The discursive legitimation strategies of the President of the Commission: a qualitative content analysis of the State of the Union Addresses (SOTEU)

Abstract. In this work, we investigate the way in which the two latest Presidents of the Commission have tackled the question of the legitimacy of the EU in the delivery of the State of the Union Addresses (SOTEU). Our analysis, based on a qualitative content analysis of the SOTEU speeches, identifies a marked difference in the discursive legitimation strategies employed by the two Presidents and in the conception of the legitimacy of the EU that they promote. In Barroso's speeches, the legitimazing principle recalls the classical functionalist interpretation of the 'rationality' of the EU decisions mainly in terms of economic outputs, whilst the underlying conception of legitimacy that shapes Juncker's speeches recalls an input-based understanding of legitimacy as democracy and popular sovereignty. By way of conclusion, we argue that the introduction of the *Spitzencandidaten* system has been instrumental in providing the two Presidents with a different discursive opportunity structure.

The EU is currently experiencing an unprecedented level of politicization (Schimmelfennig 2014). The multiple crises that have affected the EU since 2008 – the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit, to name but a few – and the failure of EU institutions to address them effectively have severely challenged the foundations themselves of the project of European integration (Börzel 2016: 25) and given rise to what Juncker has described as an 'existential crisis' (Juncker 2016). Under question is not only the effectiveness of EU institutions in governing the crises, but the legitimacy itself of the European project. The wave of discontent with EU institutions and their performance, as well as with the integration process as a whole, is visible, at the member states level, in the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties gaining unprecedented electoral support and reinforcing the fear of centrifugal threats.

If the legitimacy of the EU, at least since the end of the phase of the 'permissive consensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009), has always been matter of dispute (Brunkhorst 2006; Hansen and Williams 1999; Schrag Sternberg 2013) – either in terms of a democratic deficit or as the result of sovereignist attitudes – never before has the threat to the EU project been more credible. With the 'blame-shifting' model permeating the rhetoric of Eurosceptic parties and movements, and sometimes that of national governments (Hobolt and Tilley 2014), the need for convincing responses by the EU institutions has never appeared so urgent. While effective solutions to the ongoing crises are matters concerning political decisions and actions, whether and how the EU can regain trust and support not only for its

unpopular decisions but also for the integration process as a whole concerns also and significantly the way in which the EU's leaders communicate with the public (Schmidt 2010; 2014).

Given the 'existential' challenges posed by the multiplicity of crises that have affected the European Union in recent years, the way in which the President of the Commission communicates with the public plays a fundamental role in supporting and reclaiming legitimacy not only for EU decisions but also for the EU integration process as a whole. Given these premises, this study investigates how the current President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, and his predecessor, José Manuel Barroso, have attempted to communicatively represent and reclaim legitimacy for the EU in a particularly significant institutional setting: the delivery of the State of the Union Address (SOTEU). The SOTEU speech, first introduced in 2010, is the institutional occasion on which the President of the Commission openly addresses the past achievements, the most pressing challenges that the EU is currently facing, and sets the Union's priorities for the years to come. It is thus a public occasion for reflection on the identity and the future of the European Union. Already in the choice of the name – that immediately recalls the traditional State of the Union Address delivered yearly since 1790 by the US Presidents – it appears evident that the institution of the SOTEU speech was intended to provide a symbolically significant setting for communication, and that it was meant to reach a audience wider than that of any other EU leader's institutional speech. Accordingly, the SOTEU speech provides the paramount opportunity for the President of the Commission to speak not only to EP members and national governments, but also – to an extent – directly to European citizens, and to communicate his view on the nature and legitimacy of the European project, as well as to engage in rhetorical attempts to reclaim legitimacy for the EU.

Accordingly, our aim in this study is to analyse and interpret the ways in which the two last Presidents of the Commission have interpreted, as well as attempted to reclaim discursively, legitimacy for the EU in the seven SOTEU speeches delivered to date. We conducted systematic qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014) of the SOTEU speeches in order to identify the conception of the EU's legitimacy that the speaker was endorsing and reproducing, and the particular discursive legitimation strategies employed. In particular, this analysis has enabled us to test for the presence of a significant difference between the discursive strategies of Barroso and Juncker, and to investigate empirically whether the introduction of the *Spitzencandidaten* procedure - that, according to Christiansen, has 'provided a powerful symbolic change' (2016: 993) in the nature of the Presidency - has produced a significant change in the symbolic repertoire available to the Presidents in their claim for legitimacy.

The article is organized into five sections. The first section briefly introduces the seven SOTEU speeches and further substantiates their relevance to the empirical study of the President of the Commission's discursive legitimation strategies. Section two presents the theoretical framework for our analysis. It describes the different conceptions of legitimacy of the EU discussed in the literature and provides an understanding of the notion of top-down discursive legitimation. It also describes the typology of discursive legitimation strategies used for our empirical work. The third section explains our methodology for content analysis and the categories relevant to our investigation. The fourth section sets out our results. Finally, the fifth section discusses our results in light of our theoretical perspective and offers an interpretation of the discursive legitimation strategies present in the speeches and of the particular conception of the EU's legitimacy endorsed by the two Presidents of the Commission.

1. The State of the Union Addresses

The State of the Union Address is a speech delivered each year in September by the President of the Commission to the European Parliament in plenary session. It was instituted by the 2010 Framework Agreement on the Relations between the European Parliament and the Commission (Annex IV),[1] implementing the prescriptions of the Lisbon Treaty for a "more democratic, efficient and transparent" EU. Since its institution in 2010, seven speeches on the State of the Union have been delivered, four by former President of the Commission José Manuel Barroso (2010; 2011; 2012; 2013), and three by current President Jean-Claude Juncker (2015; 2016; 2017). In 2014, following the EP elections, no SOTEU speech was delivered.

Quite expectedly, the predominant topic throughout the first six speeches concerns the analysis and evaluation of possible solutions to the "social, economic, and political crisis" affecting the EU. Along with hindering the pursuit of the EU's main economic goals ("growth", "competitiveness") and growing social problems ("diffused poverty", "unemployment"), the crisis is described as producing and exacerbating problems of a specifically political nature that concern the future of the EU: the generalized lack of confidence in the EU and in EU institutions (Barroso 2011; 2012), the rise of populist and nationalist movements all over Europe (Barroso 2011; 2012; Juncker 2015; 2016), and the

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[1] "Each year in the first part-session of September, a State of the Union debate will be held in which the President of the Commission shall deliver an address, taking stock of the current year and looking ahead to priorities for the following years. To that end, the President of the Commission will in parallel set out in writing to Parliament the main elements guiding the preparation of the Commission Work Programme for the following year". Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission, ANNEX IV, 5, p. 16.

erratic and often unreliable behaviour of some Member States towards decisions taken at the EU level (Barroso 2011; 2012; Juncker 2016).[2]

Although touching on many of the themes of the previous speeches, Juncker's SOTEU 2017 stands out as describing a situation of "economic recovery", in which the economic crisis has been overcome and Europe can finally look to the future and take some ambitious steps; steps that involve also a redefinition of the EU's political structure and procedures to strengthen and democratize EU institutions. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the main topics of the seven SOTEU speeches.

(Table 1 about here)

With the recent and noteworthy exception of Dinan (2016) discussing Juncker's SOTEU 2015, no previous study exists on the institutional significance or the structure and content of these speeches. Our decision to focus our empirical investigation on the SOTEU speeches is due, as said, to the same reasons for their institution: the creation of the SOTEU was in fact embedded within the overall Lisbon strategy directed at providing more 'democracy' and 'transparency' in the EU (EPRS 2015), which may be described as consisting in a general institutional strategy for legitimation (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016). The introduction of the SOTEU may accordingly be understood as a way to respond to what EU scholars and commentators have described as a lack of 'communicative discourses' in which ideas and decisions are explained by the leaders to the public, despite the presence of a wide variety of 'coordinative discourses' held among political actors bargaining and *negotiating* on policies and decisions (Schmidt 2010). As Schmidt pointed out, "the lack of communication about EU activity naturally has had an impact on legitimacy, since *saying* needs to be added to the processes of *doing* in order to ensure that the actions of the EU are not just acceptable but also accepted" (Schmidt 2010: 23. Emphasis in original). The institution of the SOTEU can thus be conceived as an attempt to create a more open and symbolically relevant setting for communication, one able to foster the emergence of more 'communicative', legitimizing discourses. Accordingly, if on the one hand the SOTEU speeches constitute the privileged case where to study the President of the Commission's legitimizing strategies, on the other, they may be seen as representative of the President's overall approach to communication.

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[2] While all speeches are structured as a series of items fot discussion that constitute the agenda for the year to come, the SOTEU 2015 stands out as exceptional with a single topic – the refugee crisis – taking up almost half of it.

In the next section, before presenting the theoretical framework that guides our empirical analysis, we will briefly discuss the three different conceptions of the EU's legitimacy that emerge from the literature.

2. Theoretical framework: EU legitimacy and discursive legitimation

Legitimacy can be generally described, in classic Weberian terms, as the belief in the rightfulness of authority. In the academic debate, questions about the legitimacy of the EU have been frequently posed in relation to its assumed 'democratic deficit'. Scholars propounding this view have suggested that EU institutions should be modified so as to 'democratize' the EU decision-making process (Follesdal 1998; Hix and Follesdal 2006; Lord and Beetham 2001; Schmitter 2000). Responses to such arguments have been made by scholars assuming a different interpretation of the legitimacy of the EU: given the great variety of constraints on implementation of more democratic institutions imposed by the very nature of the EU as a supranational body, the legitimacy of the EU should not to be assessed on the basis of the 'democraticness' of its decision-making process; rather, it should be assessed in terms of its 'performance' as a decision-making body (Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002; Scharpf 1999). In this latter sense, the legitimacy of the EU is conceived as depending on (and being conditional upon) the quality of its decisions: the EU may have *output* legitimacy although lacking *input* legitimacy. However, there is a third way in which legitimacy has been interpreted, one that plays a significant role in the current political debate exacerbated by the crises and intensification of the 'de-conciliation' process (Ferrera 2014). In this third sense, legitimacy does not apply to the 'decisions' of the EU in terms of their 'procedural' (input legitimacy) or 'instrumental' (output legitimacy) validity. It applies instead to the very nature of the EU as a supranational *authoritative decision-making body*. Questions about the legitimacy of the EU are raised in relation to nationalist attitudes towards state sovereignty, where the boundaries of 'European' citizenship and community are seen as blurred and historically artificial.

It is this latter interpretation of legitimacy – which may be labeled, with Cerutti (2008: 13) *substantial* legitimacy – that is most reflected in European citizens' concerns with and attitudes towards EU institutions, as testified by the growth of populist and nationalist parties all over Europe. Under this 'Weberian' interpretation (Cerutti 2008: 10), legitimacy's core condition is "the political identity or rather self-identification of the people involved" (Cerutti 2008, p.13), and it refers to the question of the entitlement of EU institutions to make authoritative decisions. The problem of formation of a European community as a 'community of values' is thus central to the legitimacy of the European Union. It is likely that in the absence of a European political identity – where identity is defined as "the

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overarching and inclusive project that is shared by the members of the polity, or in other words the set of political and social values and principles in which they recognize themselves" (Cerutti 2008, p.7) – the question of the EU's legitimacy will always include a challenge to its very existence, and that it will be reflected in other kinds of legitimacy assessments; as Schmidt suggests, the absence of substantial legitimacy necessarily impacts also on legitimacy assessments in terms of "performance-based legitimacy of the 'output' variety" (2013:11).

Whilst *legitimacy* concerns the actual assessment of a particular state of affairs, *legitimation* consists in the process by which the belief in the rightfulness of the authority is claimed or conferred (Barker 2001; Hurrelman 2016). Top-down legitimation strategies should be understood as activities – institutional or discursive (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016) – distinct, at least in analytical terms, from the other activities of a political body. Following Gronau and Schmidtke, we define top-down legitimation strategies as: "goal oriented activities employed to establish and maintain a reliable basis for diffuse support for a political regime by its social constituencies" (2016: 541).

The particular need for top-down legitimation activities in the case of the EU, sometimes interpreted in terms of "political community-building and/or mythical foundations of identity" (Hansen and Williams 1999: 235) has always been recognized, and it proves of the utmost importance in dealing with the current crises. As Theiler writes: "fostering political legitimacy always has a 'top-down' symbolic dimension. This entails elite-driven construction and dissemination of symbolic categories which, if successful, stimulates more 'bottom-up' communicative and deliberative processes" (2005: 4).

Accordingly, our interest here centres on the analysis and interpretation of the top-down discursive legitimation strategies employed by the two latest Presidents of the Commission in the delivery of the SOTEU addresses. Legitimizing discourses are an integral aspect of political communication, and they consist of references to "specific linguistic resources and configurations of linguistic resources" (Van Leeuwen 2007: 92). In order to analyze the discursive legitimation strategies employed by the two Presidents of the Commission, we employed a typology formulated by Van Leeuwen (2007; see also Vaara 2014) that differentiates among four legitimation strategies. These strategies can be present separately or in combination, and consist in:

1. Authorization: "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority is vested" (Van Leeuwen 2007: 92). Legitimation through authorization may be of the personal kind, when linked to an individual's status and role or a particular

expertise (see also Reyes 2011), or of the impersonal kind when related to a tradition or to *rules and procedures*.

2. Moral evaluation: "legitimation by reference to discourses of value" (Van Leeuwen 2007: 92). It consists in the approval/disapproval or justification of some courses of action or states of affairs in terms of *moral values*.

3. Rationalization: "legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the social knowledges that endow them with cognitive validity" (Van Leeuwen 2007: 92). Through rationalization, legitimacy is conferred in view of certain *goals and effects*.

4. Mythopoiesis: "legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions" (Van Leeuwen, 2007: 92). In this case, legitimation is claimed through the presentation of 'moral tales' (Van Leeuwen, 2007: 105) or 'myths', where *myths* can be understood as narratives providing "collective groups with a story about where they have come from and the values that set them apart from others" (Della Sala, 2010: 5).

The conception of legitimacy that the speaker endorses undoubtedly affects how s/he shapes his/her discursive strategies. In particular, in this case, it is possible to identify a relation among the three conceptions of the EU's legitimacy previously outlined and the four discursive legitimation strategies listed by Van Leeuwen. While the prevalence of references to goals and effects, which indicates *legitimation through rationalization*, may reveal an output-based conception of legitimacy, the prevalence of references to (democratic) rules and procedures, which indicates a case of *legitimation through authorization*, may be seen in connection to an input-based conception of the EU's legitimacy. Moreover, an extensive reference to moral values – which characterizes *legitimation through moral evaluation* – and the presence of mythopoetic elements may denote an understanding of legitimacy of the substantial kind.

In the rest of this article, after describing our content analysis methodology, we will present our findings in detail and we will provide an understanding of the discursive legitimation strategies employed by Presidents Barroso and Juncker in the delivery of the SOTEU speeches.

3. Methodology

While few works have concentrated specifically on investigating EU legitimation through discursive approaches (De Ville and Orbie 2014; Schmidt 2010; Schrag Sternberg 2013; Vaara 2014), discourse analysis has become a leading approach in European Union studies (Crespy 2015). Despite the variety of studies, their interesting results and informative stance, Crespy underlines some problematic aspects:

"The main problem in this literature […] is that it too often relies on implicit methods. While most scholars provide effective conceptual tools, information on the empirical material and the specific techniques guiding the analysis are scarce, if not completely absent, from many publications" (Crespy 2015: 108-109). Crespy and other scholars, however, have recently tried to overcome these problems and have proposed more precise attempts to study the discursive strategies embedded in EU leaders' speeches through the methodology of frame analysis (Crespy and Schmidt 2014) and lexicographic analysis (Boriello and Crespy 2015). Olsson and Hammargård (2016), moreover, have studied the rhetoric of the President of the European Commission by relying on a computer-assisted analysis of a selected corpus of speeches by President Barroso.

Our investigation of the discursive legitimation strategies in the SOTEU speeches proceeded along the lines indicated by Crespy (2015) in terms of methodological accuracy, and it adopted a novel approach to content analysis. Our method consists in a qualitative content analysis of the evaluative aspects of a speech. Following Mayring, we understood qualitative content analysis as a mixed methods approach in which the qualitative and the quantitative aspects represent two distinct analytical steps: "assignment of categories to text as qualitative step, working through many text passages and analysis of frequencies of categories as quantitative step" (Mayring, 2014: 10). Given our choice to focus on evaluative aspects of the speeches, we did not focus on mere 'signifiers' (i.e. single 'words' or 'word co-occurrences'). We instead focused on the 'signified', i.e., on meanings. Following Harold Lasswell's seminal work (Lasswell et al. 1952; Fedel 1999; Franzosi 2008), our coding unit is the *symbol*, i.e., a syntagm that both *denotes* and *evaluates* (positively or negatively) a particular aspect of social or political reality. The same symbol/meaning may be expressed by different signifiers: for instance, the symbol "national sovereignty" may be expressed by the syntagm "national sovereignty" but also by the complex sentence "Member States have the last word about the adoption of that directive". The activity of symbols identification and categorization is the qualitative aspect of our research, and it is carried out by considering not only the single symbol but also the larger argumentative structure of which the symbol is part.

In practice, our method consists in the manual coding of the evaluative content of speech transcripts in light of a classificatory grid.[3] The grid – our coding scheme – was built on the basis of a deductive and inductive process. General distinctions derived from overall accepted categories in the study of politics. The distinction among the political (at the EU level and at the Member State level),

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[3] Texts were coded with NVivo 10. The work of the two independent coders showed a good degree of inter-coder reliability, with a Kappa coefficient ranging from 0.76 to 0.94 for the various symbols categories.

economic, social and intellectual spheres was based on the Weberian classification of the value-spheres, understood as the *loci* of value rationalization in which individual action is shaped through the capacity to *take a position* on the world and ascribe a *meaning* to it (Weber 1949; Oakes 2003). Specific categories resulted from the analysis and identification of significant recurrent elements in the seven Speeches on the State of the Union and a number of other speeches by the Presidents of the Commission. Definition of the categories and sub-categories and the allocation of symbols among the relevant categories allows for quantification and overall comparison of the content of the speeches.[4]

To investigate the understandings of legitimacy present in the SOTEU speeches, we rely on the frequency[5] of specific categories and sub-categories of symbols in the total of symbols registered in the single speech. The choice of the relevant symbolic categories is guided by the intent to operationalize Van Leeuwen's (2007) typology of discursive legitimation strategies in light of the three different conceptions of legitimacy (*input*; *output*; *substantial*) expounded in the previous section. The categories that we identified as relevant to the study of legitimacy were: 1) values; 2) goals; 3) sources of legitimacy; 4) interpretations of the political community. The next two sub-sections introduce the four symbols categories and the relevant sub-categories and explain their significance for the study of legitimacy.

3.1 Values and goals

We register in the category 'values' explicit references to abstract concepts and principles invoked as such, or organized into complex structures of thought, referred to as providing the reasons for political action, grounding specific choices or constituting the goals that political action should pursue. In general, the purpose of explicit reference to values is to justify or legitimate the *status quo* or specific changes. Following Weber's theory of value-rationalization and substantive rationality (1978), we assumed that values may play two distinct roles in the argumentative strategy of the speaker. On the one hand, they may be cited to justify the procedure or method (both ideational or practical) that leads

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[4] Our approach is thus similar to the methodology of the Manifesto Project (Werner et al., 2011). The main difference lies in the definition of the coding unit. Unlike the Manifesto Project, we did not focus exclusively on argumentative units defined as quasi-sentences: in our methodology, a single word, intentionally selected by the speaker to carry evaluative content, constitutes a symbol just as much as a complex sentence.

[5] The relative frequency of a category is obtained in relation to the entire symbolic content of the speech. Symbols that do not pertain to any of the categories relevant to our investigation are included in the category 'Other'.

to a specific decision or states of affairs; on the other hand, they may be invoked as constituting the ultimate goal to which political actions is oriented.[6]

The category 'goals' includes symbols concerning the explicit proposal of actions and decisions intended to change (or preserve) the actual state of affairs. References to goals may have different degrees of generality. They may range from abstract and general statements orienting the future of the EU (that may be defined in terms of 'values', see fn. 6) to direct and precise policy indications. The sub-categories of 'values' and 'goals' are presented in Table 2.

3.2 The sources of legitimacy and the political community

A fundamental aspect of our analysis is identification of the particular source of the legitimacy of the EU's political authority that the speakers endorses and communicates. We labeled 'sources of legitimacy' those symbols cited in order: 1) to found the EU polity in terms of identity by providing a sense of "belonging/being bound together"; 2) describe and justify the EU's authority and decisions.

In general, the EU's symbolic repertoire in terms of *thick* symbols (like language, ethnicity, culture, traditions, religion) is limited (Theiler 2005: 42-43). The EU's identity/legitimacy repertoire is mainly composed of *thin* symbols, i.e. symbols that connect the EU's legitimacy to aspects of civic engagement or 'rational-utilitarianist' arguments (Theiler 2005: 22). However, an attempt to create and provide 'thicker' symbols of identification in the EU polity may be present in the speeches. In Table 2, we identify five different symbolic categories to which the speakers may make direct reference so as to found their legitimation strategies.

Another aspect relevant to the conception of legitimacy endorsed by the speakers – and that may drive their discursive legitimation strategies – is their interpretation of the role of the 'political community' ('European peoples', 'European citizens', 'European voters') that emerges from the analysis of the speeches. Close reading of the speeches induced us to differentiate two sub-categories of symbols referring to the political community. We labelled them: *community as a recipient*, and *community as a source of legitimacy*.[7] Included in the first sub-category are references to the EU political community as the beneficiary of EU decisions; included in the second are those cases in which the political community is invoked as founding the EU's authority and legitimacy (see Table 2).

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[6] When a symbol referring to a 'value' is intended as a 'goal' it is registered twice, once in the category 'values' and once in the category 'goals'.
[7] Note that symbols denote the political community as a 'recipient' of the EU decisions do not constitute a basis for legitimacy and accordingly are not registered in the category *sources of legitimacy*.

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(Table 2 about here)

4. Findings

In total, the application of our coding scheme enabled us to identify 193 symbols in Barroso 2010, 247 in Barroso 2011, 281 in Barroso 2012, 244 in Barroso 2013, 328 in Juncker 2015, 267 in Juncker 2016 and 219 in Juncker 2017.[8] Figure 1 shows the overall distribution of symbols in the different categories.[9]

(Figure 1 about here)

The analysis of the SOTEU speeches in terms of frequencies of 'values' and 'goals' yields some interesting results. In general, the explicit reference to values varies across the seven speeches, ranging from 9.3% (in the total of symbols registered in the speech) included in Barroso 2013 to 22.8% in Juncker 2017 (see Figure 1). Moreover, the distribution of values among the different sub-categories changes quite evidently. The first two speeches (Barroso 2010 and 2011) exhibit a clear predominance of values pertaining to the economic sphere, which in the SOTEU 2011 represent 75.7% of all symbols pertaining to the category 'values' (see Figure 2). The two most recent speeches by Barroso (2012 and 2013), on the other hand, show a clear decrease in the reference to economic values and a slight predominance of symbols pertaining to the sub-category of political values. An even more evident change in the explicit reference to values is, however, the one apparent in Juncker's 2015 speech. The reference to economic values reaches only 5% of the total of symbols in the category 'values', and the predominant sub-categories in the speech are, in order, the spheres of social and ethical values. In the SOTEU 2016, and, even more evidently, in that of 2017, while the frequency of symbols in the sub-categories social and ethical values remain high, the predominant sub-category is the one of political values, populated mostly by references to 'democracy', 'transparence' and 'accountability'.

(Figure 2 about here)

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[8] The higher number of symbols identified in Juncker's 2015 speech is also due to its greater length (around 10,000 words against an average length of 5,000 words of all other speeches).
[9] Note that the sub-category 'community as a source' is included within the category 'sources of legitimacy'.

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In regard to the category 'goals', clear differences emerge among the speeches. It is interesting that 'goals' represent almost half the total of symbols in Barroso's first speech (SOTEU 2010; 49.7% of the total of symbols registered in the speech). The other speeches range from 21.9% in Juncker 2015 to 35.6 in Juncker 2017 (see Figure 1).

(Figure 3 about here)

As can be seen in Figure 3, all of Barroso's speeches are characterized by a clear predominance of goals concerning the economic sphere. Juncker's speeches, by contrast, present a prevalence of goals concerning the political (both constitutive and merely political) and social spheres. Significantly, in the SOTEU 2017 the reference to political goals represents 51.2% of the total of symbols of the 'goals' category, with a clear predominance of symbols pertaining to the sub-category 'constitutive goals'.

Figure 4 depicts the distribution of symbols of the 'sources of legitimacy' category for the seven SOTEU speeches.

(Figure 4 about here)

As shown in Figure 4, the reference to the sources of legitimacy records its lowest rate (in the total of symbols in the speech) in Barroso 2010 (1.5%) and its highest in Juncker 2017 (15.1%). No general pattern, in terms of the distribution of symbols concerning the 'sources of legitimacy', can be detected across Barroso's speeches (2010; 2011; 2012; 2013): different symbolic sub-categories are adopted time by time to deal with the question of legitimacy. A clear moment of discontinuity is found in Juncker's 2015 speech. Along with the speaker's greater concern to address the question of the foundation of the EU's legitimacy – testified by the highest frequency of symbols in the speech falling in the overall category 'sources of legitimacy' (see Figure 1) – the analysis shows a clear predominance of symbols referring to the sub-category 'common historical experience and memory'. Although still higher than that found in all Barroso's speeches, in the SOTEU 2016 references to symbols of the 'sources of legitimacy' category diminish overall, and the predominant sub-category is that of 'popular sovereignty'. The 'popular sovereignty' sub-category also predominates in the SOTEU 2017, along with the 'global designations' sub-category ("Union of values"; "Union of equals"). The SOTEU 2017 is, overall, the speech with the most references to the 'sources of legitimacy'.

Lastly, in terms of the reference to a specific interpretation of the political community, it is interesting that Barroso and Juncker's speeches register opposite results (see Figure 5).

(Figure 5 about here)

Whereas in all Barroso's speeches the political community is invariably presented as a 'beneficiary' of the EU's decisions and a recipient of the beneficial consequences of European integration, in Juncker's speeches the references to the political community clearly prioritize its role as a source of the European Union's legitimacy.

5. Discussion. 'Which' legitimacy for the European Union?

The study of the frequency of symbols has allowed us to identify clear differences, in terms of symbolic content, between the speeches by Barroso and the more recent speeches delivered by Juncker.

As illustrated in the previous section, Barroso's speeches make predominant reference to *economic goals* and *values*, while devoting little attention to symbols concerning the sources of the EU's legitimacy – privileging, in this case, the reference to 'Treaties' – and providing an interpretation of the *political community as a beneficiary* of the EU's decisions and of the European integration process. Referring to the typology of discursive legitimation strategies identified by Van Leeuwen (2007), we suggest that Barroso's speeches comprise a discursive strategy mainly directed at legitimation through *rationalization* given by the predominance of symbols belonging in the 'goals' category, especially 'economic goals'. The legitimacy of the EU is asserted through 'rationalist' and 'utilitarianist' arguments (Thelier 2005: 22), and it is attested insofar as the EU produces beneficial outcomes *for* the 'political community'. The following passage from Barroso 2013 exemplifies this point:

I cannot emphasise this enough: citizens will not be convinced with rhetoric and promises only, but only with a concrete set of common achievements. We have to show the many areas where Europe has solved problems for citizens. Europe is not the cause of problems, Europe is part of the solution (Barroso 2013: 6).

Barroso's speeches, moreover, present elements of *authorization*. The kind of authority evoked, however, is predominantly the authority of economic expertise (Reyes, 2011) supported by the high frequency of references to economic values.

What emerges from Barroso's choices in terms of discursive legitimation strategy is an underlying *output* conception of legitimacy (Scharpf 1999; Schmidt 2013): the community is not the source of power *per se*; it is, by contrast, the ultimate recipient and judge of the activities and decisions of the EU. In this perspective EU authority and procedures are then motivated and justified in light of their capacity to make 'good decisions' for EU citizens. In Barroso's speeches, the legitimazing principle is accordingly the classic, functionalist interpretation of the 'rationality' of the EU's decisions in terms of, mainly, economic outputs, supported by reference to merely economic principles and values – as well as by a non-conflictual, technocratic language (Olsson and Hammargård 2016: 552-3): Barroso's attempt to reclaim legitimacy for the EU in times of crises thus goes in the direction of the depoliticization of current conflicts in light of the rationality of EU decisions.

Our findings for the SOTEU speeches delivered by Juncker allow us to depict a quite different picture. Juncker's speeches devote little attention to the economic sphere in general, and to symbols concerning economic goals and values in particular. Juncker's reference to values is made predominantly in terms of *ethical, social* and, especially in the last two speeches, *political values*. Symbols concerning the EU political sphere are overall predominant, and particular reference is made to symbols concerning the *sources of legitimacy*. Despite differences between Juncker's three SOTEU speeches – concerning mainly the 2016 speech, where we registered a slight increase in the reference to economic values and goals and a decrease in the reference to the sources of legitimacy – the overall similarities hold in the comparison with Barroso's speeches.

The discursive legitimation strategies employed by Juncker can thus be described as rather different from those used by Barroso. Firstly, the frequency of symbols of the sub-categories 'political community' and 'popular sovereignty' as sources of legitimacy indicates a legitimation through *authorization* in terms of (democratic) rules and procedures, where authority is understood in terms of the classic repertoire of democratic legitimacy. The underlying conception of legitimacy that shapes Juncker's discursive strategies thus seems to consist in an *input*-based understanding of legitimacy whereby citizens are not only the judges of, but also the prime actors in, the decision-making process.

Secondly, the frequent reference to symbols in the 'values' category, in particular the reference to values pertaining to the ethical sphere - almost absent in Barroso's speeches - highlights the presence of a strategy of legitimation through *moral evaluation*, where actions and decisions are explained and justified by reference to a commonly shared set of values. Lastly, Juncker's speeches include also elements of legitimation through *mythopoesis*, supported by the high rate of symbols concerning the 'common historical experience and memory' (especially in the SOTEU 2015) and by the inclusion of

actual mythopoetic narratives. The following passage from Juncker's 2015 speech exemplifies this point:

"*Pushing back boats from piers, setting fire to refugee camps, or turning a blind eye to poor and helpless people: that is not Europe. Europe is the baker in Kos who gives away his bread to hungry and weary souls. Europe is the students in Munich and in Passau who bring clothes for the new arrivals at the train station. That's those at the Munich rail station applauding and welcoming refugees. The Europe I want to live in is illustrated by those who are helping. The Europe I don't want to live in is a Europe refusing those who are in need*" (Juncker 2015: 6).

The use of these two latter discursive strategies seems intended to provide and reinforce thicker symbols of identification and narratives for legitimizing the EU, and upholding, as well as reproducing, a *substantial* conception of legitimacy of the Weberian kind described by Cerutti (2008) as based on collective identification and shared beliefs.

On the basis of our findings, we can thus highlight a clear shift in the overall legitimizing strategies of the two Presidents. Whereas Barroso's speeches are designed to depoliticize conflicts and reproduce the commonly held assumption of the EU as "a polity based on rationality and functional interests, not emotional appeals" (Della Sala 2010: 2), Juncker's speeches are 'more political' and characterized by 'a marked assertiveness' and 'bold proposals' (Dinan 2016: 103) associated with stronger legitimacy claims.

To be noted is that the results of our analysis seem to be in line with, as well as to support, the insights of other studies that have illustrated the emergence of a visible difference between Barroso's and Juncker's overall approaches to the Presidency (Kassim 2017; Kassim et al. 2017). If, on the one hand, the content and the discursive strategies employed in the speeches highlight the role of agency in attesting Juncker's willingness to present himself and communicate as a 'more political' President than Barroso – the latter being often criticized for a lack of political assertiveness (Dinan 2016: 102) – on the other hand, the differences in the communication style of the two Presidents may be interpreted as also related to changes in the political and institutional context. Undoubtedly, the exacerbation of the refugee crises and Brexit may have had an impact on Juncker's communication choices by rendering the question of legitimacy even more urgent. Nonetheless, while agency is certainly central in the selection of the discursive strategies, the introduction of the *Spitzencandidaten* system has been fundamental in providing the two Presidents with a different discursive opportunity structure.

Firstly, the different procedure of appointment has undoubtedly endowed the two Presidents with a different symbolic repertoire. As suggested by Christiansen, the introduction of the

Spitzencandidaten procedure "provided a powerful symbolic change" (2016: 993) – that may also be interpreted, following Gronau and Schmidke (2016), as an institutional strategy for legitimation – in the nature of the Presidency. While the appointment of Barroso and his predecessors was the result of intergovernmental negotiations and merely 'approved' by the European Parliament, the new appointment procedure allows Juncker to claim a sort of electoral mandate, and, as a consequence, offers him the opportunity to resort more directly to the symbolic repertoire of democratic legitimacy. Secondly, the nature itself of the *Spitzencandidaten* system has allowed Juncker to claim a sort *personal* electoral mandate (Kassim 2017; see also Dinan 2016), offering him the opportunity to claim more legitimacy for his role and enabling a stronger leadership. As Christiansen points out: "The President of the Commission, less encumbered than his predecessor by the need for support and approval from the majority of member states, has been able to assume a leadership role unseen since the days of Jacques Delors" (2016: 1007).

Accordingly, the new opportunity structure created by the introduction of the *Spitzencandidaten* system has allowed Juncker to shape his discursive strategies in a way just precluded to his predecessor. 'Building' (Dinan 2016: 103) on his new appointment procedure, Juncker has been able to include in his speeches discursive strategies directed at the legitimation of his own role and of the EU's policy proposals in terms of democratic authorization, thus offering an overall interpretation of the EU's legitimacy in terms of input. Moreover, in light of his stronger leadership, Juncker has been able to reinforce his legitimacy claims by including discursive strategies of top-down legitimation through moral evaluation and mythopoesis, overall contributing to an interpretation of the EU as a 'community of values' in terms of a substantial, Weberian, conception of the legitimacy of the EU.

Conclusion

In this study we have investigated the way in which the two latest Presidents of the Commission, José Manuel Barroso and Jean-Claude Juncker, have tackled the question of the legitimacy of the EU in the delivery of the SOTEU speeches. Given the 'existential' challenges posed by the multiplicity of crises that have affected the European Union in recent years, the way in which the President of the Commission communicates with the public plays a fundamental role in supporting and reclaiming legitimacy not only for EU decisions but also for the EU integration process as a whole. In light of this premise, our aim in this study has been to investigate the way in which Barroso and Juncker have attempted to restate and reclaim legitimacy for the EU through the use of specific discursive

legitimation strategies. The State of the Union speech, specifically instituted to provide a more symbolically significant setting for communication, is expected to be the moment when the President's claims for the legitimacy of the EU are expressed and substantiated. Through a systematic qualitative content analysis of the seven SOTEU speeches delivered until now, we have been able to reconstruct the discursive legitimation strategies (Van Leeuwen 2007) employed by the two Presidents, and the specific conception of the legitimacy of the EU that underlies them. Our results have enabled us to identify two different overall approaches to discursive legitimation on the part of the two Presidents.

The four speeches by Barroso rely primarily on *rationalization* in light of economic goals and on *authorization* defined in terms of the authority of economic expertise, revealing a commitment to an understanding of the EU's legitimacy of the output variety. By contrast, Juncker's three speeches mainly rely on legitimation through *authorization* in terms of democratic procedures and popular sovereignty. They present elements of legitimation through *moral evaluation* and *mythopoesis*. In reference to the conception of the legitimacy of the EU that emerges from the speeches, Juncker seems to endorse elements of input legitimacy combined with an attempt to promote a substantial, Weberian conception of legitimacy (Cerutti 2008) as a system of shared belief and collective identity. Accordingly, whereas Barroso's speeches can be read as attempts to depoliticize problems of a political nature by addressing them in light of the functionalist, rationalist 'myth' (Hansen and Williams 1999) of the EU as a 'community of interests', Juncker's speeches can be seen as attempts to restore the myth of the EU as a 'community of values'.

Assessing whether this change in legitimation strategies has had or would have an effect on Europeans' perception of the EU's legitimacy falls outside the scope of this study. Nor is it our intention to claim that a single, annual speech has an immediate effect on citizens' attitudes – especially in light of the absence of a fully developed public sphere at the EU level. What our analysis of the SOTEU speeches offers, however, is evidence of a clear shift in the attitude of the President of the Commission - undoubtedly facilitated by the introduction of the *Spitzencandidaten* procedure - towards the conception of the EU's legitimacy that should be reclaimed and promoted, as well as towards the role of the President him/herself in the attempt to regain and enhance trust in EU institutions and the European integration project. Although the analysis of the SOTEU speeches does not tell the full story of Barroso's and Juncker's attempts to produce and reclaim legitimacy for the European Union, it nevertheless provides us with evidence to depict a paradigm shift that was long overdue.

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Table 1. The seven State of the Union Addresses

SOTEU	Main topics
Barroso 2010 *No title*	Common response to the crisis: modernize EU social market economy Priorities: growth to promote freedom, security and justice
Barroso 2011 *"European Renewal"*	Economic crisis: restoring confidence Priorities: stability; responsibility/discipline; growth Target: irresponsible MSs
Barroso 2012 *No title*	Political union (Federation) as a means to Economic Union Priorities: Economic, social and political crisis Target: unreliable MSs; populism
Barroso 2013 *No title*	Economic crisis: positive signals, more to be done Priorities: growth as a means to/as well as employment Target: general detractors
Juncker 2015 *"Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity"*	Common solutions to refugee crisis and Greece Priorities: solidarity; social values and rights as means to economic growth; political role of EU institutions Target: Un-European Union?; general detractors
Juncker 2016 *"Towards a better Europe - a Europe that protects, empowers and defends"*	Overcoming fragmentation Priorities: preserving the European way of life; unemployment and social inequality; growth Target: MSs; national governments
Juncker 2017 *No title*	A more united, stronger and democratic Europe Priorities: more integration in the economic and political domains; stronger EU institutions; more democracy in the EU.

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Table 2. The coding of discursive legitimation: the symbols categories

Categories and sub-categories	Examples
Values	
Economic values principles and doctrines of the economic sphere	"growth"; "competiveness"; "free movement"; "social-market economy"
Ethical values moral principles and doctrines	"human dignity"; "human rights"; "toleration"
Political values political concepts and doctrines	"democracy"; "accountability"; "transparency"; "nationalism"; "liberalism"
Scientific values	"knowledge"; "expertise"; "technology"
Social values sphere of social rights and justice	"gender equality"; "solidarity"; "fairness"; "equity"; "minority rights"; "equality".
Goals	
Constitutive goals	"strengthening the Union"; "political integration", "improving the relations between the Parliament and the Commission; "strengthening the role of the Parliament"
Political goals	"implementation of that policy"; "co-ordination"; "compliance by MSs"
Economic goals	"development"; "growth"; "competiveness"; "productivity"; "increase of wealth, of welfare, of poverty"; "increase of employment"; "coordination of national economies"; "economic reforms"
Social goals	"social cohesion"; "development of human capital"; "social protection"; "social innovation"; "social development"; "social malaise/welfare"; "social crisis"; "social emergency"; "social reform"
Eidetic goals	"scientific, technological, or cultural development"; "investment in research"
Ethical goals	"dignity of the person, of work"; "protection of human rights"; "promotion of gender equality"; "support for European values"; "moral reform"
Sources of legitimacy	
Symbols of *popular sovereignty*	"European elections"; "Citizens' mandate"
Symbols of *global designation*	"European democracies"; "Union of equals"
Symbols of the *political community*	"Peoples of Europe"; "European citizens"
Symbols of the *treaties* (when evoking the source/origin on which the European framework founds its existence and capacity for action)	"Treaty of Lisbon"; "Treaty of Rome"; "TEU"
Symbols of the *common historical experience and memory* (recalling the cultural matrix of EU or justify the process of unification)	"European civilization"; "the Europe of Enlightenment"; "the fight for liberation of the peoples of Europe"; "World Wars"
Interpretations of the political community	
Community as a source of legitimacy	"European peoples", "European citizens", "European voters"
Community as a recipient	"For the European citizens"; "Beneficial to EU citizens"; "Solving problems for citizens"

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Figure 1. The SOTEU symbolic space: frequencies of symbols (%) in the different categories

Figure 2. Frequencies of symbols (%) in the category 'values'

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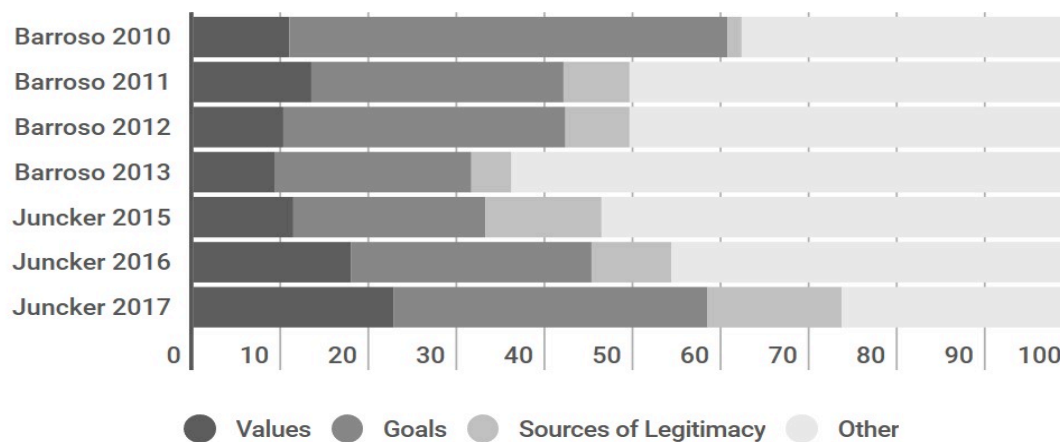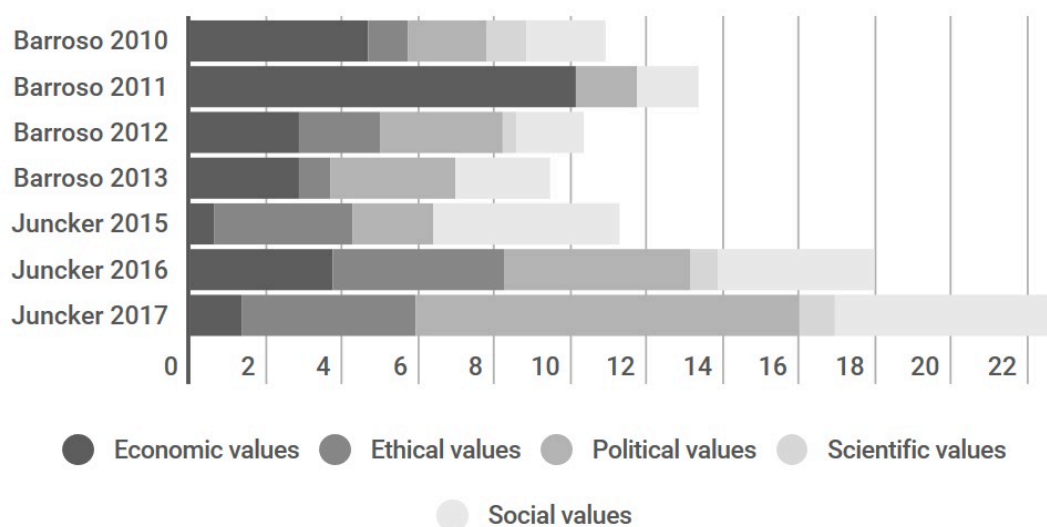
Figure 3. Frequencies of symbols (%) in the category 'goals'
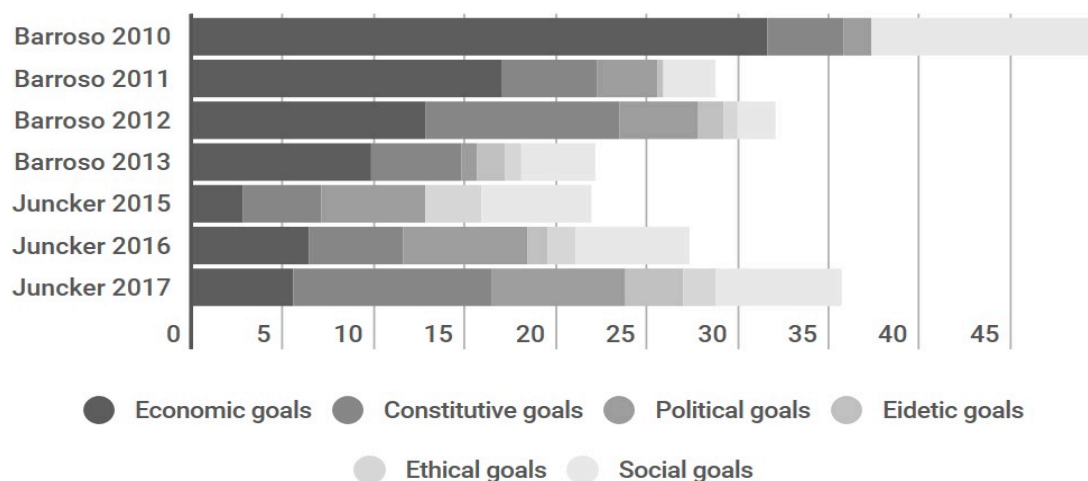
Figure 4. Frequencies of symbols (%)in the category 'sources of legitimacy'

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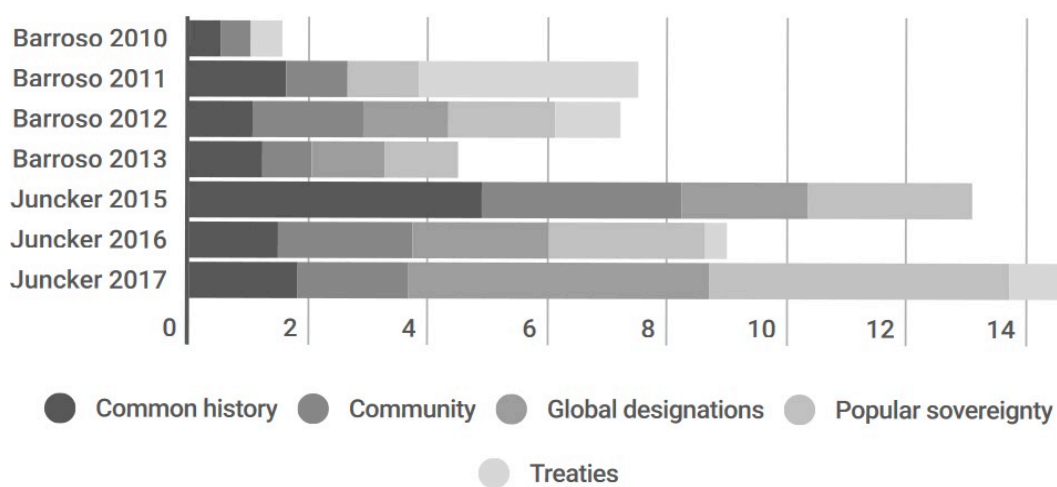
Figure 5. Frequencies of symbols (%) in the category 'political community'