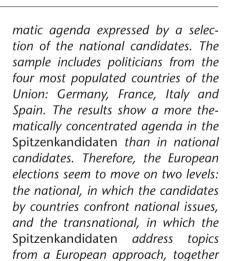# Thematic Agenda on Twitter in the 2019 European Parliament Elections: A Comparative Study Between 'Spitzenkandidaten' and National Candidates

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The representativeness of the European Parliament has usually been a subject of controversy which is currently enhanced by Brexit and the development of several populist movements within the EU. In this context, the elections to the European Parliament in 2019 were the second time in which the Spitzenkandidaten *system was applied. Bearing this in mind, the objective of this research is to know the thematic agenda set by these transnational candidates on Twitter, trying to find differences with the issues raised by the traditional national leaders. To this end, the technique of quantitative content analysis is used, referring to the issues addressed on Twitter by the six candidates to chair the Commission, as well as the the-matic agenda expressed by a selection of the national candidates. The sample includes politicians from the four most populated countries of the Union: Germany, France, Italy and Spain. The results show a more thematically concentrated agenda in the* Spitzenkandidaten *than in national candidates. Therefore, the European elections seem to move on two levels: the national, in which the candidates by countries confront national issues, and the transnational, in which the* Spitzenkandidaten *address topics from a European approach, together with references to domestic policy.*

Keywords: *political communication, EP elections,* Spitzenkandidaten, *Twitter, agenda-setting.*

The European Union is nowadays a political system of big relevance for its more than 500 million inhabitants. This system has democratic roots through the elections to the European Parliament. Despite the growing importance attributed to these elections in recent decades by European institutions, the EU is still considered by many to be somewhat remote. The poor communication carried out by the European institutions is one of the reasons that has prevented a joint public discussion, especially in the journalistic field (Lloyd and Marconi, 2014).

In recent years, the feeling of remoteness has been spurred by a political disaffection towards the European integration project, evidenced in phenomena such as Brexit or the growth of Eurosceptic parties across Europe (Boix-Palop and López-García, 2014). In this sense, it should be assessed that the vote in the European elections works differently than other elections, since many voters do so as a punishment for national policies (Hobolt and Vries, 2016; Nulty *et al.*, 2016).

Although there is a significant citizen distance —turnout in the European elections of 2009 and 2014 did not exceed 44% in the Union as a whole—, the EU has an undoubted political relevance for journalists. EU institutions have made efforts to communicate better since the 1990s (Andrino-San Cristóbal, 2014). These measures are not only communicative, but also institutional, in which the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is framed. This model was informally implemented in 2014 so as to improve the traceability of the European electoral process. According to this, the parties commit to support their candidates as future president of the European Commission.

The reason for this research is ground in the fact that EU is going through a period of turbulences. This situation makes of interest to explore which practices European leaders adopt in social media for political communication such as Twitter. The 2019 elections were also the second time the *Spitzenkandidaten* system was used, a consolidation of the model in which the accumulated experience should mean the implementation of better communication strategies. The objectives of this mechanism are to increase participation and achieve greater citizen legitimacy of the European Union (Aixalà-Blanch, 2014). Turnout in the EP elections raised in 2019 for the first time in two decades, reaching 50% of potential voters. However, the *Spitzenkandidaten* model did not finally have political consequences, since the European Council proposed Ursula von der Leyen as a candidate, who had not undergone this process.

Taking into account the increase in participation, this research tries to know the agenda on Twitter of the candidates to chair the European Commission. It also analyzes which are the topics that attract the most attention from users. By agenda we understand the set of public interest issues addressed frequently by the political class in order to determine the social debate. This process is related to media according to the theory of the agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), whereby the mass media establish the topics of public discussion by selecting news of interest.

BACKGROUND

Political Communication in the European Union

The European Union represents a legal community endowed with a political system. The EU has legislative (European Parliament and EU Council), executive (European Commission) and judicial (European Court of Justice) capabilities. The model of separation of powers is typical in democratic regimes (Mazzoleni, 2010), applied in this case to an international organization that in some of its policies acts from a supranationalism approach.

Although the EU has been concerned about how to communicate its policies (Andrino-San Cristóbal, 2014), there is an academic consensus that states that the Union communicates poorly (Moravcsik, 2002; Seoane-Pérez, 2013). Its image is more linked to the diplomacy of international relations than to an organization with direct implications in daily life (Dalen, Albaek, and Vreese, 2011). The literature has pointed out a communication gap as a cause of this phenomenon, which prevents a fluid dialogue between rulers and governed (Moravcsik, 2002).

The communicative deficit hypothesis is well established in European studies. Research has been interested in items such as public communication developed by the EU institutions or the role of Europeanized media in a hypothetical European Public Sphere (García-Gordillo, 2010; Risse, 2015). The communicative hypothesis puts the emphasis on mediation. This means that European identity problems could be solved with more effective strategies by the EU institutions, which should be accompanied by a better journalistic work through media professionals reporting on European affairs.

The idea of the EU's so-called "communication gap" came into crisis with the failure of the European Constitution in 2005, rejected in a referendum in France and the Netherlands. Following this disruptive fact, a new empirical trend emerges, centered on the structural and cultural dimension of the weak European political communication (Schulz-Forberg and Strath, 2010). Schlesinger (1999) has already formulated this approach before, noting that the existence of national political systems limited the possibility of a Europeanized journalistic coverage.

These studies break a classical doctrine that argued that postmaterialist values, derived from social, economic and cultural development produced after World War II, are the basis of support for European integration (Inglehart, 1967). The underlying idea was that the EU brought a "constitutional patriotism", a civic identity made of values and procedures (Müller, 2007). Nevertheless, this concept seems not to have worked, as it would be demonstrated by the lack of popular support for the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 or the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005.

Therefore, in recent years the scholarship has shifted from mediation to a structural and cultural analysis. The communicative dimension is no longer as relevant, but the fact that the EU fails to meet many requirements of classical democratic systems, due to its sui generis character (García-Gordillo, 2010). In the field of European studies, characterized by multidisciplinary, communication gives way to approaches from sociology and political science.

The structural and cultural perspective in the analysis of European political communication has become an emerging empirical trend. Some of its most influential texts have been published recently, such as those by Schulz-Forberg and Strath (2010), Dalen, Albaek, and Vreese (2011) or Seoane-Pérez (2013). These investigations coincide with the previous ones in the setting of a strong consensus about the existence of communicative problems at the EU level. Optimistic studies on the emergence of European citizenship due to the action of media are not so common (Bruter, 2005; Risse, 2015).

The 'Spitzenkandidaten' System in a Digital Context

The election to the European Parliament takes place within a framework of mediated politics and audience democracy (Lakoff, 2004). Increasingly, electoral disputes are overcoming at the media. Nevertheless, the EU does not have the basic elements of mass communication, such as a media system or specialized journalistic coverage (Mazzoleni, 2010), which increases its legitimacy problems.

The representativeness of the European Parliament is a thorny problem that has been widely treated in the literature (Bee and Bozini, 2010). The EU itself has shown in recent years concern about the structural causes of the dysfunctions of its political communication. In the 2014 European Parliament elections the *Spitzenkandidaten* system was established for the first time, which implies a commitment by the parties to make their list leaders president of the European Commission. Although this prerogative is not written in the European Treaties, the EU institutions have encouraged it to create the feeling that a president is voted for Europe. That was an attempt to deal with the democratic crisis of the Union (Aixalà-Blanch, 2014).

In the personalization of politics, digital platforms play a key role (Cotarelo, 2010). The Internet generated optimistic academic proposals on the possibility of building a European public sphere, which from the digital sphere would offset the absence of its own media system (Thomass, 2011). This circumstance has not prevented the emergence of centrifugal phenomena for the EU, such as Brexit or the breakthrough of Eurosceptic parties. In fact, recent empirical studies (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández-Gómez, and Pineda, 2018) point out to the persistence of national approaches in the digital European public discussion.

Due to its characteristics, such as immediacy, ease of use or spreading, Twitter is the digital tool that best adapts to political communication (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012; Campos-Domínguez, 2017). This social media adjusts to the current fragmented public discourse, while serving as instrument for political candidates to set the media agenda. Another role attributed to Twitter is its ability to mobilize voting and participation (Gainous and Wagner, 2014), The latter has great importance for the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. However, empirical evidence suggests that interaction with the public is not as high as expected (Nulty *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, the personalization of EU politics is low, both in journalistic reporting (Rivas-de-Roca, 2018) and the dynamics of European parties (Hobolt and Vries, 2016). Consequently, it is not useful to develop campaigns based on

personal issues at the European Union level, which explains the strong function of diffusion of political proposals in its political communication. Notwithstanding this fact, the transnational proposals do not seem to influence citizen evaluations of the EU (Marquart *et al.*, 2019).

There are specific studies on the action on Twitter of political parties during the elections to the European Parliament, but they are usually carried out at national level (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández-Gómez, and Pineda, 2018). Their conclusion is that political parties give preference to national issues in these elections, something that coincides with the few cross-national papers located on this matter (Nulty *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, Berganza-Conde (2008) emphasizes the emergence in the European elections of a strategic approach (game frame) of conflict (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and Vreese, 2011), which focus on getting votes rather than on programmatic proposals, posing a division between "them" and "us".

Beyond the EU elections, other researches have been carried out, which analyze the development of European political phenomena on Twitter, for instance populist leaders. A study by Casero-Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella, and Franch (2017) reveals that their agenda has a more thematic approach than traditional politicians, who advocate for strategic items. There is also a differentiation of themes according to the ideological axis: European conservative parties give preference to issues such as immigration, meanwhile progressives prefer to talk about social issues (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). This implies that the parties prioritize in social media those issues in which they are most benefited.

METHOD

The main objective of this research is to analyze the thematic agenda developed on Twitter by the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the traditional national candidates. Specifically, it seeks to recognize:

- O1. The thematic agenda exposed by these candidates on their official Twitter profiles.
- O2. Comparison of the communicative strategies used, in terms of thematic (issue frame) or strategic agenda for getting votes (game frame). This may be connected with elements of the cosmopolitanism / nationalism axis. The cosmopolitan vision refers to post-industrial values of pluralism and tolerance.
- O3. Comparative analysis of the attention triggered by messages from transnational and national leaders on Twitter, measured through retweets and favorites.

Based on the review of the literature, a range of hypotheses are fixed:

- H1. There is a thematic difference between the parties of the left / right axis, as well as between those of the Europeanism / Euroscepticism axis, maintaining few references to Europe as a political subject.

- H2. The strategic approach (game frame) expressed on the degree of Europeanism monopolizes most of messages, being smaller in the Eurosceptic parties.
- H3. National issues are common in the candidates' tweets by countries, thus the *Spitzenkandidaten* system would not have achieved its objective of Europeanizing the political agenda.
- H4. The personalization of the messages is low, prevailing a function of diffusion of the political proposals.

To identify the topics in the spotlight, Twitter analysis is used (Fernández-Crespo, 2014), based on quantitative content principles. Its adaptation to the communication area has been endorsed by various researchers (Krippendorff, 1990; Igartua, 2006), since it allows us to understand the parts that make up the communicative message. Following this approach, the profiles of the *Spitzenkandidaten* proclaimed are analyzed:

- Manfred Weber (European People's Party-EPP, Germany), @ManfredWeber (unique account in English and German).
- Frans Timmermans (Party of European Socialist-PES, the Netherlands), @TimmermansEU (unique account in English).
- Jan Zahradil (Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe-ACRE, Czech Republich), @ZahradilJan (unique account in English and Czech).
- Bas Eickhout (European Green Party-GREENS, the Netherlands), @BasEickhout (unique account in English and Dutch).
- Ska Keller (European Green Party-GREENS, Germany), @SkaKeller (unique account in English and German).
- Nico Cué (Party of the European Left-IE, Belgium), @AvecNico (unique account in English and French).

On the other hand, we also take into account the profiles of five national non-*Spitzenkandidaten* leaders of different political parties, with the aim of comparing Twitter strategies following the cosmopolitanism / localism axis, translated in this case into Europeanism / nationalism. The national accounts analyzed are:

- Katarina Barley (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*-SPD, candidate for Germany), @katarinabarley (unique account in German).
- Jordan Bardella (*Rassemblement National*-RN, candidate for France), @J_Bardella (unique account in French).
- Luis Garicano (Ciudadanos-Cs, candidate for Spain), @lugaricano (unique account in Spanish).
- Silvio Berlusconi (*Forza Italia*-FI, candidate for Italy), @berlusconi (unique account in Italian).
- María Eugenia Rodríguez Palop (Unidas Podemos-UP, candidate por Spain), @MEugeniaRPalop (unique account in Spanish).

These profiles have been chosen according to population criteria, representing candidates from the four most populated countries in the EU excluding the United Kingdom —Germany, France, Italy and Spain. In addition, we try that the selection gathers the maximum ideological plurality, summoning up candidates of the left, the social democracy, the liberalism, the center-right and the far-right.

This whole research seeks to measure the building of the profile of candidates, both European and national. Therefore, as a period of analysis, a wider band compared to the official electoral campaign is selected, with a sample of messages that includes three months: from February 22 to May 22, 2019, since the elections in some countries start on May 23. The beginning of the study is established three months before, as the European Parliament makes its first surveys public in February 2019 to monitor the campaign.

This paper considers the own tweets and the responses of the candidates, but not the retweets, since they contain information published by others do not allow to find out the individualized agendas (Larsson and Ihlen, 2015). The collection of the sample is carried out using Twitonomy, being analyzed later by the statistical software SPSS.

We have developed an analysis sheet (Table 1) with exclusive categories created from European news to study the tweets. Table 1 has variables referring to the thematic agenda (issue frame) and electoral strategies (game frame). The definition of Aalberg, Strömbäck, and Vreese (2011) is followed, placing strategic and electoral game approaches under the name of 'game frame', that is to say, all those which directly seek to get votes.

The model is applied by a single researcher. We prefer to use one encoder to facilitate the task, since thematic categories do not imply as many codification differences as other variables. However, two previous rounds of coding training were carried out by the authors, modifying categories related to game frame and adding new rules to the coding manual.

**Table 1. Categories used for the quantitative study
of the media agenda on Twitter**

	Topics	Description
Issue frame	Institutional issues	Tweets that allude to issues such as the Treaties, the functioning of the institutions or the future of Europe.
	Brexit	Tweets concerning Brexit, its negotiations and implications.
	Economy	Tweets related to economic policy and its topics, such as unemployment, wages, public debt, the euro, crisis, etc.
	Trade	Tweets concerning commercial issues, such as free trade agreements or tariff barriers.
	External relations of the EU	Tweets on the political relationship with other areas of the world (bilateral agreements or other kind of agreements).
	Security	Tweets that mention home affairs, terrorism and the European Defense Policy.

	Topics	Description
Issue frame	Immigration	Tweets that include issues related to immigration, including refugees.
	Social policy	Tweets that refer to issues related to the European Social Pillar, gender equality or the European Cohesion Policy.
	Agriculture, livestock and fisheries	Tweets concerning the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and its negotiations, as well as the Fisheries Policy.
	Education, youth and sports	Tweets on policies such as the Erasmus program, dual vocational training or sport promotion actions.
	Environment	Tweets that refer to environmental problems and challenges, with special attention to climate change.
	R&D	Tweets on innovation and development actions within the European Union.
	Digital market	Tweets regarding topics on Digital Single Market and new technologies.
Game frame	Horse race and governing frame	Tweets that refer to possible post-electoral alliances for ruling the European Commission. Mentions to surveys are placed here.
	Conflict frame	Tweets that adopt a position of aggressiveness (good / bad) towards the political opponent.
	Politicians as individuals' frames	Tweets about the personal life of European leaders.
	Organization of events' frame	Tweets on political events, such as electoral debates or meetings with citizens.
	News management frame	Tweets related to the media, such as the mention to a candidate in one of them or the existence of disagreement with a journalistic publication.
Other	Unclassifiable tweets in the previous categories.	

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS

THE AGENDA OF THE CANDIDATES ON TWITTER

The analysis of the *Spitzenkandidaten* accounts during the fixed period has brought a sample of 1,444 tweets, distributed in this way among the candidates: 294 messages by Weber (EPP), 291 by Timmermans (PES), 371 by Zahradil (ACRE), 125 by Keller (GREENS), 241 by Eickhout (GREENS) and 122 by Cué (IE).

The number of messages is higher in the five national candidates selected, reaching 1,794 tweets. The distribution is as follows: 180 messages by Barley (SPD), 588 by Bardella (RN), 336 by Garicano (Cs), 408 by Berlusconi (FI) and 282 by Rodríguez Palop (UP). In the *Spitzenkandidaten* as well as in the national accounts the candidates with more tweets belong to the right Eurosceptic wing. In

any case, the figure of messages by national leaders shows a greater quantitative weight of the campaign on Twitter in national terms.

The analysis of the thematic agenda set by the six *Spitzenkandidaten* provides interesting empirical evidence. Firstly, there is a relatively fragmented media agenda, with a wide variety of topics on which European leaders publish tweets (Table 2). The thematic concentration is greater among the candidates linked ideologically to the left and the green movement. Thus, Timmermans (PES) publishes 24.7% of his tweets about social policy, being his most addressed issue, followed by the economy (6.8%) and the environment (6.5%). The preponderance of social policy also takes place with Cué (IE), which devotes 14.8% of his messages to social policy, compared to the environment (4.9%), EU external relations (2.5%) and immigration (2.5%).

The GREENS candidates Keller and Eickhout also present a concentrated agenda, in this case on environment, which covers 16.8% and 12.9% of their tweets. On the other hand, in the right wing a greater degree of thematic fragmentation is noted. Weber (EPP) is the only one of the *Spitzenkandidaten* that publishes tweets on all topics (issue frames) raised by our analysis sheet. His most recurring theme is social policy —same as Timmermans and Cué—, to which only 8.2% of his messages are referred, closely followed by institutional issues and Brexit.

As for Zahradil (ACRE), his most outstanding fact is the low level of use of the issue frames, having very small percentages. The most mentioned topic is Brexit, with a short 4.8%. This is a completely different issue from the ones most referenced by the other candidates, being outside the two items preferred by the rest of the political parties (social and environmental policies).
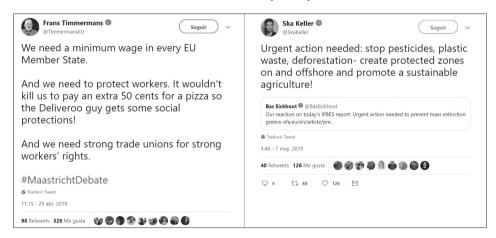
Table 2. Distribution of the 'Spitzenkandidaten' tweets according to their theme (%) (in bold outstanding findings)

Issue frame	Manfred Weber	Frans Timmermans	Jan Zahradil	Ska Keller	Bas Eickhout	Nico Cué
Institutional issues	6.1	2.4	3.5	3.2	4.6	0
Brexit	5.8	0	**4.8**	0.8	3.7	0
Economy	1.7	6.9	3	6.4	3.7	1.6
Trade	1.4	0.7	1.1	0	0.4	0.8
External relations of the EU	1.7	0	1.1	0.8	0.4	2.5
Security	4.1	1.4	0.5	0	0	0
Immigration	2.4	0.3	1.1	2.4	0	2.5
Social policy	**8.2**	**24.7**	0	7.2	2.5	**14.8**
Agriculture, livestock and fisheries	0.4	0	0	0.8	2.1	0
Education, youth and sports	0.7	0.3	0.3	0	0	0

Issue frame	Manfred Weber	Frans Timmermans	Jan Zahradil	Ska Keller	Bas Eickhout	Nico Cué
Environment	2.4	6.5	2.7	**16.8**	**12.9**	4.9
R&D	2.7	0	0	0	0.8	0
Digital market	1	0.7	0	1.6	0	0
Subtotal issue frame	38.6	43.9	18.1	40	31.1	27.1

Source: Own elaboration.

Bearing the results in mind, the ideological axis influences both the agenda items and their concentration. The degree of thematic fragmentation is lower not only on the left, but also on green parties. Besides, the communicative behavior of Zahradil allows to introduce the Europeanism / Euroscepticism axis. The Eurosceptic candidate places much less importance on the issue frames, while also prefers a different issue as the central theme of his agenda regarding other candidates. His issues oppose the European mainstream, which is shaped through the two themes preferred by the rest of *Spitzenkandidaten*: social and environmental policies.

Image 1. Examples of tweets about social policy (Timmermans) and environment (Keller)

Source: <https://twitter.com/timmermanseu> ; <https://twitter.com/skakeller>.

We have seen so far how the issue frames were articulated in the period studied by our research. However, in the whole of the *Spitzenkandidaten* the agenda is revealed much more strategic than thematic (Table 3). That means more oriented to the electoral dispute rather than to the dissemination of proposals (Berganza-Conde, 2008). All the candidates publish more tweets with game frames than issue frames: 54.3% to 38% in Weber, 48.9% to 43.9% in Timmermans, 62.3% to 18.1% in Zahradil, 45.6% to 40% in Keller, 47.8% to 31.1% in Eickhout and 66.4% to 27.1% in Cué.

Table 3. Distribution of the messages according to the issue frame and game frame variables (%) (in bold outstanding findings)

		Manfred Weber	Frans Timmermans	Jan Zahradil	Ska Keller	Bas Eickhout	Nico Cué
Issue frame		38.6	43.9	18.1	40	31.1	27.1
Game frame	Horse race and governing frame	7.5	7.9	15.1	4	4.6	3.3
	Conflict frame	10.2	12.4	**27.8**	11.2	13.3	13.1
	Politicians as individuals' frame	2.7	4.5	2.7	1.6	5.8	17.2
	Organization of events' frame	**26.8**	**21**	10.2	**25.6**	**15.8**	**27**
	News management frame	7.1	3.1	6.5	3.2	8.3	5.8
	Total	**54.3**	**48.9**	**62.3**	**45.6**	**47.8**	**66.4**
Other		7.1	7.2	**19.6**	14.4	**21.1**	6.5
Total		100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

The most referenced strategic element by candidates is the organization of political events. Zahradil (ACRE) is once again the exception, as the conflict approach means his predominant game frame. Zahradil is the only clearly Eurosceptic *Spitzenkandidaten*, but others are also reluctant to the EU, like Cué (IE). These two candidates are indeed those who resort more to strategic frames —62.3% in Zahradil and 66.4%—, a difference that cannot be based on the left-right ideological axis.

Image 2. Examples of tweets related to event organization (Cué) and conflict approach (Zahradil)

Source: <https://twitter.com/avecnico>; <https://twitter.com/zahradiljan>.

The data collected with the *Spitzenkandidaten* are linked to the results achieved from the analysis of the national candidates for the 2019 European elections, providing interesting similarities and differences (Table 4).

Table 4. Distribution of the messages posted by the national candidates according to the issue frame and game frame variables (%) (in bold outstanding findings)

Issue frames and game frames	Katarina Barley	Jordan Bardella	Luis Garicano	Silvio Berlusconi	María Eugenia Rodríguez Palop
Institutional issues	10	0	1.8	4.7	3.5
Brexit	10	0	1.8	0	0
Economy	10	4.1	8.9	**22.2**	3.5
Trade	3.3	0	3.6	1.6	1.7
External relations of the EU	0	0	3.6	0	1.7
Security	3.3	**20.4**	0	1.6	0
Immigration	6.6	13.2	0	0	5.3
Social policy	**16.6**	5.1	3.6	0	**12.3**
Agriculture, livest and fisheries	0	6.1	3.6	0	3.5
Education, youth and sports	0	0	1.8	1.6	0
Environment	3.3	0	1.8	0	8.8
R&D	0	2	1.8	0	0
Digital market	0	0	0	0	0
Subtotal issue frame	**63.3**	**51**	32.1	31.7	40.3
Horse race and governing frame	3.3	2	1.8	19	**17.5**
Conflict frame	3.3	**21.4**	**21.4**	**28.6**	3.5
Politicians as individuals' frame	6.6	0	7.1	6.3	12.3
Organization of events' frame	10	12.2	**21.4**	1.6	**17.5**
News management frame	3.3	10.2	3.6	7.9	0
Subtotal game frame	26.6	45.9	**55.3**	**63.4**	**50.8**
Other	10	3	12.5	4.8	8.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

The first noteworthy aspect is that two of the national profiles —Barley (SPD) and Bardella (RN)— expose most of their tweets with a thematic component. This practice does not occur in the case of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, who prefer a strategic framing. In addition, there is no ideological explanation for this behavior, neither on the left-right nor on that of Europeanism-Euroscepticism axis, since Barley belongs to a social democratic party, while Bardella does so to a far-right and Eurosceptic organization.

The reason for the main use of the thematic agenda by Barley and Bardella may be caused by their differential treatment of the issues, in comparison with *Spitzenkandidaten*. The observation of the tweets posted by national profiles shows how they address issues from a more national perspective (Image 3), meanwhile transnational candidates tend to present issues at the EU level. Therefore, the campaign for the European Parliament elections seems to take place between two different poles: the national and the European ones, with state candidates in the first field and the *Spitzenkandidaten* in the second.

The issue of social policy is the most addressed by Barley (SPD) and Rodríguez Palop (UP), evidencing an ideological behavior from the left already observed in the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Moreover, Bardella (RN) has the issue security as a priority. Berlusconi (FI) also makes extensive use of an issue frame, which in his case refers to the economy, although this candidate has more strategic tweets than thematic ones.

Beyond the particularities, 3 of the 5 national accounts (Garicano, Berlusconi, and Rodríguez Palop) use more strategic than thematic resources, as did by the *Spitzenkandidaten*. In them, the frequent game frame was the organization of political events. By contrast, for the accounts by countries the most recurrent strategic approach is the conflict one. 3 national candidates from center to far-right (Bardella, Garicano, and Berlusconi) use it mostly.

Image 3. Examples of tweets concerning the issue frame of security (Bardella) and the game frame of conflict (Berlusconi)

Source: <https://twitter.com/j_bardella>; <https://twitter.com/berlusconi>.

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In the profile of the only Eurosceptic candidate (Zahradil, ACRE) there was not a typical practice of populist leaders, which consists in prioritizing a thematic agenda of concrete achievements (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Nevertheless, this preference for thematization can be seen in Bardella (RN), who devotes 20.4% of his tweets to a controversial issue such as security. Meanwhile Zahradil belongs to a European alliance that accepts the EU as an institutional framework from a critical approach, Bardella's position is much more populist, since he is part of a far-right party that proposed the exit of France from the Union.

To sum up, an exact translation between national parties and European alliances cannot be made, even if the elections are the same. However, interesting similarities have been observed during the investigation period: social policy as an issue frame on the left, game frame of conflict in Euroscepticism. Differences have also been noted, since there is a preference for the organization of events in the *Spitzenkandidaten* use of the strategic framework, while in the national accounts the conflict and even the strategy appear more frequently, for example in the profile of Rodríguez Palop.

Program and Strategy in User Interaction

The analysis of the impact of the agenda developed on Twitter by the *Spitzenkandidaten* shows that there are 7 themes and 1 strategic frame that manage to catch users' attention above average in both retweets and favorites, with an average of 21.04 and 61.12 (Table 5). Preferred themes are Brexit, external relations, security of the EU, immigration, social policy, the environment and the digital market. As for game frames, it is the horse race and governing frame that rises above the average.

Table 5. Average retweets and favorites according to the theme / agenda of the messages of the 'Spitzenkandidaten' (in bold above the average)

Theme / agenda	Retweets	Favorites
Institutional issues	13.88	37.47
Brexit	**29.45**	**73.07**
Economy	20.83	**68.31**
Trade	9.25	19.16
External relations of the EU	**24.04**	**69.81**
Security	**36.17**	**110.23**
Immigration	**23.5**	**86.77**
Social policy	**25.13**	**76.75**
Agriculture, livestock and fisheries	**27.16**	50
Education, youth and sports	20.5	**86.25**

Theme / agenda	Retweets	Favorites
Environment	**29.31**	**89.73**
R&D	16.11	51.11
Digital market	**27**	**82**
Subtotal issue frame	23.25	69.28
Horse race and governing frame	**28.7**	**77.83**
Conflict frame	14.42	44.76
Politicians as individuals' frame	8.62	35.05
Organization of events' frame	16.78	**59.92**
News management frame	9.47	26.93
Subtotal game frame	15.59	48.89
Other	19.46	**73.20**
Total	21.04	64.12

Source: Own elaboration.

The issues that cause a greater degree of interaction do not always match the most widespread by the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Only social policy and the environment are present in the European agendas, while issues such as security, immigration or EU foreign relations get the attention of the audience, despite not being a priority in the agenda of transnational candidates. For instance, the issue frame of security is only mentioned by Weber (EPP), Timmermans (PES) and Zahradil (ACRE).

This differentiation also takes place in the issue frame of digital market, and to a lesser extent with Brexit. In fact, the tweet that captures more interactions of the entire sample refers to Internet legislation (Image 4). Besides, in the field of game frames a similar situation is reported, given that the frame of horse race and governing has a high impact that does not suit its limited presence in the *Spitzenkandidaten* tweets.

According to the data in Table 5, the audience chooses to interact more with the program than with the strategic elements. Although the programmatic contents are scarce in the messages of the candidates, these concrete proposals mean the most attention from the citizens. The strategic issues are revealed as of less interest to the audience, at least as far as participation on Twitter is concerned. Our research also collects the average of retweets and favorites from national accounts (Table 6). Through to this data, an overview of the interaction with the audience caused by the domestic candidates can be offered.

Table 6. Average retweets and favorites according to the theme / agenda of the messages of the national accounts (in bold above the average)

Theme / agenda	Retweets	Favorites
Institutional issues	75.66	208.77
Brexit	20.75	115.75
Economy	62.64	146.71
Trade	44	91.2
External relations of the EU	49.33	82.33
Security	**351.47**	**540.95**
Immigration	**275**	**493.11**
Social policy	81	197.52
Agriculture, livestock and fisheries	77.1	126.3
Education, youth and sports	17.5	69.5
Environment	**137.28**	**661.57**
R&D	**148.66**	**319**
Digital market	-	-
Subtotal of issue frame	111.69	254.39
Horse race and governing frame	**237.85**	**389.77**
Conflict frame	**155.92**	**294.69**
Politicians as individuals' frame	**150.70**	**379.64**
Organization of events' frame	73.5	162.84
News management frame	56.6	133.44
Subtotal game frame	**134.91**	**272.07**
Other	52.71	148.90
Total	114.87	253.44

Source: Own elaboration.

The first outstanding finding of this analysis is the greater interaction on Twitter brought by the national candidates: 114.87 retweets and 253.44 favorites on average compared to 21.04 and 64.12 by the *Spitzenkandidaten*. This data shows the remoteness of European politics. There is no significant difference in the subtotal of issue frame and game frame, having slightly higher attention towards strategic frames, in opposition to what happened in the *Spitzenkandidaten*.

The most preferred issue (security) and strategic frame (horse race and governing) by the audience coincide with those that aroused more attention among the messages of the Pan-European candidates, meaning a clear continuity.

Immigration and environmental topics are also important. As differential elements there is a high interaction with the issue frame R&D, as well as with the game frames of conflict approach and personal issues (politicians as individuals' frame).

Image 4. Most interesting tweets for the public. Digital market in the 'Spitzenkandidaten' (Keller) and security in the national leaders (Bardella)

Source: <https://twitter.com/skakeller>; <https://twitter.com/j_bardella>.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research provide a range of conclusions on the communication on Twitter of the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the national candidates for the 2019 European Parliament elections. We organize this information in four items to verify the hypotheses of the study, as well as following the objectives set by this paper:

1. In the Twitter profiles analyzed (*Spitzenkandidaten* and national leaders) there is a thematic difference between the parties according to the left / right axis, but also according to the Europeanism / Euroscepticism axis, which validates our first hypothesis that claimed the existence of that distinction. The left parties have a greater thematic concentration with social policy being their

central issue, while in the right wing the fragmentation of the agenda is a characteristic feature. A new ideological position (green movement) comes up, permeating the left-right axis and placing the environment as the main issue frame.

2. In any case, the axis with the greatest explanatory power is that of Europeanism / Euroscepticism, given that the Eurosceptic Zahradil (ACRE) exposes a different communication compared to the rest of the candidates. By contrast, the domestic leaders analyzed develop a more heterogeneous agenda. Two candidates from very different parties —Barley (SPD) and Bardella (RN)— present even more thematic tweets than strategic ones, but they do so from a national approach.

3. The second of our hypothesis, which mentioned that the strategic approach (game frame) monopolized most of the messages, being smaller in the Eurosceptic parties, is verified only in its first part. The *Spitzenkandidaten* used predominantly strategic frames during the research period. However, the results invalidate the claim that the strategy is less in the Eurosceptic parties, since the only Eurosceptic *Spitzenkandidaten* has been the one who used the strategy the most. The thematic preference of populist leaders for thematization pointed out by the literature has only been detected in the profile of Bardella (RN).

4. The third hypothesis is also validated, referring to the fact that national issues have an important presence in the tweets of national candidates, which would show that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system has failed to create a European political agenda. The campaign for the 2019 EP election moves on two levels: the national one, in which the candidates focus on local issues, and the transnational one, in which the *Spitzenkandidaten* address issues from a European perspective. Nevertheless, this practice is less frequent, as strategic approaches are more easily decodable for the citizens.

5. The last of the hypotheses of our research, which claimed a low personalization of the messages combined the diffusion of the political proposals, is only validated in its first part. Following the pattern of the European political culture, the game frame of personal themes is hardly quoted. Only the left-wing draw on it more frequently. Hence, the low personalization of EU policies is verified, but this does not mean that political proposals are prioritized. Instead of concrete initiatives, the *Spitzenkandidaten* grant more space to strategist frames.

In conclusion, the *Spitzenkandidaten* system has meant an attempt to politicize the EU to overcome its recognized democratic deficit, which has kept citizens away from the European integration project for decades. In the three months prior to the 2019 elections, the communication of the *Spitzenkandidaten* was characterized by strategic approaches, not acting as European leaders on Twitter. This fact, in addition to the huge difference in interaction between national and European accounts, much greater in the former, show that Europe still does not have a wide range of concrete program proposals at the transnational level, although these messages are what catch a greater attention of citizens.

The main limitation of this article concerns the methodological research. The sample of the quantitative analysis is small, as the use of social media by Pan-European candidates has shown limited. Furthermore, the codification procedure applied by a single encoder could also be a point, but we consider that the previous steps adopted have warranted an objective codification. The *Spitzenkandidaten* system means a novel object of study, but the issue and game frames used for research are based in a classic approach on the framing of politics.

Future lines of research should focus on how EU personal practices affect turnout in the European Parliament elections as well as trust in the European Union itself. Beyond the *Spitzenkandidaten* model, which could be in danger because countries are reluctant to support transnational candidates to rule the European Commission, it is important to analyze whether EU politics moves towards a personalization scenario.

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