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Policy Actors' Struggle for Attention: The Role of Peer Networks in the Migration Discourse on Twitter (X)

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Abstract: Policy actors (PAs) like nongovernmental organizations, political parties or governmental institutions strategically communicate on social media to gain attention and thus influence the public agenda. We argue that networks of PAs engaged in the same issues (i.e., a PA's *peer network*) are crucial to attracting the interest of a broad audience. Drawing on network theory, we posit that (i) ideological homophily, and (ii) the centrality and embeddedness in a PA's peer network increase the attention received from *all* Twitter (now X) users. We investigate these premises by analyzing the European migration discourse on Twitter (2014–2020). The results of our study reveal that the centrality of PAs in their peer networks and ideologically similar relations considerably increase attention from the whole Twittersphere. These findings provide strong evidence that a PA's role in its organizational peer network on social media governs the attention received in the overall discourse.

Keywords: Twitter/X attention; migration discourse; social network analysis; homophily

1 Introduction

Policy actors (PAs) such as nongovernmental organizations, political parties or governmental institutions are strategic communicators and attempt to gain attention in order to influence the public agenda (Guo and Saxton 2018; Saffer et al. 2019; Thrall, Stecula, and Sweet 2014). They create connections with other PAs involved in the

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same policy field to address social issues through collaboration and mutual recognition (Guo and Acar 2005; Hall, Schmitz, and Dedmon 2020). Attracting public attention is crucial for reaching PAs organizational goals – convincing people to vote for them, to find donors for their cause or to influence the public's views and exercise discursive power (Jungherr, Posegga, and An 2019; Saxton and Guo 2020). Thus, to address the social and political issues that PAs care about, their audiences must be aware of these positions to garner support. Yet, how PAs address the public and, eventually, shape people's opinion, has changed. Digital media are increasingly important for PAs, in particular, social networks like Twitter (now X) (Jungherr, Rivero, and Gayo-Avello 2020). Our paper is therefore concerned with the question how PAs can gain attention on Twitter. More specifically, we focus on the question *how PAs' peer networks with other PAs* (i.e., PAs engaged in the same policy issues) *impact the attention they receive from the general Twittersphere*. Note that regardless of the rebranding to X, we continue to refer to the platform as Twitter, as it was the name at the time of the data collection. Furthermore, while there were some changes to the platform, the central functions discussed here remain the same.

Research that focuses on organizations as main unit of analysis and their efforts to gain attention is scarce (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012; Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton 2012; Saffer et al. 2019; Wang, Cheng, and Sun 2021). However, some studies emphasize that NGOs' networks with their peers are crucial to gather the attention of a broad audience and to set specific issues on the public agenda (Guo and Saxton 2018; Sabatier and Weible 2007; Saffer et al. 2019; Sun, Yang, and Saffer 2022; Yang and Saffer 2021). It has further been argued that scholars should investigate *multistakeholder issue networks*, i.e., focusing not only on NGOs but, more broadly, on all PAs that play a role within the same policy field (e.g., Saffer 2019; Sun, Yang, and Saffer 2022). Yet, how the relationships between PAs impact the attention from a broader audience is almost completely unexplored. To the best of our knowledge, there is only one other study that examines the influence of networking strategy between different types of PAs (Stier, Schünemann, and Steiger 2018). In contrast to their study, however, our data is not limited to specific hashtags and examines the impact of PA's relationships on the received attention from the broader Twittersphere.

Thus, going beyond previous research on the connection strategy of organizations, our key argument suggests that PAs' role in their *peer networks* (i.e., relations to other organizations active in the same policy field) impacts the attention PAs receive from a much larger crowd on social media. We argue that organizations with a strong multistakeholder issue network can reap the benefits of this network and reach a greater audience. We assume that the different ways PAs connect to others in their peer network are crucial in the struggle for the attention of a larger audience (i.e., the attention of all Twitter users) in two ways: first, *network position* and *embeddedness* in their peer network increases attention; secondly, *homophile relationships* to other PAs with similar ideologies (vs. diverse relations) might add to a successful strategy.

It is therefore important to distinguish between the attention from peers (only a limited set of PAs) and all Twitter users (minus those peers). In other words, we argue that the general attention received by a PA on social media is closely associated to properties of a much smaller network that consists of a rather narrow set of similar PAs. Learning how peer networks relate to public attention would be of great practical use, because peer networks are limited in size and often well-known by PAs. Attention of peers might therefore be a useful strategy for PAs to earn one of their most important currencies, public attention.

For that purpose, we focus on the European discourse on migration and asylum between 2014 and 2020. We collect a massive dataset of around 17 million tweets from almost 7 million authors in 13 European languages. Therein, we trace the networks and communications of around 500 manually selected PAs. We choose the migration issue because it is polarized as well as salient in the political and media discourse (Eberl et al. 2018; Strijbis, Helmer, and de Wilde 2020). Going beyond a classic left-right ideological view, however, we argue that this polarization is visible in a transnational cleavage system that spans between nativist and globalist actors (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Sicakkan and Heiberger 2022). It is characterized by conflicts between different levels of government (e.g., European vs. national) and non-governmental actors (Brack, Coman, and Crespy 2019; Giannetto 2020; Sanchez Salgado 2021). The so-called 'Refugee Crisis' also involved a wide array of different types of organizations (Sun, Yang, and Saffer 2022). Migration discourse is thus an ideal case to trace network-based mechanisms of attention, because many stakeholders with different interests are involved. Not the least, the European discourse on migration and asylum in this period is of great public and political interest (Menshikova and van Tubergen 2022).

The following section develops our theoretical argument and derives several hypotheses, before moving on to explaining the selection of PAs, collection of data and operationalization of our key variables. In the subsequent parts, we present the empirical analyses and discuss our findings. Taken together, our findings reveal how PAs' positions and types of relation in their relatively small peer networks are tightly linked to the interest of the whole Twittersphere.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Strategic Goals of Policy Actors

PAs do not necessarily choose actions by rationally tallying all costs and benefits. Instead, they are subject to limited attention spans (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Jones and Baumgartner 2012). Similar to their publics, they can only consider a given set of issues at the same time (Thrall, Stecula, and Sweet 2014). Thus, on the one hand, PAs react to issues

and fields high in the public attention in order to influence the policy agenda. However, on the micro-level, they are tasked with the challenge of garnering attention from their target audiences while adapting to more broad changes of the policy agenda (Guo and Saxton 2018; Lamothe and Lavastida 2020). PAs and their networks so influence public opinion by communicating with and to their specific audiences (Knoke 1996).

Each PA is thereby focused on gathering support for their own position, mobilizing for the cause of the organization and, ultimately, altering public opinion to their own advantage (e.g., policy or election support) or utilizing information to convince key decision-makers (MacIndoe 2014; Sabatier and Weible 2007; Saxton and Guo 2020). The achievement of these strategic goals is highly dependent on the effectiveness of their communication which can be understood as the attention the public (or a certain part of it) pays to its messages (Guo and Saxton 2018; Lamothe and Lavastida 2020). The attention actors receive from the public is a scarce resource in the media sphere. PAs compete for this media attention as it has been shown to be instrumental for agenda-setting and to impact policy (Müller 2022). Therefore, the effectiveness of their (digital) communication is essential for the achievement of the aforementioned goals.

2.2 The Role of Collaboration with Peers on Social Media

The fulfilment of PA's strategic goals occurs in policy subsystems or policy networks where interaction between different types of actors takes place in order to shape policy (Coleman and Perl 1999). In such subsystems, *advocacy coalitions* form around actors' shared set of core beliefs (Sabatier and Weible 2007). Different types of institutions such as governments, international governmental organizations or NGOs can become part of those coalitions and form multistakeholder issue networks. These peer networks emerge through information exchange, collaboration and membership in advocacy coalitions (Sun, Yang, and Saffer 2022; Toepler and Abramson 2021).

In the digital sphere, we can also speak of networked power which develops from horizontal relationships and connections between the actors who are part of these relationships (Hall, Schmitz, and Dedmon 2020). Traditionally, power is understood as a difference in status between actors, while networked powers arises from collective organization, adaptability to changing circumstances and enables a PA to accomplish goals not possible without co-operation. In essence, this means that PAs have the chance to create new forms of power through collaboration with like-minded organizations, particularly in the digital realm.

Our key argument is that the level of attention of a PA is dependent on a specific type of network, i.e., its *peer network* (Klijn, Steijn, and Edelenbos 2010). Peers are other PAs engaged in the same issue field, in our case migration and international protection. They may, however, include networks between different types of

organizations in multistakeholder issue networks, because facing complex social and societal issues requires cooperation between different types of organizations (Doerfel and Taylor 2017; McGuire and Agranoff 2011; O'Brien et al. 2019; Saffer 2019; Shumate, Fulk, and Monge 2005; Smith 2005).

Creating peer networks has several advantages for PAs: they can build trust and acceptance of decisions between stakeholders and serve to share resources such as information with each other (Ulibarri and Scott 2017). When it comes to marginalized communities (e.g., migrants and asylum seekers and those advocating for them) feelings of bonding, belonging and support are particularly crucial to achieve shared goals. In these fields, networks between organizations can facilitate reaching their objectives (Rodriguez 2016). Peer networks thus act as an avenue of resource allocation which can be understood as organizations' social capital (Sandström and Carlsson 2008; Saxton and Guo 2020). Social media has an even greater capability for the generation of social capital due to its interactive and network-dependent nature. Some even claim that online social capital is a new form of social capital (Saxton and Guo 2020; Yang and Liu 2022). These resources can be used to shape the policy agenda and public opinion as well as improve the effectiveness of public management (Robins, Lewis, and Wang 2012; Sandström and Carlsson 2008). Furthermore, it has been argued that PAs acting alone are not as able to sustain public attention on an issue as if they are well-connected in their peer networks (Saffer et al. 2019). When they are part of a peer network, they may magnify each other's messages and thus receive more attention than they would have alone, making it a valuable strategy to group together with like-minded peers. They are able to promote collective agendas, create and maintain social capital through bonds of reciprocity and trust (Rodriguez 2016).

PAs on social media mainly attempt to influence public opinion via their messages. The level of engagement with these messages is what can indicate the amount of attention paid to them and thus reflects their potential influence (Guo and Saxton 2018) and discursive power (Jungherr, Posegga, and An 2019). All types of PAs studied here rely in some capacity on effective strategic communication to motivate their stakeholders and publics (Rodriguez 2016). Parties, (supra)governmental agencies and NGOs alike vie for electoral support, for their desired policy and for funding which depends on their ability to reach a large audience (Müller 2022). Both attention of the (platform's) public and other PAs, can be conceptualized as connections and interactions of a network (Doerfel 2018; Saffer et al. 2019).

2.3 Network Positions and Embeddedness

Based on general insights from network theory (Newman 2010), we argue that the *individual position* of a PA in its peer network has an impact on the attention it receives, i.e., whether it is more or less central in a (directed) network's structure.

This means that the degree to which it is part of advocacy coalitions, or peer networks, within the migration and asylum discourse impacts the communicative success it has. We distinguish two types of centrality within the network, which can be seen as measures for the broader advocacy coalition or multistakeholder peer network in the area of migration and asylum. The *indegree-centrality* of an actor can be understood as *popularity* (Freeman 1979). Thus, in our case, a popular actor is receiving attention from many peers, i.e., its tweets are cited by others. In contrast, an actor with many outgoing relations (*outdegree-centrality*) is considered an *active* actor, which should also help to attract the attention of peers. In- and outdegree centrality are among the measures most often used to predict influence on Twitter (Baviera 2018; Riquelme and González-Cantergiani 2016). Consequently, our first two hypotheses are:

Activity Hypothesis (H1)*: The more a policy actor interacts with its peers (*i.e., *higher outdegree), the more attention it receives from a larger audience.*

Popularity Hypothesis (H2)*: The more a policy actor is cited by its peers (*i.e., *higher indegree), the more attention it receives from a larger audience.*

In social network research, subgroups of actors play an important role, i.e., groups that have tighter connections with each other than with other actors in the network (Girvan and Newman 2002). On Twitter, actors connect with a small group of users more frequently than with others and thus form subgroups (Saffer et al. 2019; Yang and Saffer 2021). In other words, actors are *embedded* in social relations with other actors, which generates mutual trust (Granovetter 1985). Embeddedness in a subgroup conditions whether an actor has access to opportunities provided by the membership in the subgroup (Uzzi 1996). Thus, magnifying each other's messages in subgroups enables online interlocutors to get the attention of the public and, ultimately, reach social influence and mobilization power (Barberá et al. 2015; Saffer et al. 2019; Yang and Saffer 2021). These subgroups can be defined as tighter groups of advocacy coalitions within the multistakeholder issue network. The third hypothesis thus states:

Embeddedness Hypothesis (H3)*: The more embedded a policy actor is in sub-groups within its peer network, the more attention it receives from a larger audience.*

2.4 Homophily in Networks

Homophily might be considered one of the most important mechanisms shaping social interactions (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Smith, McPherson, and Smith-Lovin 2014). It implies that relations are more likely between actors that are similar to each other with respect to certain attributes (e.g., gender, ethnicity, political leanings, etc.). In the case of homophile organizations, perceived similarity

symbolizes trustworthiness, predictability and compatibility (Atouba and Shumate 2015; Shumate et al. 2016). Creating interactions with similar organizations thus creates advocacy coalitions, which have a higher probability of receiving public attention due to sharing social capital and resources among them.

The term homophily was coined by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954), who distinguish between *status homophily* and *value homophily*. The first refers to sociodemographic dimensions or, in the case of organizations, attributes such as organization age, activity specialization and organizational size. Instead, we will focus on value homophily which involves shared beliefs, attitudes and values (Atouba and Shumate 2015; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954).

Value homophily can be created by a similar use of meanings and symbols among peers (Shumate et al. 2016). Advocacy coalitions are formed in specific policy subsystems such as migration policy based on a collective identity, which is produced, reproduced and carried out through communication (Koschmann 2013). Studies have shown that actors on Twitter rather interact with others that agree with them ideologically in the sense that they specialize in similar scopes and political leanings (Baviera 2018; Conover et al. 2011; Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2007; Himelboim, McCreery, and Smith 2013). Ideologically similar actors have, for instance, been found to be more likely to follow each other on Twitter (Barberá et al. 2015; De Coninck et al. 2023; Hekim 2021) or to be more likely to befriend one another on social networking sites (Cargnino, Neubaum, and Winter 2023). In the case of message reactions such as retweets and mentions, similar patterns have been found (Del Valle and Borge Bravo 2018; Hekim 2021; Hemsley et al. 2018). Thus, peer networks, or advocacy coalitions, are expected to particularly emerge from ideologically similar actors. This is especially true for marginalized or extreme actors (Ackland and Gibson 2013). Previous research finds that actors with extreme political leanings are more likely to interact amongst each other on social media because they receive less attention from traditional media (Ackland and Gibson 2013; Heft, Wittwer, and Pfetsch 2017).

Instead of the rather simplistic left-right spectrum of political ideology, we use *cleavage theory* to classify organizations into ideological groups. Classic cleavage theory based on Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) seminal work was originally developed to understand the underlying social conflicts that drove the emergence of the European party system. Recently, the theory has been expanded beyond the national realm to global politics, where additional cleavages have been identified (Hooghe and Marks 2018).

This is particularly useful for our study, as we are employing our research design within a policy subsystem with high transnational and global importance: migration and asylum. Empirical research inspired by cleavage theory has documented that there are four main global ideological groups that are in conflict and contestation with each other about multiple policy issues in the migration and asylum field (De Wilde et al. 2019; Ford and Jennings 2020; Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty

2021; Kriesi et al. 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2002; Piketty 2020; Sicakkan 2012; 2016; Sicakkan and Heiberger 2022; Zürn 2019). These groups form advocacy coalitions and are dubbed *globalists, regionalists, nation-statists,* and *nativists*.[1] The categories relate to the broader political divides in society, which are represented and sustained by governments, political parties, and other actors. Each actor expresses its policy preferences as a function of its position in the cleavage system, which in turn affects the appeal it exerts on Twitter users.

Additionally, along the lines of value homophily, we expect that each group will try to amplify the voices of their own ideology and mainly retweet other PAs that have the same ideological leaning. Retweeting ideologically similar actors could mean that they reach a wider interested public which shares the same ideological values (i.e., the followers of the retweeting PA). Consequently, they are able to receive more attention in the form of retweets than if it was shared to a less interested public by an ideologically opposed PA.

We thus assume that homophile relations are associated with more attention from a wide audience and therefore hypothesize:
Homophily Hypothesis (H4)*: PAs that mainly interact with other PAs belonging to the same ideological group gather more attention from a larger audience.*

3 Data and Methods

The internet in general, and social networking sites in particular, have the ability to build relationships between organizations and publics (Rodriguez 2016). Social Media Platforms provide interactive, accessible, affordable and easy-to-use interaction and engagement tools for all types of organizations. In particular, they are used for information sharing and relationship-building (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). These relationships can be formed both with the public as well as with stakeholders, volunteers, mass media and others, especially because social media provides the opportunity of dialogic communication.

1 *Globalists* aim to develop a global supranational system of migration and refugee protection based on binding international human-rights norms in international law. They generally view migration as positive. *Regionalists* seek region-wide legal and institutional solutions to address the limits of what individual states can achieve in the handling of migration and refugee protection. *Nation-statists* may be open or closed to migrants and refugees, depending on the conjuncture, as they give primacy to the state's obligations to its own citizens. They accept multilateral, voluntary state collaboration on migration and refugee protection, but reject any binding international arrangements. *Nativists* are against migration and see no need for international protection. We explain the groups in greater detail in Appendix part A.

Social media is thus particularly suited to study co-operation and reciprocal communication through its network-style architecture. Furthermore, social media data, unlike survey data, includes voluntary statements and a 'natural' setting for the author of the statement, where communication efforts can be investigated (Bloodgood, Stroup, and Wong 2023).

Studying Twitter attention in particular as compared to other social media platforms has several advantages. Political actors such as social movements, parties, government agencies and NGOs particularly often adopt a social media presence on Twitter compared to other platforms (Blevins et al. 2019; Castanho Silva and Proksch 2022; Dimitrova, Heidenreich, and Georgiev 2022; Müller 2022). Twitter has been shown to influence social and political change (Blevins et al. 2019; Mousavi and Gu 2019) and is easily accessible for the public and organizations alike. Furthermore, Twitter has a particularly large audience with 330 million active users per month worldwide (Dimitrova, Heidenreich, and Georgiev 2022).

3.1 Data Collection

We collected data with a keyword-based search on a commercial platform with access to the complete Twitter archival[2] in order to identify the European communication networks and the involvement of global institutions, European authorities, states, and non-state organizations in regard to public communication on international protection (Heiberger et al. 2022). The keywords for the query were assembled by an international consortium of experts and aim to include groups who might need protection and policy actors who are likely to be involved in policymaking on refugee and asylum matters such as the European Union and its supranational and intergovernmental institutions.[3]

In so doing, we gathered around 17 million tweets from almost 7 million authors in 13 European languages[4] in the timeframe of 2014–2020[5] (Heiberger et al. 2022). We extracted all communications that contained retweets (N = 11.835.869). Retweets are defined as previously posted tweets that are shared by another Twitter user (Twitter 2021).

2 Provided by Brandwatch (https://www.brandwatch.com/).

3 Keywords used: refugee, migration/migrant, immigration/immigrant, asylum/asylum seeker NEAR European Union, European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, Council of the European Union, European Court of Justice, Frontex, Europol, EASO, ECHO, EU-LISA.

4 Because the data is not reliably geo-referenced, it is not possible to collect data only pertaining to a certain country. The selection of certain languages, however, makes it possible to gather data that is of importance in the national discourse. We include English, Czech, German, Greek, Spanish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Dutch, Polish, Slovak, Danish and Swedish.

5 Due to data access restrictions, we needed to collect data in late 2020. Therefore, we could only gather all tweets up to November 2020.

3.2 Sample Selection: Identifying Policy Actors

From the above sample we select PAs that are deemed important in the international refugee protection system and migration discourse. We aimed to include PAs from different governance levels including national political parties,[6] national governments and heads of states, regional and international authorities from the EU and global level, global institutions as well as non-governmental and civil society organizations (NGOs and CSOs) (Heiberger et al. 2022).

The identification of institutional policy actors is relatively straightforward, while selecting national and international NGOs and CSOs that focus on migrant and refugee matters is less so. We chose multiple strategies to systematically find relevant organizations. First, we used the *Event-registry platform*,[7] a database containing newspaper articles from a wide variety of countries. Therein, organizations are extracted via Named Entity Recognition and matched to Wikipedia entries. From this list, we collect NGOs and CSOs that were most active for the time period in traditional media.

To avoid a potential selection bias, particularly in countries with little communication activity on Twitter, we checked manually with structured key-word-based searches whether there were more internationally active CSOs on Wikipedia (Heiberger et al. 2022). This follows the same idea as the Event-registry platform that relevant organizations are likely to have Wikipedia pages. Here, only English-language searches were conducted to include the NGOs and CSOs that are internationally active on global and European scales (see Appendix part B. for more details on actor selection). Member organizations from larger global and European NGO networks were also added. These NGOs and CSOs were then matched with their Twitter handles and compared to the actors contained in the retweets in our data, resulting in the final set of actors for the social network analysis (a total number of 503 actors).[8]

3.3 Operationalization

3.3.1 Attention on Twitter

Our main outcome is the public attention of PAs on Twitter, i.e., the attention a PA receives from the Twittersphere. We describe with Twittersphere all Twitter users that are not part of the PA network and therefore distinguish between the attention from peers (only a limited set of other PAs) and all Twitter users (minus those peers). We

6 Political parties were chosen via the ParlGov dataset (Döring, Huber, and Manow 2020).

7 https://eventregistry.org/.

8 A complete list with all actors used in this analysis can be obtained from the authors on demand.

operationalize attention by the number of retweets of a PA. The number of retweets is thereby defined as the total number of times an organization's tweet was retweeted by others (Saffer et al. 2019; Saxton and Guo 2020). Influence on Twitter is best measured as retweets, which serves the purpose of rapid information diffusion and is the most unambiguous sign of endorsement (Stier, Schünemann, and Steiger 2018). To only gather attention from the wider audience and avoid issues of autocorrelation, the final dependent variable excludes retweets from other PAs of our sample.

3.3.2 Centrality and Homophily

Using a network methodology, we assess whether and how different PAs are successfully using their network among other actors in the field of migration and international protection during the time-frame of analysis. We are using retweets between PAs to construct the social network from interactive communications. More technically, the nodes of the directed, weighted network are the accounts of the selected actors, and its edges are the interactions understood as retweets, weighted by the frequency of a specific interaction between two nodes (Heiberger et al. 2022).

Our independent variables are obtained from the network. First, we measure *activity* of a PA as the number of outgoing retweets of other actors (outdegree) within the peer network (H1). Likewise, we assess policy actors' popularity in the network as the number of incoming links to a policy actor (indegree) (H2). Both measures are normalized by the network's size, providing an indication of the position a PA holds in its peer network (Freeman 1979; Heiberger et al. 2022).

In addition to centrality measures, we are adding variables that not only consider the policy actor's direct connections, but also the presence or absence of ties between a node's alteri to account for a PA's *embeddedness* (H3). To operationalize this, we are using a *triad count* which reports the number of triads that a node belongs to and identifies a sub-group within the network, i.e., if $A \rightarrow B$, $B \rightarrow C$, $C \rightarrow A$ (Saffer et al. 2019).

Finally, we assess the similarity of PAs along the lines of *ideological groups* as assumed in cleavage theory (H4). For this purpose, we manually assigned each PA to a specific cleavage-theoretical category: nativist, nation-statist, regionalist, globalist (see Appendix part A). We then measure the heterogeneity by calculating ideological homophily. This is the share of ties to the same cleavage category compared to all ties. This means, this measure can take values between zero and one with zero representing low homophily and one representing ties to only the same cleavage category as oneself.

Finally, prior research has found that the total number of tweets and number of followers of an organization's Twitter account impacts the level of engagement of an

organization (Guo and Saxton 2018). We therefore control for those characteristics in all models.

4 Analysis

4.1 Description of Peer Networks

The peer network consists of 303 nodes (i.e., PAs) and 934 edges (i.e., interactions).[9] All other actors did not interact with each other and were manually assigned network and homophily measures of zero. Figure 1 shows the Twitter handles of the top 10 most central actors in terms of activity and popularity. Various types of EU institutions are most central both in terms of activity and popularity in the retweet network. However, there are also some NGOs that can be pointed out as either particularly active[10] or popular.[11]

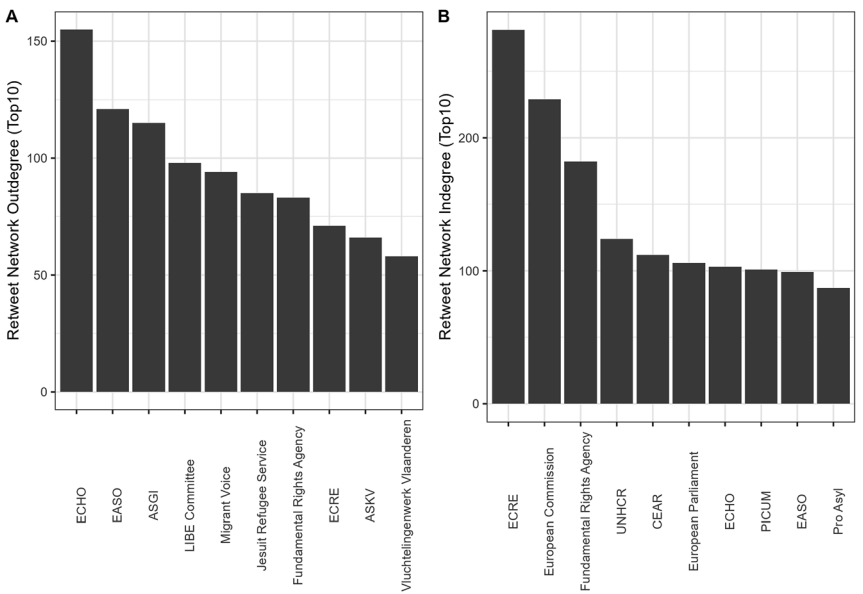

Figure 1: Most central PAs in peer networks on Twitter (2014–2020) regarding activity (outdegree) (A) and popularity (indegree) (B).

9 Density: 0.01020698.

10 ASGI, Migrant Voice UK, JRS, ASKV and Vluchtelingenwerk Flanders.

11 ECRE, CEAR, PICUM and ProAsyl.

4.2 Regression Results

Our dependent variable represents count data (i.e., the number of retweets) and is highly skewed. Consequently, we model our data with a Negative Binomial regression to test the hypothesized effects. All independent variables except for Twitter Followers were z-transformed to account for the different scales of the variables. Followers were log-transformed due to the distribution of the variable. Table 1 presents standard deviations and other descriptive statistics.[12]

We fit three models with a different variable subset corresponding to each hypothesis: 'Network metrics' (model 1) test the hypotheses containing the network measures on activity (outdegree, H1), popularity (indegree, H2) and embeddedness (Number of Triads, H3). 'Ideology' (model 2) contains all variables associated with ideological similarity, the cleavage theory dummies (nativist PAs are the reference category) and the Ideological Homophily variable (H4). Finally, we present the full model (model 3) that includes all variables. Each model contains controls for Twitter followers and number of Tweets as well as robust standard errors. Because it can be argued that the network measures are related and may violate independence of observation, we include a check for multicollinearity in Section C.1 of the Appendix.

The results for the models are summarized in Figure 2. Figure 2 depicts all three model specifications (see legend) and which variables pertain to which Hypothesis (brackets). The dots, triangles and squares respectively indicate the strength of the coefficient (odds ratio), the whiskers show the 95 % confidence intervals (robust standard errors). The dotted line indicates odds ratio of one. Therefore, coefficients larger than one show an increase and smaller than one a decrease of Twitter

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for all metric variables contained in the models.

Variable	*N*	Mean	Median	St. Dev.	Max	Min
Number of retweets	503	751.54	43	2,938.25	43,293	0
Indegree	503	5.50	0	22.95	281	0
Outdegree	503	5.50	1	15.41	155	0
Number of triads	503	6.20	0	24.02	278	0
Ideological homophily	503	0.26	0	0.38	1	0
Twitter followers	498	156,368	12,591	594,777	6,999,632	7
Number of tweets	498	86.35	19	256.88	3,873	1

12 The drop in the number of observations from 503 to 498 with regard to the control variables (Twitter Followers and Number of Tweets) are due to missing information from the organizations which do not appear as authors in the dataset, just as retweeted organizations. This is most likely due to deleted tweets from the timeframe.

attention. All details, including goodness of fit measures (Pseudo-R^2 at least 0.67), can be found in the regression tables in Appendix part C.2.

Focusing on the full model (model 3), Figure 2 reveals that PAs activity (outdegree) has a positive, non-significant association with attention. One standard deviation more activity increases attention by 11 percent (CI: 0.84, 1.45). In line with our expectation, high rates of retweets of other PAs correlate with *higher levels of attention* from the general public on Twitter, however, with a lot of variation.[13] Even though the effect points in the expected direction, the activity hypothesis (H1) is rejected due to the insignificant finding.

Further investigating the effect of activity, we ran additional models to consider the prominence of the actors (see model 4 in Appendix part C.2). PAs with a large number of followers may not need to be as active in their retweeting strategy than

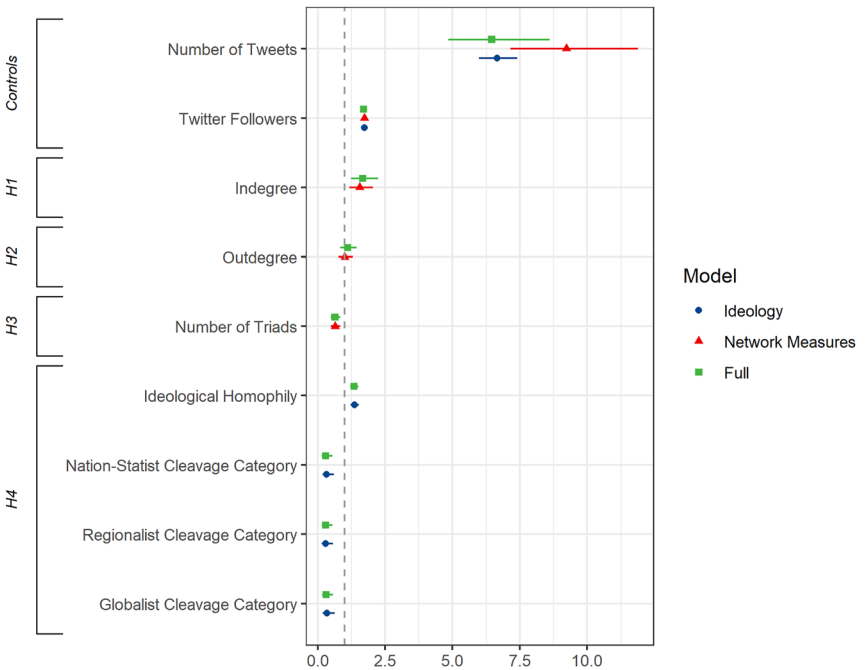

Figure 2: Negative binomial regression results in odds ratios. Whiskers indicate 95 % confidence intervals (robust standard errors).

13 Interestingly, a negative effect of activity is also often observed in offline friendship networks between pupils (e.g., Snijders, Bunt, and Steglich 2010).

less prominent PAs (Stier, Schünemann, and Steiger 2018). Because attention already skews in their favor, retweeting other PAs is not necessary for established PAs such as the UN-related organizations (Sun, Yang, and Saffer 2022; Thrall, Stecula, and Sweet 2014). Thus, *activity might be moderated by the prominence of PAs*. As a proxy for the prominence of an PA we take the number of followers of the organization. This assumes that the number of followers indicates that the organization is more widely recognized and does not rely on strategic interactions to gain recognition by the wider Twittersphere.

Indeed, we find a moderating effect of prominence of the organization (Number of Followers) on activity (outdegree) (see regression table in Appendix part C.2 and Figure 3). The prominence of a PA shows a negative effect (odds ratio of 0.86). The marginal effects in Figure 3 show that PAs who have more followers gain less attention

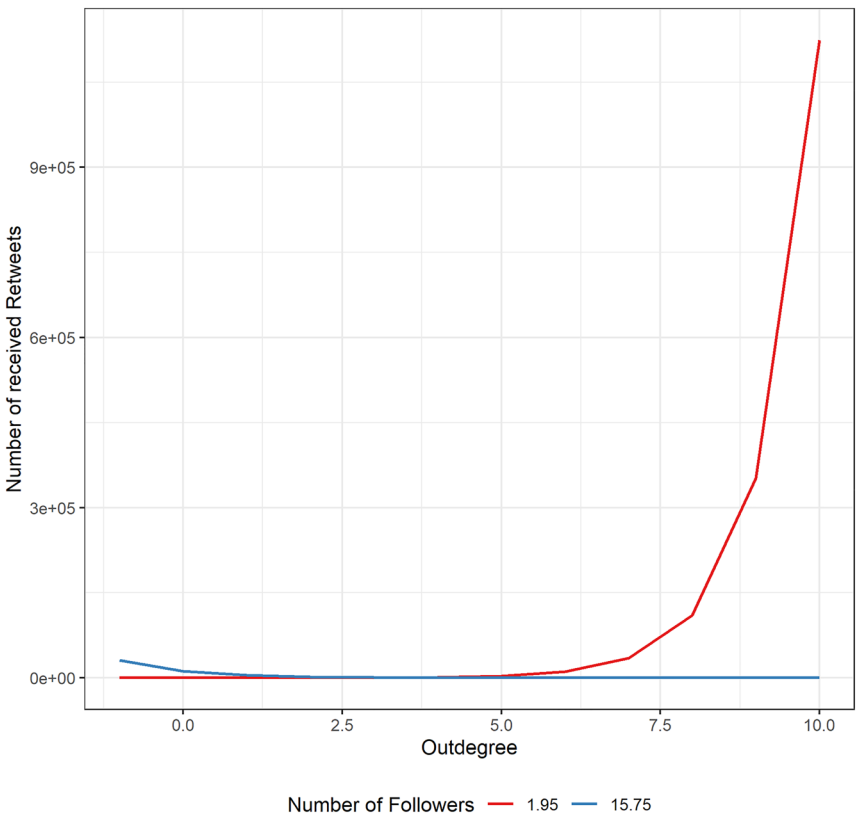

Figure 3: Interaction between outdegree (activity) and prominence (number of followers) of a PA. On the *Y*-axis we depict the attention received from the Twittersphere.

from the Twittersphere when they are very active. This effect might indicate that prominent PAs can 'oversaturate' their audience by retweeting many peers. In contrast, the outdegree has little effect on the attention received for less prominent PAs.

Turning to H2, we show that popularity (indegree) has a strong, significant relationship as assumed by the popularity hypothesis (H2). One standard deviation more popularity increases attention by as much as 67 % (CI: 1.24, 2.24). This means a PA that is popular among its peers receives much more attention from all Twitter users (its peers excluded).

Furthermore, we find a significant, yet negative effect of *embeddedness* (Number of Triads, H3) with odds ratio 0.64. Being part of triads among peers therefore appears to decrease the attention of a wider audience. Thus, network transitivity is not associated with attracting the attention of a larger audience. This negative effect of closed triads might be due to an 'over-embeddedness'. Along the lines of Granovetter's argument made on members of a closed triangle, such network constellations might also transport only few information to a wider audience and so do nothing to attract further attention.

Finally, we find significant effects of ideological homophily to other PAs. The effect confirms the expected direction in H4. Hence, PAs with ties to ideologically similar actors are associated with larger attention (odds ratio 1.35). This means that interacting with the same ideological group is beneficial for receiving attention from a wider audience. According to current literature, our results confirm that nativists receive more attention on social media compared to PAs of other ideological groups (Ackland and Gibson 2013; Stier et al. 2017).

To ensure the robustness of our results, we performed a variety of sensitivity checks. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we first tested whether the effects are specific to a period. For that purpose, we split the data in a period before and after the so-called 'Refugee Crisis' (see Appendix part D.1). Furthermore, we controlled if time-wise outliers affect our outcomes (Appendix D.2). Finally, we also examined whether the language communities that a PA's belong to play a role in the received attention as well as considering the differences between organization types of PAs (Appendix D.3). Across all checks, the effects are substantially the same as in the main models.

5 Conclusions

Based on network theoretical considerations, this paper shows that the success of PAs' communication strategy on Twitter is highly associated to their *peer relations*. Thus, the attention received from all Twitter users depends to a considerable extent on a PA's peers. These peers are other PAs with claims in the same policy field, in our

case the European migration and asylum policy. In particular, PAs which are popular within their peer network receive much more attention from a broad public (*indegree effect*). Therefore, popularity among peers indicate effects going *beyond* direct relations and might serve as a proxy for the attention from a wider audience. Interestingly, this resembles network effects known from markets, in which participants continually monitor reactions through the medium of a joint social construction (attention of peers/all users) (White 1981). Hence, the *market of digital attention* provides a public feedback mechanism so that observing one's immediate competitors may prove a beneficial enterprise for PAs.

Yet, we also find a *positive but insignificant* effect of activity in peer networks for prominent PAs. Highly active *and* visible PAs however receive *less* attention from the general audience (*outdegree effect*). This means that prominent PAs cannot maximize attention by activity alone, but that they need to produce quality content that is shared among their peers.

In support of our initial expectations, our models show a strong effect of ideological *similarity*. Larger ideological homophily (i.e., more similar relations across ideological groups) of PAs *increases* attention from a wider audience. This confirms the assumption that in particular the organizations which are well-connected within their own group of ideologically similar peers (i.e., globalist, regionalist, nationstatist and nativist) receive wide attention. Likely, such organizations have followers with similar ideological preferences, thus making it more likely to receive attention from a wider public which is interested in their messages. Taken separately, nativist PAs receive considerably more attention than the other groups confirming prior studies (Ackland and Gibson 2013; Stier et al. 2017).

However, our paper had to focus on a rather aggregated level due to relatively sparse networks for more granular temporal levels.[14] This sparseness is in part due to the actor selection that emphasized pan-European organizations. Further research should validate and extend the results presented here with a wider set of PAs and expand to other policy subfields to compare the effects between different issue areas. Longitudinal data may also allow researchers to make causal claims on the effects of peer networks, which we cannot do with the data at hand. Additionally, while the user volume and the purpose for Twitter (X) usage has largely remained the same through the rebranding (Newman et al. 2023), researchers may examine whether the platform now attracts different users or there are changes in users' behavior and how this may impact attention for PAs (Rohlinger et al. 2023). Our findings may also be moderated by offline relationships or different online channels

14 However, an exploration of the dynamics by year show that they appear quite similar throughout the time-period under investigation (see Appendix D.2). In addition, robustness checks using different timeframes show that the dynamics of activity and popularity do also not change.

where PAs communicate with each other. For instance, Dumitrica (2021) suggests that actors interested in political agenda setting use multiple channels to build communities. Moreover, future research could look into other social media platforms such as Bluesky, Threads or Mastodon where actors may have migrated to in the wake of the rebranding and similar dynamics could develop (Jeong et al. 2024).

Despite these limitations, our results may hold several important implications for PAs seeking to maximize the effect of their online communication efforts. First of all, being popular (i.e., being shared) among peer organizations is closely linked to an increased attention of a wider audience. This means that PAs should be very aware of activities of other organizations in the same policy field and should produce content that is recognized by their peers. Our findings suggest at least one possible way to achieve this: maintaining ties to actors who are ideologically *as similar as possible.* If they are well-connected to other, ideologically similar organizations, their social capital is enhanced (i.e., they can rely on greater resources, social bonds and trust), and through reaching the audiences of these similar organizations their messages will likely also reach many interested audiences (i.e., the followers of the retweeting organization). Thus, actors who share the same ideological outlook can fall back on their shared social capital to achieve their goals. Organizations who are well-connected to others with the same views on migration and asylum are then also able to transport these messages to a wider audience. They might also appear more unambiguous in their opinions, since retweeted messages from one organization is also shown to an interested public of another organization, thereby creating an amplifying effect. At the same time, reaching out to peers alone does not help to gather users' interest. It may even lead to less attention from the Twittersphere, in particular for PAs who are widely recognized and have a large followership.

As social media has become an important pillar of the strategic communication efforts of actors involved in advocacy work, determining which strategies are successful seems more important than ever. In particular, because organizations dedicate time and resources to these efforts, the decision on how and with whom to connect on social media is critical. Whether greater attention of peers also helps PAs to reach other goals – furthering trust in policy decisions, facilitating collaboration or mobilizing supporters – has to be explored in further studies. We thus conceive of attention on social media as an intermediate goal of PAs, with the ultimate objective of promoting their causes and building ties with followers *and* peers.

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Appendix

A Cleavage Categories Including Hand-Coding Procedure

The organizations were coded in four categories: globalist, regionalist, nation-statist, nativist. This categorization should be understood as the organizations' ideological visions for a future world order.

Globalists aim to develop a global supranational system of migration and refugee protection based on international human-rights norms in international law. They generally view migration as positive. The globalist vision of the world order is a global multilevel polity where the globally relevant policy areas (human rights, refugee protection, climate, energy, gender rights, children's rights, nuclear powerplants etc.) are decided by global institutions such as the UN in ways that are binding for the lower governance levels, that is, a partial global supranationalism.

Regionalists endeavor to work beyond national borders to address the limits of what individual states can achieve regarding the handling of migration and refugee protection. In their view, well concerted regional solutions for the regional (European) migration challenges are necessary. The regionalist vision of world order is a world of regional inter-state unions. This is basically the dream of those who want a multi-level, European Union (or African Union) with supranational institutions that make decisions that are binding for the lower governance levels.

Nation-statists may be open or closed to migrants and refugees, depending on the conjuncture, as they give primacy to the state's obligations to its own citizens rather than non-citizens and refugees. They accept multilateral, voluntary state collaboration on migration and refugee protection, but reject any binding international arrangements. The nation-statist vision of world order is an intergovernmental world of sovereign nation-states whose cooperative or conflictful actions within the international system of states is voluntary. They accept no binding global or regional commitments to be imposed from the above.

Nativists are against migration and focus on the protection of the members of their native community and see no need for international protection. Nativists categorically reject international solidarity and collaboration, especially with regard to protection of refugees and migrants. The nativist vision of global order is a world of natives in local societies that rule themselves. They are not necessarily nationalists, but in some cases nativist sentiments can have the shape of nationalism (especially in homogenous societies). Nativists can be recognized by looking at their attitudes to native minorities and immigrant minorities in their local societies or countries. They are more positive to native minorities than immigrant minorities.

The coder visited both the Wikipedia pages and organizations' own websites to collect information that could be used for classifying them.

General coding rules:

All global intergovernmental organizations such as the UN, UNHCR, WTO, WHO and their sub-institutions and all persons who represent these organizations were classified as 'globalist'. All regional organizations such as the EU, AU, OAS, OSCE, etc. and their sub-institutions and all persons representing them can be classified as 'regionalist'. All nation-state institutions such as ministries, directorates and all persons representing these can be classified as 'nation-extras'. Remaining organizations were more challenging and were coded after a careful assessment of the content of their Wikipedia and web. They can be globalist, regionalist, nation-statist, or nativist.

B Actor Selection

We applied a variety of different strategies to search relevant actors in the EU migration and asylum discourse.

Political Parties were chosen via the ParlGov dataset.

National Governments, Heads of states, regional and international authorities and their twitter handles were compiled via desk research.

CSOs and NGOs focusing on migration and asylum issues were compiled with a three-fold strategy:

1. Selection of organizations that were most often mentioned in traditional media. These organizations were identified within the Event-Registry platform (https://eventregistry.org/), which encompasses newspaper articles from all relevant countries. The relevant organizations were extracted with Named Entity Recognition, a Natural Language Processing technique extracting entities according to predefined categories such as persons, names and organizations. The organizations were only considered if they could be matched to Wikipedia entries, which ensures that we only include relevant organizations.
2. Selection of organizations via a structured key-word search on Wikipedia. The keyword searches conducted included searches in Wikipedia categories (such as political, human and refugee rights organizations, anti-immigration politics and organizations in the respective countries). For more general categories (e.g., category "Human rights organisations based in the United Kingdom") we added search terms. These terms were ("organization" OR non-government* OR "non-profit" OR "advocacy" OR "think tank") AND (["humanitarian*" OR "human rights"] AND [migra* OR immigra* OR refugee OR asyl*]). A full list of keyword searches can be obtained from the authors on request.

3. There are some migrant networks that have member organizations. We also compiled these member organizations. The migrant networks are PICUM, ECRE, ENAR and Concord Europe.

Twitter handles were added for these organizations via desk research as well.

C Negative Binomial Regression Results

C.1 Main Results' Generalized Variance Inflation Factor (GVIF)

To test for multicollinearity, we checked the models' GVIFs. This is important as we are dealing with different network measures which may be correlated. No apparent multicollinearity is visible (Table A1).

Table A1: GVIF of the full model.

Variable	GVIF
Number of tweets	1.932062753
Twitter followers	1.02953491
Cleavage category	1.01235651
Ideological homophily	1.032615818
Number of triads	2.549511427
Outdegree	2.056396029
Indegree	2.403363393

C.2 Main Regression Results

The regression tables belonging to Figure 2 are displayed in Table A2.

Table A2: Negative binomial regressions on number of retweets (attention of Twittersphere). Odds ratios with 95 % Confidence Intervals.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	0.97	2.57*	3.25**	3.84**
	[0.57, 1.64]	[1.14, 5.78]	[1.46, 7.22]	[1.63, 9.03]
Number of tweets	9.22***	6.66***	6.46***	6.65***
	[7.16, 11.88]	[5.99, 7.40]	[4.84, 8.61]	[4.71, 9.38]
Twitter followers (log)	1.73***	1.73***	1.70***	1.66***
	[1.64, 1.82]	[1.63, 1.84]	[1.60, 1.80]	[1.55, 1.79]
Number of triads	0.64***		0.64**	0.58***
	[0.49, 0.83]		[0.48, 0.84]	[0.44, 0.76]
Outdegree	1.01		1.11	4.30**

Table A2: (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	[0.78, 1.30]		[0.84, 1.45]	[1.61, 11.48]
Indegree	1.55**		1.67***	1.88***
	[1.17, 2.06]		[1.24, 2.24]	[1.41, 2.49]
Nation-statist cleavage category		0.33***	0.29***	0.29***
		[0.18, 0.60]	[0.16, 0.55]	[0.16, 0.55]
Regionalist cleavage category		0.30***	0.29***	0.30***
		[0.16, 0.56]	[0.15, 0.55]	[0.16, 0.57]
Globalist cleavage category		0.34***	0.31***	0.31***
		[0.18, 0.63]	[0.17, 0.57]	[0.17, 0.57]
Ideological homophily		1.37***	1.35***	1.36***
		[1.23, 1.53]	[1.21, 1.50]	[1.22, 1.52]
Outdegree:Twitter followers				0.86*
				[0.76, 0.97]
N	498	498	498	498
AIC	5,734.40	5,710.63	5,711.40	5,709.35
BIC	5,763.87	5,744.31	5,757.72	5,759.88
Pseudo R^2 (Nagelkerke)	0.70	0.67	0.71	0.71

Standard errors are heteroskedasticity robust. ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.

D Robustness Checks

To ensure our results do not rest on the choices made during the construction of variables and the model configuration, we perform several robustness checks.

A possible drawback of the analysis might be that the aggregation of attention and interactions between PAs should be looked at in smaller time-frames because during the span of 2014–2020 the effects may have changed (e.g., Stier, Schünemann, and Steiger 2018). Therefore, we analyzed whether the effects found for the entire timeframe of analysis still hold when the years during the so-called European 'Refugee Crisis' (2014–2016) and the years after (2017–2020) are considered separately (see Appendix D.1). The sparseness of interactions between actors did not permit a more granular time-wise exploration of the dynamics.

The sparseness of interactions might furthermore indicate temporal differences in the dependent variable. We therefore checked, whether that is the case per year visually (Appendix D.2.1, Figure A2) and conducted ANOVA and pairwise *t*-tests to detect the difference between years. These showed that the year 2014 is an outlier with statistically significant differences to other years. We thus re-ran the analysis without 2014 and found similar effects to the analysis which includes the year 2014. The results of the analysis can be found in Appendix D.2.

Lastly, we consider some further variables (Appendix D.3). Firstly, we control whether language communities have an effect on the received attention. Secondly, we control, whether organization type has an effect on received attention.

D.1 During and after the 'Refugee Crisis'

Generally speaking, we find similar dynamics in the full models if the timeframe is split and if the entire timeframe is considered as a whole (Figure A1). In particular, the measures that indicate the PA's personal position in the network – activity (Outdegree) and popularity (Indegree) as well as their embeddedness (Number of Triads) show mostly similar impacts on the number of retweets the actor received from a larger audience. In both timeframes, ties to an ideologically similar set of PAs has a positive effect on attention. We also observe the same trend when interacting activity with Number of Followers. This follows by and large the pattern we are seeing for the whole timeframe.

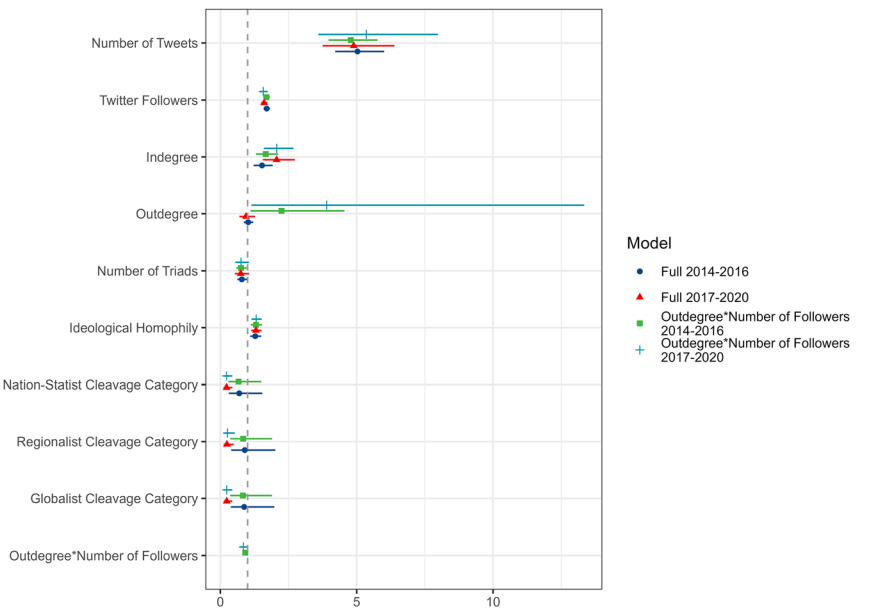

Figure A1: Regression results for two timeframes – during and after the 'Refugee Crisis'. Otherwise same setup as models 3 (full model) and 4 (interaction model).

D.2 Controlling for Outliers in the Dependent Variable During the Timeframe of Analysis

Due to the sparseness of interactions between actors, we could not choose a fine-grained aggregation level. Nevertheless, we further controlled for time-wise outliers in the dependent variable by examining the year wise effects. Visual examination (Figure A2) did not yield obvious differences. However, ANOVA and pair-wise *t*-test with the non-transformed independent variable showed that the year 2014 is an outlier. Therefore, we re-examined the analysis excluding the year 2014 (Figure A3).

Comparing the results of this regression analysis (Figure A3) with the main results, we find similar effects of the independent variables on attention.

D.2.1 Mean Retweets by Indegree

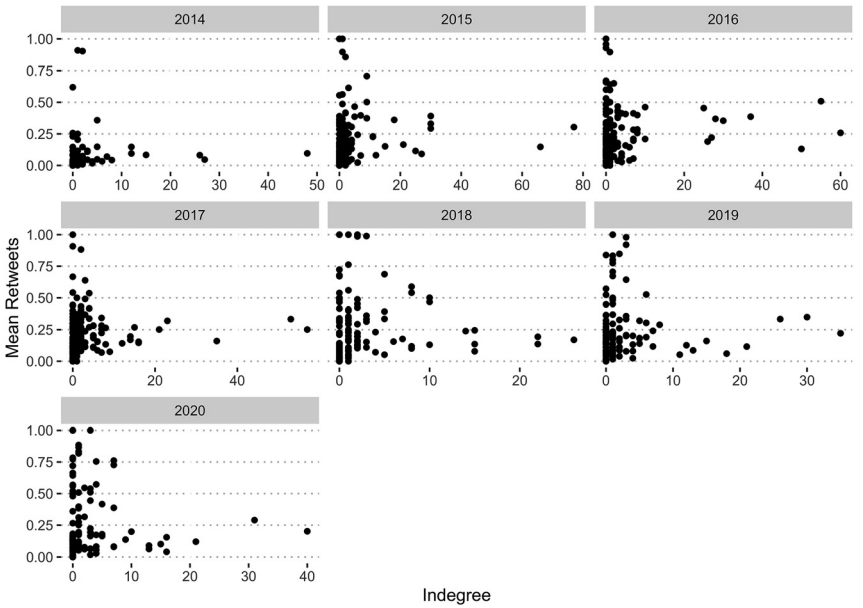

Figure A2: Mean retweets by indegree for each year.

D.2.2 Excluding the Year 2014.

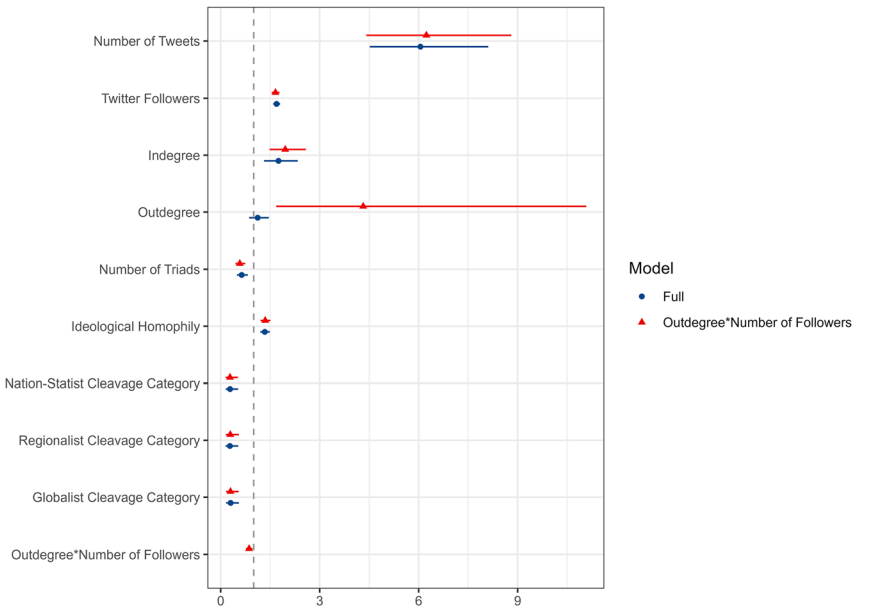

Figure A3: Regression results excluding the year 2014 (timeframe between 2015 and 2020). Otherwise same setup as models 3 (full model) and 4 (interaction model).

D.3 Including Language Communities and Organization Type Dummies

As part of the robustness checks, we examined whether the language communities that the PA's belong to play a role in the received attention. We thus constructed a dummy variable, that indicates the main language that the retweets of a PA were written in (Main Language variables). The main language that was used in a retweet of a PA's message represents the main language that the PA's themselves used in tweets that were picked up and further spread by others. The effects are mainly insignificant (see Figure A4).

We furthermore also added organization type classifications as a dummy variable and tested its effect on received attention (Organization Type model) as the type of policy actor (e.g., governmental actors, parties, NGOs) might have a different level of attention. The reference category are far right organizations/movements. The effect is negatively significant for Religious Institutions, Parties, Think Tanks and Trade Associations, indicating that these receive less attention. At the same time, all other institutions also receive less attention than far right organizations or movements even though the effect is not significant. In both models the effect of the other variables is very similar to the original models.

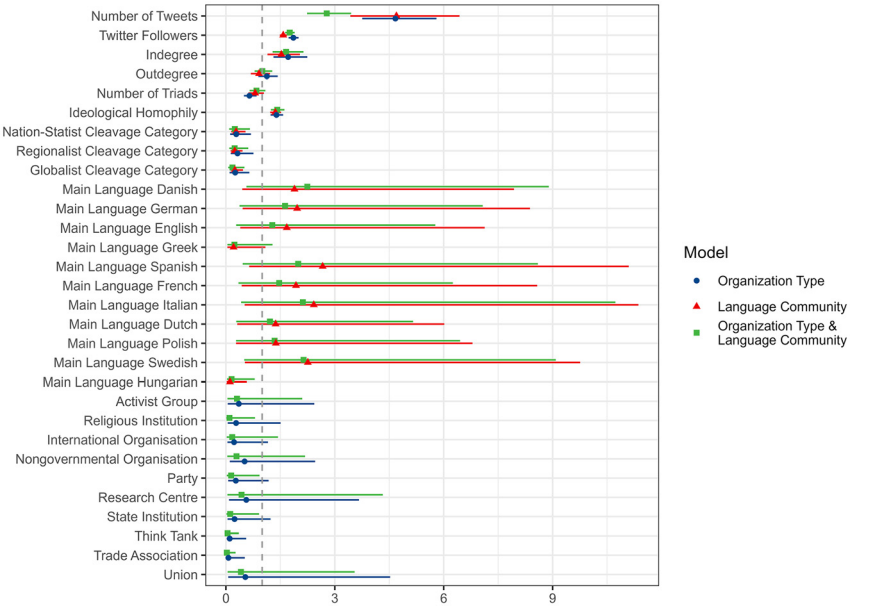

Figure A4: Models including language communities and organization type. Otherwise same setup as model 3 (full model).

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