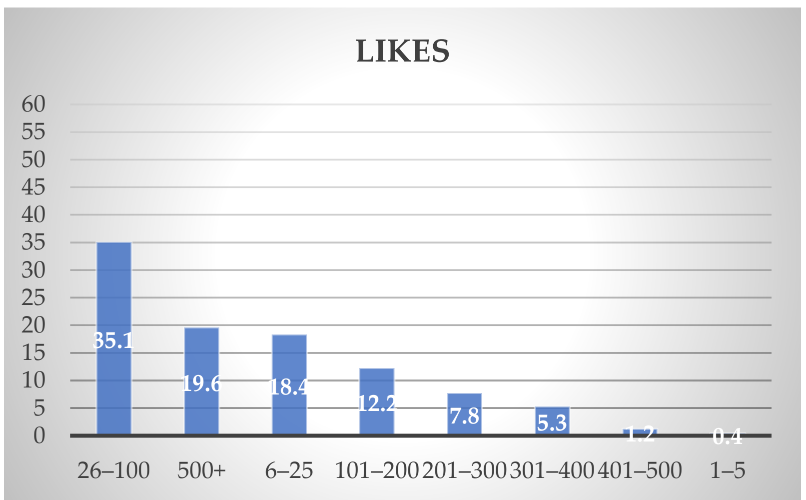

Figure 8. Likes on posts published by the official account of the European External Action Service, broken down by percentage. Self-elaboration.

Concerning tweet quotations, which were analysed under the "Comment" variable, it is noteworthy that 77.5% of the sample do not exceed 25 quotations, and nearly 15% fall

between 26 and 100 quotations. Almost 5% of the posts have had minimal impact when it comes to being shared with additional commentary.

5. Discussion

5.1. Narration Level

Based on the results obtained through content analysis and their comparison with the in-depth interviews, a discussion will now be conducted by examining the trends, potential correlations, and divergences identified in the communication of the various EU bodies at three levels: narration, interaction, and engagement. To this end, the discussion will focus on the research objectives, as outlined in the hypotheses presented in the second section of this study.

H1. *EU institutions favour a politico-symbolic narrative over an administrative-procedural narrative regarding the ongoing international conflict.*

The verification of this hypothesis is primarily structured around the analysis of the variables within the narrative dimension, particularly focusing on the theme and purpose of the European institutions' publications. It was initially assumed that the predominant theme in the tweets from EU bodies revolves around sanctions against Russia and that the main function of these contents is to express solidarity with the situation of the Ukrainian people. In the case of the European Commission, addressing sanctions against Russia emerges as one of the key issues (14%), as well as the purpose of showing solidarity with Ukraine (12%) through its X content, which is also evident from the repeated use of pre-established hashtags in English or Ukrainian, such as #StandwithUkraine, #WithUkraine, #EUSolidarity, and #SlavaUkraini (see Figure 9).

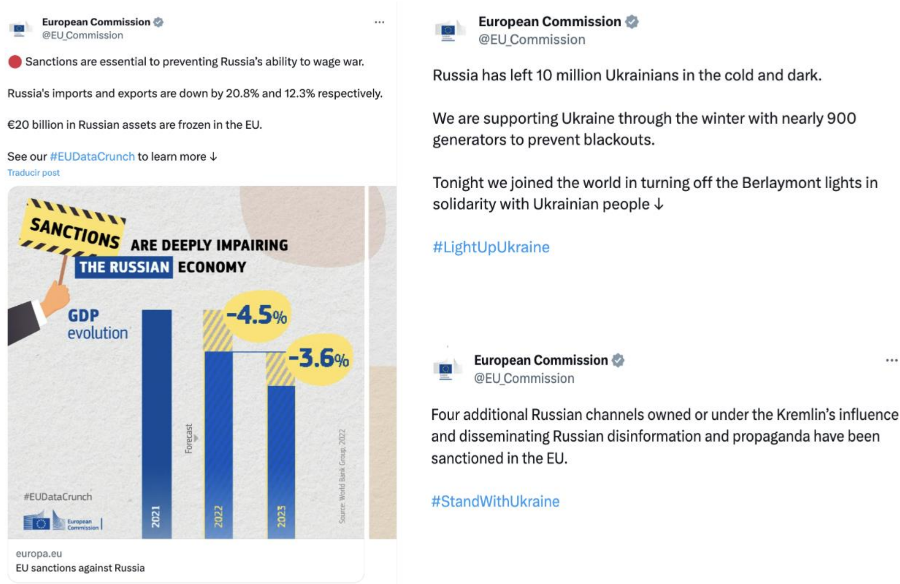

Figure 9. Examples of tweets published by the official profile of the European Commission on X. @EU_Commission.

This pattern does not hold true, however, for the European Parliament at the thematic level, although it does at the functional level, where a similar pattern of using hashtags with messages of solidarity towards the Ukrainian people is observed. Neither assumption is valid in the case of the European External Action Service, which favours different narratives and purposes compared to other European bodies. However, the European Council partially meets the proposed hypothesis: the primary thematic area of its publications is the EU's sanction packages (24%), and most of the hashtags used are those showing solidarity

with Ukraine (43%), but the function attributed to more than half of the tweets is to provide conclusions on measures taken (53%).

According to INT-6, the European institutions adopted "a very different order of priorities in communication compared to the current one" during the first year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, especially in the case of the Commission: "Initially, the main objective was to inform people that unprecedented sanctions against Russia were being approved. Then it shifted to measures, with messages like 'we are going to reform the electricity market, so you pay less on your electricity bill'. Until 24 February 2023, communication was more focused on explaining all the sanctions, and now it has shifted to how this will impact citizens and how they can resolve it."

INT-6 also notes that the European Commission has improved its communication as the decision-making process has progressed. "If you make a legislative proposal that reflects a common understanding, it is much easier to communicate than negative news. You don't communicate a migrant rescue in Greece the same way you do the approval or implementation of the Recovery Fund. Since the 2019 European elections, and even before, in the wake of Brexit, I believe that the communication policy of the institutions has improved significantly. Not just the Commission, but also the Parliament and the Council are involved in this."

In INT-8 words, "many countries that did not take the European Union seriously have started to do so now, following the war. We project an image of confidence, which is why more and more countries want to join the EU." In this regard, however, INT-1 highlights that "there is a lot of debate about how to communicate and reach more people," without being entirely sure that "the role of the European institutions is to maximise their propaganda capacity right now, but rather to try to connect the European debates in Brussels with national debates"; a significant matter developed in a previous work (Tuñón et al. 2019).

In light of the above, the first hypothesis is partially confirmed concerning the theme and purpose of the tweets. EU institutions generally place greater emphasis on the aid packages (economic, social, health, etc.) sent to Ukraine rather than on the sanctions imposed on Russia, despite both topics being closely related.

However, the data regarding the purpose of publicising the measures taken to support Ukraine and sanction Russia is also significant for the EU institutions or bodies, sometimes surpassing the number of tweets expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people. The political-symbolic and administrative-procedural narratives, therefore, occasionally converge in the EU's posts on X.

H2. *The fight against disinformation and the promotion of citizens' literacy in European affairs play a crucial role in the conception of communication strategies on social media by EU institutions during times of hybrid wars.*

In response to the alarming challenge posed by disinformation, European public authorities have resolved to adopt a dual approach, encompassing both legal and informational strategies (Higgins 2019; Tuñón et al. 2019). After all, the dissemination of a certain volume of incorrect information is an inherent characteristic of public communication: it is impossible to guarantee the accuracy of every message that reaches the audience, as communication processes often involve confusion, misunderstandings, and unintentional errors, which can lead to the spread of inaccurate data (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2023).

"For more than a decade now, there have been malign actors who produce or amplify this social unrest, distrust, and confusion, which leads to the proliferation of conspiracy theories. We are seeing this now with the war, but also during the COVID-19 pandemic" (INT-4). The Director of Strategic Communications at the EEAS notes interesting correlations in studies on the spread of disinformation and the propensity of certain publics to believe in such conspiracies during times of crisis, highlighting "a certain openness to trust pro-Kremlin sources, for instance, or anti-Western narratives."

INT-2 points out that the EU has experienced "very dark moments during the migration crisis and the pandemic; fake news and disinformation were very, very strong at that time. In response to all of this, Europe has legislated very effectively. We now have the Digital Services Act, which regulates how platforms must monitor and moderate the content that appears on them." Currently, from the European Parliament's perspective, there is concern about Russian interference and the use of bots and Artificial Intelligence by China, but they have more tools to defend themselves (Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro 2024).

In theory, both the Parliament and the Commission have aligned their communication strategies very similarly, with no significant differences. The Council has also followed this approach, except for "certain blocking elements." INT-1 argues that much more emphasis is being placed on the dimension of disinformation and its impact on citizens: "In fact, it was these institutions that pushed for the idea of banning Russia Today and Sputnik. At the same time, one wonders what influence this has. I think, overall, the communication has been rather coherent and consistent."

According to INT-2, there are various types of disinformation that always arise when discussing Europe: "that it is distant and disconnected from reality, that it is for the lobbies, that it adopts absurd laws, that it disregards citizens... These are variations of a discourse we mainly see from the far-right, particularly from Eurosceptic populists. We have to live with it; if they are real hoaxes, we try to debunk them. Sometimes we choose not to respond, but we believe it is better to make it clear what statements are false and support them with facts so that this negative view of the EU does not continue to spread."

In this context, it was presumed that the research findings would indicate that the fight against fake news has become one of the priority issues in European communication, especially in the context of any international conflict, where the war is fought not only on physical terrain but also in the virtual space. This was an assertion that this second hypothesis sought to confirm. However, in practice, it is not one of the topics to which EU institutions pay the most attention when posting on X.

Strictly considering the content analysis data, institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, or the European External Action Service (Figure 10) dedicate an equal or less than 5% of their content to warning about the scourge of disinformation and the impact it has on the coverage and understanding of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When addressed, there is a tendency to condemn the profusion of fake and misleading information (misinformation) on social networks—often originating from communication channels aligned with the Putin regime—highlighting the punitive measures that have been taken and using hashtags like #EUvsDisinfo. It is also noteworthy that the European Council does not even include this topic among the ten priority issues in its communication strategy regarding the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

The latest initiatives aimed at combating disinformation, supported by both European and national public institutions, concur on the inclusion of media literacy as a key element (Sánchez-Illán 2021). Indeed, some recent theoretical proposals have suggested expanding this concept towards what is termed "transmedia literacy." This involves considering the information consumer as an "active actor who not only acquires increasingly advanced skills to understand new narrative formats but also increasingly contributes to the creation, combination, and sharing of content on digital networks" (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023, p. 21).

The connection between the growing convergence of media and disinformation is mainly manifested in the fact that nowadays, certain false messages reach the population through multiple platforms simultaneously (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). Unlike the past, when falsehoods were disseminated in a scattered and occasional manner, today they often reach the audience through multiple channels simultaneously, which increases their credibility and persuasive power (Vázquez and Pulido 2020; Elías 2021; Lelo and Fígaro 2021; Bouza and Tuñón 2018).

The turning point or shift in the EU's communication strategy occurred in response to the disinformation surrounding Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Rodríguez-Fernández 2019; Tasente et al. 2023; Bennett and Kneuer 2024), as noted by

INT-1: "It is curious because, actually, the European Union did not take disinformation seriously until Brexit and then rushed to claim a victory after the fact. In the end, it was shown that the EEAS was somewhat ahead of the other institutions in this regard."

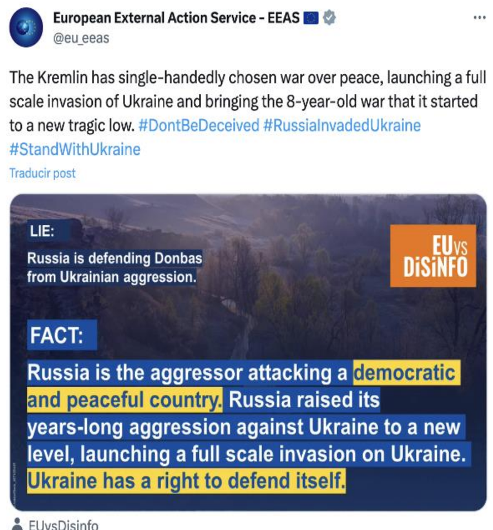

Figure 10. Example of a post about disinformation published by the EEAS. @eu_eeas.

Regarding specifically the EEAS's actions against fake news, INT-4 confirms this trend and explains that the agency perceived an increase in the Russian Federation's spending on war propaganda machinery and its media agencies, television channels, and the state-controlled (dis)information ecosystem a year before the conflict even erupted.

"We observed an increase in the frequency of messaging, the violence and aggressiveness of the narratives, and the spread through new channels. In the months of November, December, and January 2021 to 2022, we saw a clear increase in narratives related to the alleged genocide perpetrated by Ukraine against Russians in Donbas or about secret US biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine and an imminent plan for Ukrainians basically to invade their own territory. Then we saw an even greater intensification after the invasion began, especially in the first half of the year: when the EU sanctions were imposed on certain Russian propaganda media, there were many attempts by Russia to immediately adjust its tactics" (INT-4). Those statements agree with the research carried out by Tasente et al. (2023) and Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón-Navarro (2024), providing further evidence.

All of this reaffirms the need for greater cooperation between European institutions and media in the fight against disinformation and the truthful communication of issues concerning the EU. However, there is an implicit duty in the transmission of media-institutional messages that the media be fair and impartial in addressing European issues so that these contents are perceived as information rather than propaganda (INT-6).

This way, there will be a gradual literacy of the public that will mitigate the alarming ignorance about EU-related topics, increase their interest, and reduce the incidence of hoaxes or "Euromyths" in public debate (Lozano 2022b; Valero 2022). Paradoxically, Pfetsch and Hertz (2015) point out that although there is evidence that good news about Europe increases the sense of identity among Europeans, the effects of bad news about Europe can only be speculated upon so far.

Censoring or eliminating disinformers, INT-1 argues, "is still a somewhat depoliticised perspective on what the public sphere is. A well-functioning 'European Republic' requires conflict, different points of view, and as little disinformation as possible, obviously. But disinformation will not be completely eradicated; total coordination of the types of messages that European nations send is not likely to solve much."

Given all the above, it can be asserted regarding this second hypothesis that EU bodies emphasise the importance of combating disinformative trends during times of hybrid threats, as well as advocating for media literacy on a European scale. However, in practical terms, this emphasis is not generally reflected in their X posts, at least not in those dealing with the Russian invasion of Ukraine during the examined period. The analysis does not suggest that disinformation narratives play a key role in the EU's discourse on the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which leads to the hypothesis being refuted.

5.2. Interaction Level

H3. *The EU institutions' posts on X concerning the Russian–Ukrainian war adopt a highly professionalised audiovisual format.*

The use of audiovisual formats has become a constant in the application of new narratives and, consequently, in the mechanics of organisational communication both at the public and private levels on social media platforms like X (Rodríguez-Guillén 2013; Sierra 2012; Jiménez-Alcarria and Tuñón-Navarro 2023). The EU has not lagged behind in this regard, as highlighted at various points in this study. Its communication and press services have adopted new rhetoric and formulas to convey its message to a heterogeneous and constantly connected audience in the digital age (Olsson and Hammargård 2016; Vilanova 2014; Battista et al. 2014; Gleason 2018).

Related to these studies, INT-5, member of the press team at the European Council, emphasises the relevance of adapting content to different channels, both in tone and form, by designing "different products for different platforms." "On LinkedIn, we mainly publish news or communications in English and French, as well as on the Facebook page, while on X, it is primarily in English because it is the quickest and most effective way to reach the European audience. Instagram, on the other hand, allows for more experimentation because the stories are in vertical format, whereas on X, all videos are in horizontal viewing format. We also do live streaming there sometimes; we always strive for content diversification across platforms, although we do reuse materials."

The saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" is particularly relevant in an age of information overload and overexposure, where time is scarce, and the impact of a photograph on the receiver within seconds is infinitely greater than that of a long text, as numerous scientific studies have demonstrated. INT-3 remarks that, from the European Commission's DG COMM, they have learned that "if we want the political message to resonate, we must use all available tools to disseminate it in terms of content and form. We are pushing towards more innovative and direct formulas, especially when it comes to social media like X." The political communication expert believes it is essential to target the intended audience, listen to their demands, and foster interaction with them, for instance, through multimedia links and dynamic, engaging videos. "In terms of impact and visual communication, they better capture the attention of those on the other side of the screen. This allows for the creation of an online community connected to the institution" (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

In this regard, INT-7 argues that, in an institutional setting, "creating a YouTube video or doing a live stream on X will be perceived by the citizen as an attempt at accessibility, breaking down the barriers of distance. The simple fact that a political leader gives a speech via Twitch streaming already changes people's perceptions significantly; even if it's the same message, it will be perceived as more approachable."

According to data from the content analysis, this statement holds true: the European Commission opts to include an external link alongside other multimedia elements in its tweets or to embed images/infographics or video clips in more than 90% of cases. This trend towards using links in combination with audiovisual formats is reinforced by the European Parliament's posts (Figure 11), which favour moving images more than twice

as often as static images and also frequently use simple text with hashtags, unlike other institutions that do so only occasionally.

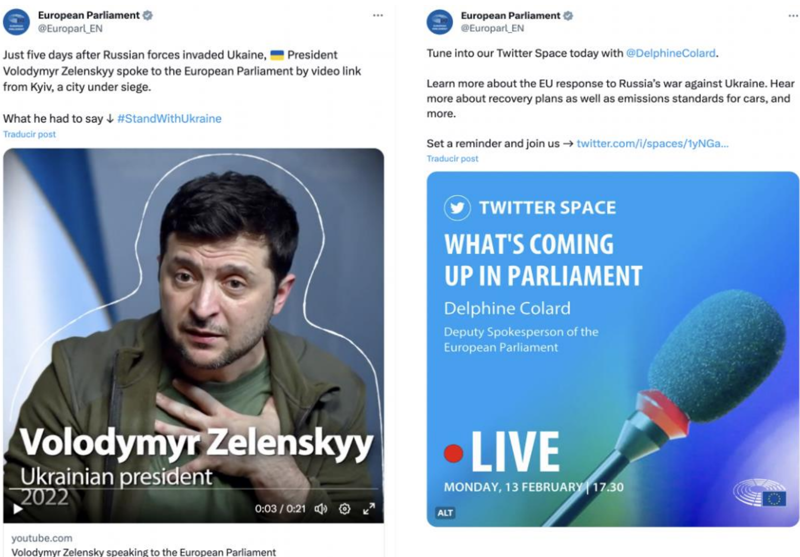

Figure 11. Examples of posts with links and audiovisual resources published by the European Parliament. @Europarl_EN.

Conversely, there is a certain preference for images over videos in the EEAS's posts; also, 25% of them incorporate links alongside other hypertextual resources. The European Council's tweets extensively use interactive links (more than 80% of them are in text plus multimedia format), while a percentage lower than 10% relies entirely on photos and videos.

These data are corroborated by the testimony of INT-3, who explains that "the presence of European institutions on social media has increased considerably across different platforms, and follower numbers continue to rise, which is even more important. This is a result of how we have adapted our messages to social media, but generally also to the emergence of digital communication tools that make it more immediate. We continue to rely on traditional forms of information, such as websites, which is why we include links to our press releases, articles, and statements, but we now use many infographics and short explanatory videos as well. It's a new dimension, in line with the times, that always responds to the EU's need to communicate, something the Commission, Parliament, and Council have always agreed on and have tried to emphasise as much as possible."

In summary, this research confirms the third hypothesis. European institutions favour multimedia formats, incorporating links, images, and videos into their posts. However, the degree of professionalisation and/or complexity of the content depends on the management of each official profile on X.

H4. *The communication of European institutions primarily consists of interpersonal interactions with international bodies and leaders in their posts, but only establishes a digitally intermediated relationship with media outlets, academics, or civil society organisations in very specific instances.*

In light of the results, the relationship between European institutions and other international actors has proven unsteady in the digital sphere. This is particularly evident with those operating outside official channels (such as supranational organisations and representatives), who often have greater penetration in public opinion, namely: media outlets, academic members, non-governmental organisations, or citizen associations (Canel and Sanders 2012; Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024).

According to INT-1, civil society is composed of those actors "who often operate as a kind of broker, connecting debates in different countries; a transnational coalition of

actors mobilising to find common ground, because generally, conversational frameworks tend to be quite similar." The issue, the researcher also notes, "is that European nations often perceive civil society as if it works for them, as if it only aims to weave a network of ambassadors to promote the European Union when this is not how it works: civil society must be there to challenge institutions, not to propagate them."

Moreover, INT-6 points out that "the weight civil society carries in the public sphere is often greater than politics itself (. . .) For example, neighbourhood associations: middle-aged people with concerns and complaints. Many of these complaints could likely be addressed by the European Union if their demands were listened to, considering that 68% of the laws passed in Spain originate from the EU, which people are unaware of. The EU must be brought out of its bubble through initiatives and projects with real impact" (Ordiz 2018).

The most recent instance of engaging with civil society is the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), which INT-2 describes as an expansive listening exercise: "Besides the social media channels, we had a platform for citizens to leave comments, suggestions, or proposals about what Europe should look like in 5, 10, 20 years." The deputy director of the European Parliament's Office in Spain emphasises the high level of participation in the CoFoE; however, these figures are rigorously questioned by other non-institutional sources like INT-6, INT-1, and INT-7. "It was the most comprehensive social listening exercise we've undertaken, although, of course, we couldn't reach everyone, only the best-informed: university students, civil society associations, media outlets that covered it. . . Self-employed individuals or retirees participated less because they are more distant from the political debate, and that too is an issue that needs to be addressed" (INT-2; INT-5).

According to the analysis of X publications, international organisations and political leaders, both from the EU and beyond, are among the most frequently mentioned and quoted in the case of the Commission, the Council, and the EEAS. References to international organisations such as the UN or FAO or intergovernmental forums like the G7, however, are not prevalent in the case of the European Parliament. As a general rule, tweets without any mentions dominate the studied sample, with a percentage ranging between 60% and 80% in the first three institutions, a figure that hovers around 40% in EEAS posts. It is precisely this organisation that allocates more space to linking accounts of media outlets and the scientific community, although these remain minimal (around 3%, respectively).

According to INT-7, it justifies why the European Union still seems distant and difficult to understand for the average citizen (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024). "The more content options we have to consume about the EU, such as articles with good context, political leaders speaking clearly about Europe and explaining something about it, television programmes discussing this topic, associations creating events, institutions creating online or in-person forums inviting civil society actors, the more myths about the EU will gradually be dismantled. All of this will lead to people having an increasingly well-founded opinion, and whether they are for or against the project or want it to go in one direction or another, they will be able to argue it, to have those tools and that critical judgment."

The fourth hypothesis is thus validated, as interaction with media outlets, researchers, and civil society actors on social media, specifically on X, is limited and even non-existent from some official EU institutional accounts. Nevertheless, when one or more accounts are referenced or quoted, they usually belong to the categories of "EU Institutions/Leaders," "Political Leaders," or "International Organisations" in more than 50% of cases.

5.3. Engagement Level

H5. *The posts on the official accounts of the EU institutions achieve high levels of engagement, considering their large number of followers.*

Considering the results obtained from the content analysis and interviews, it can be deduced that the "personalisation" (Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro 2019; Bennett 2012)

of an institution through a profile with a specific name and surname enhances the connection between the audience and the European political representative, and through them, with the supranational organisation in question (Capati 2019; Deželan et al. 2017; Bouza and Tuñón 2018; Pérez-Curiel 2020). In fact, the personal accounts of EU leaders tend to accumulate a larger number of followers despite often being managed by a communication team identical or similar to that of the institutional accounts.

As authors such as Rodríguez-Guillén (2013), Canel and Sanders (2012), and Olsson and Hammargård (2016) pointed out, the organisational communication strategies of the EU have usually been articulated by the communication and press departments (DG COMM) or from institutional offices. However, in recent years, the role of the opinion leader, or in this case, the representative of the institution, has gained prominence, with the content being professionalised from this perspective as well, adapting to new times and channels (Fazekas et al. 2021; Hänska and Bauchowitz 2019; Gleason 2018), as the interviewees point out.

INT-6 suggests that "the European Union must be brought closer to all age groups, to the local village neighbour, to the generation that isn't connected to X or Instagram via their mobile phones." He notes that "middle-aged people also need to understand how Europe works, and the communication strategy directed at them is not the same as the one applied to young people. Here, European institutions have work to do because they focus heavily on social media and do not reinforce other parallel channels when their communication must be transgenerational."

Maintaining a balance between different communication strategies and doing so in a coherent and appealing way can be incredibly challenging. In this regard, in the interview with INT-7, the concept of "complementarity" in the use of social media and other communication strategies was discussed: "The offices must fulfil their public service function, even if it is a more aseptic, neutral, and commanded communication (. . .) On the other hand, we, as content creators on YouTube, do not have someone dictating what to say and how; it's more informal."

In conclusion, the fifth hypothesis is thus partially refuted, verifying that posts from EU's institutional accounts on X demonstrate a variable level of engagement from the audience, as the degree of involvement depends significantly on the topic at hand and the mentions made of European leaders.

6. Conclusions

The communication of European affairs has gained substantial relevance over the past two decades. Communication is, within the framework of community policy, a priority axis for ensuring that citizens identify with the European project in the 21st century. Consequently, the various EU institutions have sought to exploit new narratives and tools through unexplored and increasingly diverse channels, such as social media (Facebook, X, Instagram, Telegram, or TikTok), to reach a heterogeneous audience. However, they have not lost sight of the fact that mass media remains an indispensable avenue for influencing public opinion, given its penetration among a high percentage of the adult population.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has marked a further step in the paradigm shift of institutional communication, representing a new moment of crisis in the European order, as was the migration crisis or the Brexit rupture process yesteryear. The necessity to communicate the multiple consequences of the conflict and to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people on the one hand, and to explain the humanitarian actions and measures taken by the European executive to mitigate the impact of the war on the other, have characterised the publications of the various EU bodies during the first year after the invasion of Ukraine.

Broadly speaking, through the analysis of their communication strategy on X (formerly Twitter), it has been observed that the EU's efforts have focused on highlighting the problem, condemning it, and showcasing how Brussels is supporting (both materially and symbolically) Zelensky and those affected by the war, as well as the various initiatives

undertaken to help European citizens cope with the adverse effects of the conflict, such as rising energy prices, food shortages, market saturation, migrations, and so on. In this regard, the institutions have adhered strictly to the expected discourse under conventional organisational communication terms, albeit adapted to a 2.0 environment with invisible mediation, such as social media.

The parallel narrative of the Commission, the Parliament, the Council, and the EEAS has proceeded in a rather similar manner, without significant divergences, reflecting coherence and coordination, whether intentional or not, in communication strategies concerning the Ukraine war (INT-2; INT-3; INT-5).

It is noteworthy that, as evidenced by the results of the various studied variables, there is an extremely small—practically non-existent—percentage of links, mentions, or quoted tweets corresponding to national or international media. This fact underscores the pressing need to incorporate greater interaction between European institutions and European journalists into the digital conversation, as this absence could determine the ineffectiveness of many of their communication strategies aimed at citizens (Lesaca 2018; Lozano 2022a; Tuñón and Bouzas 2023). INT-6 deems it necessary to "rethink European information and give it more weight and importance." However, he attests to a growing ambition to address certain deficiencies, particularly since the pandemic, "because we have realised at the media level that decisions made in Brussels matter a lot and have a very direct impact on people's daily lives."

European communication flow, in summary, must begin to operate on a dual track: institutional and media (Ruiz-Incertis et al. 2024; Bennett and Kneuer 2024), to achieve its goal of effectively reaching the audience and combating misinformation "that has been present for a long time and seems to be ignored in times of social, political, and economic prosperity"(INT-4). In this media-institutional symbiosis, there should be no aspiration to indoctrinate but rather to inform: "Journalists have an important role because, in the end, we don't only report the positive aspects of European institutions. There is a lack of constructive criticism. We tend to be either very friendly or very destructive in general, as if everything about the European Union were black or white. What is in abundance in Europe is grey" (INT-6).

Similarly, it would be advisable and enriching to involve external actors in the European project, such as academics, researchers, or civil society organisations (Tuñón et al. 2019). As INT-8 points out, "sometimes you need to step back and speak with other actors to gain perspective. From inside the "Eurobubble," the EU is viewed differently than it is perceived from outside." The opinion of INT-1 on this matter is also significant: "European nations often view civil society as if it worked for them and should only promote the merits of the EU. But civil society needs to be there to challenge institutions, not to act as their propaganda; the same applies to the media."

Regarding hypertextual strategies, it would be prudent to continue investing in multimedia formats inherent to the so-called new narratives promoted on social media. Indeed, the European Commission ventured in September 2022 to launch its first purely transmedia initiative: a "European metaverse" where citizens had the opportunity to interact with everything the EU offers through a virtual world, not without various criticisms. Audiovisual and transmedia formats hold an indisputable place in the evolution of organisational communication, but anticipating their incorporation into digital strategies without understanding their potential impact, or designing them without a solid foundation, indicates that there is still much work to be done in this area.

6.1. Limitations

In the development of the content analysis, tweets from the timeline of each studied account within the established timeframe were sampled. This included retweets and quoted tweets— as specified in the explanation of this variable—which could partially skew the overall results for purists of social network analysis (SNA). A similar issue arises with the measurement of the variable "Commenting" based on quoted tweets associated with each

post rather than considering the total number of comments due to the impossibility of obtaining such data. Nonetheless, these shortcomings will be addressed in future studies through the design of an ad hoc methodology and the use of advanced computational programs for analysis.

It should also be noted that there were no significant implications from the transition of the social network Twitter to X by Elon Musk at the end of July 2023. These changes in the verification of accounts (official or paid), functions of premium users, or the network's name did not affect the period studied from February 2022 to February 2023 but did impact the subsequent use of tools such as Tweetdeck or Twitonomy, which faced serious limitations in obtaining specific data due to the new policy, such as the total number of posts from each profile within that timeframe. Furthermore, throughout the article, the term X has been used instead of Twitter to reflect a revised and updated version of the original work, although the content analysis was conducted prior to the name change.

6.2. Future Reseach Directions

Future articles will conduct a more detailed analysis of the digital communication strategy of EU institutions concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, covering a more extended and, therefore, significant period. Additionally, it could be of great interest to study the progressive incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the configuration and management of institutional communication policies at the European level, particularly in addressing disinformation flows on social media, a topic underscored by projects such as EUvsDisinfo.

Another event occurred amidst the crisis of institutional credibility in 2024, once again influenced by the proliferation of hybrid threats: the European election. This event, as in 2019, was marked by waves of Euroscepticism but also by the developments of the war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, and foreign interferences, largely emanating from Russia. It seems pertinent to study the EU's communication in this context and how citizens engage or do not engage in the digital conversation about the elections and their impact on civil society and the media.

Pragmatic considerations also necessitate addressing other critical issues surrounding the creation of a global public sphere, such as the barriers arising from multilingualism and the digital divide, which would warrant an entirely separate research project. The analysis of the limits of the European public sphere prompts us to question the extent to which there can be, if not a single narrative for Europe, at least a series of narratives about Europe that foster constructive debates and shape strategies to enhance public opinion identification. Therefore, future studies could build on the formulation of hypotheses regarding this matter, with the aim of testing or refuting them.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.R.-I. and J.T.-N.; methodology, R.R.-I. and J.T.-N.; software, R.R.-I.; validation, J.T.-N.; formal analysis, R.R.-I.; investigation, R.R.-I.; resources, R.R.-I. and J.T.-N.; data curation, R.R.-I.; writing—original draft preparation, R.R.-I.; writing—review and editing, J.T.-N.; visualization, R.R.-I.; supervision, J.T.-N.; project administration, J.T.-N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This article is part of an European Chair funded by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), belonging to the European Commission, Jean Monnet (Erasmus+), "Future of Europe Communication in times of Pandemic Disinformation" (FUTEUDISPAN), Ref: 101083334-JMO-2022-CHAIR), directed between 2022 and 2025, from the University Carlos III of Madrid, by Professor Jorge Tuñón. However, the content of this article is the sole responsibility of the authors and EACEA cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to the experts who have participated in the interviews to support and contrast the results of our research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Appendix A. Code Designed for the Content Analysis

Narrative Level

Variable 1: Predominant theme in the tweet content

1. Aid sent to Ukraine
2. Invasion, explosions or attacks on territories
3. Population displacement
4. Scarcity of goods and services
5. Energy crisis
6. Sanctions against Russia
7. Ukraine's joining the EU
8. Conferences or meetings with international leaders
9. Disinformation
10. Other

Variable 2: Keywords (hashtags) primarily used

1. No #
2. Solidarity with Ukraine
3. Against violence
4. Conflict-related
5. Related to Ukraine's joining the EU
6. Migration/refugees/poverty-related
7. Energy crisis-related
8. Other #

Variable 3: Purpose or function attributed to the tweet

1. Express solidarity with the Ukrainian people
2. Condemn Kremlin's actions
3. Show support to Zelensky
4. Inform about the conflict
5. Call to action on an issue
6. Reassure or warn citizens about conflict consequences
7. Provide conclusions on measures taken
8. Other

Interaction Level

Variable 4: Format adopted in tweet content

1. Link to their website/social media without multimedia
2. Link to their website/social media with other multimedia
3. Link to media outlets
4. Link to third-party websites/social media
5. Image, infographic, or gif
6. Video or audio-visual content
7. Text only
8. Other

Variable 5: Participation—Mentions (@) of other X accounts

1. No mentions
2. EU institutions/leaders
3. International organisations

4. Political leaders
5. Academics/researchers/scientists
6. Civil society/associations
7. Media outlets
8. Other actors

Variable 6: Participation—Retweets or quoted retweets of other X accounts

1. No quotation
2. Tweet from EU institutions/leaders
3. Tweet from EU Member States' institutions
4. Tweet from political leaders
5. Other quotations

Engagement Level
Variable 7: Retweets

1. 1–5
2. 6–25
3. 26–100
4. 101–200
5. 201–300
6. 301–400
7. 401–500
8. +500
9. 0

Variable 8: Likes

1. 1–5
2. 6–25
3. 26–100
4. 101–200
5. 201–300
6. 301–400
7. 401–500
8. +500
9. 0

Variable 9: Quoted tweets

1. 1–5
2. 6–25
3. 26–100
4. 101–200
5. 201–300
6. 301–400
7. 401–500
8. +500
9. 0

Appendix B. Classification and Description of Interviewees' Profiles for the Research

Representative	Profile	Position and Institution	Date	ID Code
Academics and experts	Political communication, public sphere, and disinformation in the EU	Professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and member of various Jean Monnet European Chairs	3 May 2023	INT-1
European institutions	EU communication and digital policies	Spokeperson of European Parliament Office in Spain, Public Relations and Institutional Affairs at DG COMM	1 June 2023	INT-2

Representative	Profile	Position and Institution	Date	ID Code
European institutions	Information and communication on EU policies	Assistant in political communication at DG COMM in the European Commission	31 May 2023	INT-3
European institutions	EU strategic communication and disinformation	Member of Strategic Communication division and contact for Ukraine and Belarus in Brussels at the European External Action Service	28 June 2023	INT-4
European institutions	Information and communication on EU policies	Member of Press team at DG COMM in the European Council	27 March 2023	INT-5
Media	International communication and European politics	European politics analyst and international correspondent at Spanish newspapers	3 May 2023	INT-6
Social media outreach	EU information	Public Affairs consultant Brussels and content creator on European Affairs on social media	4 May 2023	INT-7
European institutions	Information and communication on EU policies	Communication representative at the European Parliament	9 June 2023	INT-8

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