



FEEDS FILLED WITH FRUSTRATION: SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN REACTIONS TO EU RESPONSES TOWARDS UKRAINE

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Abstract

The European Union has made explicit moves to support Ukraine and the fleeing Ukrainian population as Russia's invasion of the country intensifies, with many heralding the decisiveness, hospitality, and integrity behind European policies. Despite this, social media users on Twitter, particularly those from the Southern Mediterranean region, have found the European Union's political compassion to also carry a measure of inconsistency. Accusations of a double standard, racism, and hypocrisy are rampant in the online discourse following every major European policy or action in relation to Ukraine or Russia. In these accusations, the lack of involvement in the conflicts of Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Israel and Palestine are being criticised. Amongst these constructed narratives which are propped up by sensationalist media and amplified by bots, the only thing missing is a concrete European position in the narrative.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has galvanised a strong reaction, particularly from the Western world and the neighbouring European Union (EU), which have employed a range of measures that include comprehensive sanctions on Russia, and an essentially “open border” policy for Ukrainian refugees. This distinct response has not gone unnoticed by the population of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Particularly, individuals in the Southern Mediterranean have expressed their reactions via social media, most notably Twitter. Altogether, these users have been quick to use the response to the events in Ukraine to point out the unequal treatment that MENA countries have received when it comes to aid provision, humanitarian support, refugee public and foreign policy, and rhetoric. At the core of these tweets, there is a sentiment that resents the application of a double standard by the EU and an accompanying measure of racism. The existence of this sentiment on social media is not a new phenomenon, with previous events and conflicts motivating a similar but limited response in the past. Despite this, leading examples have often avoided attaching the sentiment to a particular actor and have addressed the topic more broadly through contextual examples. These range from commentaries on the multifaceted framing of the Syrian refugee crisis on platforms like Twitter,¹ or the difficulties associated with constructing and articulating a transnational Palestinian identity due to the inhospitable real-world and online conditions,² to broader issues related to social empowerment and amplification of ideological trends during the Arab Spring.³ Nevertheless, the blend of actors, measures and topics brought about by the Russian invasion of Ukraine allow for a unique examination of Southern Mediterranean positions specifically on EU policies, which has not conventionally been possible due to a lack of relevant data.

Reception in the Southern Mediterranean

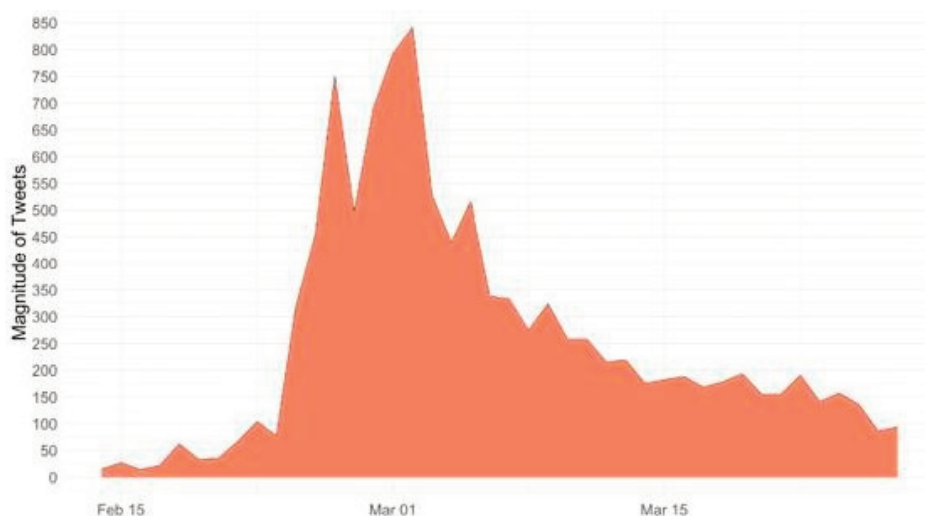
The Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred on 24 February 2022 and brought with it a distinct spike in Twitter activity. Yet, beyond immediate responses to the war, the messages that followed the next weeks were more often directed towards policies of the EU and its Member States. Notably, Twitter users in the Southern Mediterranean do not often distinguish between the EU, Europe, and more broadly the West in their tweets, which can create confusion in terms of attributability and criticism. Nevertheless, the reactionary tweets can be correlated to key dates to distinguish the tone and target of responses. Looking at either **figure 1** or **figure 2**, notable dates that carry increased user activity include: the period between 27 and 28 February, the period between the 1 and 2 March 2022, and 4 March. Each of these dates can be matched with a distinct action or set of actions by the EU, its authority figures, and its Member States.

¹ Nerghes, A., & Lee, J.-S. (2019). Narratives of the refugee crisis: A comparative study of mainstream-media and twitter. *Media and Communication*, 7(2 Refugee Crises Disclosed), 275–288.

² Aouragh, M. (2011). *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. IB Tauris.

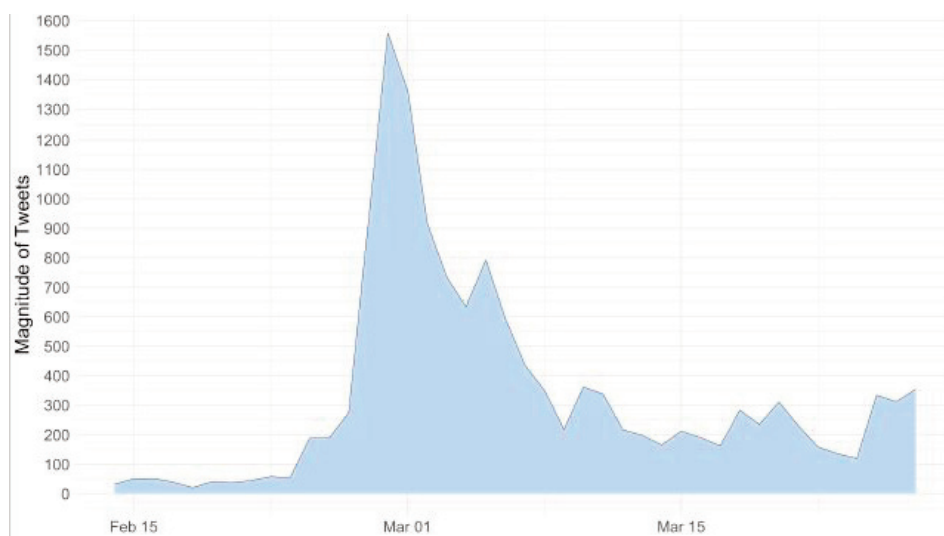
³ Lotan, G., Graeff, E., Ananny, M., Gaffney, D., Pearce, I., & Boyd, d. (2011). The revolutions were tweeted: Information flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 1375-1405. Retrieved from <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1246>

Figure 1. Frequency of tweets (in English) related to the EU's response to the Ukraine crisis



Source: Data collected from Twitter's REST API [10,694 tweets]

Figure 2. Frequency of tweets (in Arabic) related to the EU's response to the Ukraine crisis



Source: Data collected from Twitter's REST API [13,859 tweets]

In the period between 27 and 28 February, the EU and notable figures engaged in a series of significant and publicised measures. These included an address by European Council President Charles Michel where he condemned the Russian invasion and promised international support to the Ukrainian population⁴, and an announcement by President of the European Commission,

⁴ European Council (2022, February 27). *Address to the Ukrainian people by European Council President Charles Michel* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/27/address-to-the-ukrainian-people-by-european-council-president-charles-michel/>

Ursula von der Leyen, that claimed that the EU (for the first time ever) would finance the purchase and delivery of weapons to a besieged Ukraine, while also levying hefty sanctions on both Russia and Belarus⁵.

In the subsequent days, the above measures were further increased, leading to the largest spike in Twitter activity since the start of the conflict. Between 1 and 2 March, Commission President von der Leyen announced that the EU would spend €500 million with the goal of supporting humanitarian efforts in Ukraine⁶. There was also the announcement that introduced that the European Council would impose sanctions on several major Russian banks with the aim of barring them from participating in the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system⁷. By 4 March, Twitter activity had somewhat dropped, but a spike could still be noticed. This was likely in response to the European Commission suspending all cross-border cooperation and transnational collaboration with Russia and Belarus⁸, and EU Interior Ministers unanimously voting to activate the “Temporary Protection Directive” to ensure the security of Ukrainian refugees⁹.

Overall, in matching spikes of Twitter activity to the noted events, Twitter users in the Southern Mediterranean can demonstrably be seen to actively engage with, and comment on, EU actions in the context of the Ukraine crisis. A more compelling aspect of this Twitter activity can be discussed: user attitudes and positions.

Major attitudes, positions and reactions

At the core of Southern Mediterranean attitudes is a distinct sense of empathy for the Ukrainian population. However, this sentiment is combined with frustration over the inconsistent approach taken by the EU, especially when viewed in light of conflicts in Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. When investigating the content of tweets, this sentiment can immediately be seen in the frequency of the words used. As illustrated by **Figure 3**, “Ukraine” takes a significant lead in frequency, but relevant words such as “EU”, “Syria”, “NATO”, “Palestine”, “Israel”, “refugee”, “hypocrisy”, “racism”, “Libya” and “double standard” are featured prominently in the discourse of users. **Table 1 in annex** illustrates this frequency numerically.

⁵ European Commission (EC). (2022, February 27). *Statement by President von der Leyen on further measures to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine* [Press release]. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/da/statement_22_1441

⁶ European Commission (EC). (2022, March 1). *Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Russian aggression against Ukraine* [Press release]. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_1483

⁷ European Council. (2022, March 2). *Russia's military aggression against Ukraine: EU bans certain Russian banks from SWIFT system and introduces further restrictions* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/russia-s-military-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-bans-certain-russian-banks-from-swift-system-and-introduces-further-restrictions/>

⁸ European Commission (EC). (2022, March 4). *Commission suspends cross-border cooperation and transnational cooperation with Russia and Belarus* [Press release]. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1526

⁹ For more information on the Temporary Protection Directive, please visit https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en

Resolutions, and the fundamental human rights of Palestinians. It is important to keep in mind that Twitter users in the Southern Mediterranean are not arguing against the sanctions on Russia (at least not in the context of consequence) but are inquiring why other violators are not subjected to the same treatment by the EU. Altogether, this topic-pattern is not unusual on social media platforms, as the Palestinian struggle for freedom continues to be a relevant and politicised issue in MENA circles. Despite this, users have not limited their questions of consequence to the case of Israel and have also pointed to a lack of overt EU reaction to Russia's operations in Syria, or the operations of third countries in Iraq, Yemen or Libya. This assumed inconsistency is then interrelated with discourses on racism, subsequently painting the EU as a hypocritical actor despite the good intentions understood to be part of its Ukraine strategy.

A major driver behind this perception, and the amplification of discourses related to racism, double standards and hypocrisy, is sensationalism on behalf of traditional media outlets. As referenced in several Tweets, examples of unfortunate reporting on the flow and character of refugees have inclined many Twitter users to view actions by the EU through a comparative lens rather than a humanitarian one. Although the EU consistently releases statements and announcements through its official channels on what is being done to improve the situation of Ukrainian migrants, Southern Mediterranean users more often focus on inflammatory media stories to lend their criticism a measure of authenticity. The focus switches away from the good being done, to what has not been done or what should have been done elsewhere. In some ways, Twitter users appear to be looking for recognition on the fact that the course of action taken by the EU in this crisis is indeed different which leads to sensationalist narratives towards that end.

Amid this sensationalism, it is important to ask whether the conclusions inferred from the observations of Southern Mediterranean Twitter users are valid and generalisable to the broader population. The relevance of this query lies in the rather common use of bots (automated accounts that tweet about specific narratives) on Twitter. These bots are relatively easy to set up and often difficult to distinguish from genuine accounts at a cursory glance. Nevertheless, by using a machine-learning ¹⁰ classifier, Southern Mediterranean users with a large number of likes/retweets can be investigated. Overall, about 32% of the top 100 users have been determined to be bots. Significantly, this is not to say that 32% of all tweets have been published by bots, but more to indicate that a significant proportion of popular tweets are constructed to amplify a trend, be it hypocrisy and double standards on the part of the EU, or the need to empathize with a devastated Ukraine.

What could the EU have done differently

Fundamentally, in looking at the conclusions and analysis presented in this article, it should be recognised that the inferences presented above do not fully represent attitudes and positions in

¹⁰ For more information on the machine learning classifier used in this paper, please visit <https://github.com/mkearney/tweetbotornot>

the Southern Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the analysis does aim to depict a dimension of attitudes and positions likely to be seen in the broader population. Taking this aspect into consideration, a natural question would be: what's next? What can the EU do? Correcting hypocrisy or a character that depicts a double standard is an enormous task, and one that is often impossible after the fact. Despite this, the EU can manoeuvre into a more agreeable position. When looking at the content of the tweets and the broader pattern they create, it can be argued that the criticisms and concerns amplify one another and thus create an uncontrolled reaction. Attitudes are allowed to run wild. The EU, a major player in the critical discourse on refugee treatment, aid provision, and international penalties, is also seemingly made to be a (discursively) silent player. In a sense, by not overtly participating in the discussion, the EU has allowed Twitter users and media outlets to determine its position and stance. When dealing with such a difficult set of issues, it is vital to take part in the burgeoning narrative and to have a voice that can correct third parties, provide context, and reflect on oversights and improvements. Overall, there is no obvious solution to the negative reactions that have crowded the Southern Mediterranean Twitter space, but presence and participation is a start.

Table 1. Frequency (numerically expressed) of words used in tweets related to the crisis in Ukraine

Keyword	Frequency
Ukraine	8143
EU	6257
Syria	3370
NATO	2001
Palestine	1699
Israel	1425
Refugee	1388
Hypocrisy	1177
Racism	953
Libya	774
Double Standard	732

Table 2. Number of retweets and likes for statements appearing in the top 100 tweets

Statement	Retweet count	Like count
Multiple videos from EU nations, UK and US clearly indicate how the reportage is deeply troubling and dangerous. We have racism at Ukraine border and now on TV.	754	3539
The fundamental human rights is the same in Palestine just as it's in Ukraine!!! This is a message to the EU, NATO, America and to you reading this. Palestinians are not invincible, they do die too.	463	1842
EU countries are allowing WHITE people from Ukraine with their cats, dogs and other animals while blocking those with BLACK or BROWN skin. It's very appalling to see that EU is coming out as very RACIST.	330	1289
The same European nations barring Arab and African refugees freezing at their borders are now welcoming incoming refugees from Ukraine. The double standard in refugee policy shown by countries like Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria is stark.	735	1132
The only reason Israel are getting away with murdering men, women and children in Palestine is because they're bombing a Muslim country. Look at the reactions of the world over Ukraine and you'll see the double standards.	345	683
Western Media in the EU have completely won the propaganda war against Russia. The same media that lied about Iraq, Syria, Libya, barely reports on Yemen or Somalia is now totally believed about Russia / Ukraine and completely brainwashing their population.	124	567

The data displayed in Figure 3, Table 1 and Table 2 represents a sample of Tweets geolocated to the Southern Mediterranean which was collected using Twitter's REST API and processed in R