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**Environmental Commitments and Rhetoric over the Pandemic Crisis:
Social Media and Legitimation of the AIIB, the EAEU, and the EU.**

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Environmental Commitments and Rhetoric over the Pandemic Crisis: Social Media and Legitimation of the AIIB, the EAEU, and the EU.

Abstract (150 words)

How do international organizations (IOs) legitimize their right to rule in times of a Pandemic? Where are their previously made environmental commitments on their agenda during a crisis? What are the differences in self-legitimation, if any, across different types of IOs? These questions have gathered renewed urgency during the ongoing COVID-19 and climate change crises posing a threat to the legitimacy not only of national governments but also of IOs. The paper aims to address these questions through the analysis of environmental commitments made in legal documents of three IOs (the EU, the EAEU, and the AIIB) and through the analysis of their respective social media between 2017 and 2021. Among other issues, we find significant differences in self-legitimation strategies of these three IOs as reflected by their social media and some evidence of mimicry across these IOs that should remain on the agenda for further studies.

Keywords:

International Organizations, Environmental Politics; Self-legitimation; Legitimacy; AIIB; EAEU; EU; Pandemic; COVID-19

Environmental Commitments and Rhetoric over the Pandemic Crisis: Social Media and Legitimation of the AIIB, the EAEU, and the EU.

1. Introduction

How do international organizations (IOs) legitimize their right to rule during the current Pandemic crisis?¹ What is the place of their previously made environmental commitments on their agenda during the crisis? What are the differences in self-legitimation, if any, across different types of IOs? These questions have gathered renewed urgency during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and climate change crises posing a threat to the legitimacy not only of national governments but also of IOs.² The paper aims to address these questions through the analysis of environmental commitments made in legal documents of three very different IOs (the European Union (EU), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)) and through the analysis of their respective social media between 2017 and 2021.

The pandemic challenged previously made environmental commitments of some countries and of IOs, shifting the environmental agenda to the bottom of their priority list or delaying implementation of environmental policies and negotiation (Bordoff 2020; Böhmelt 2021; Vadrot et. al. 2021). Recent studies have focused on comparing cross-country responses to COVID-19 versus responses to the environmental crisis; investigating national responses to the Pandemic and to climate change as well as analysing the role of democracy across these issues (Nguyen 2021; Van der Ven and Sun 2021; Wapner 2021; Peterson 2021). We take this comparative approach to the pandemic and environmental issues further and compare the responses of different types of IOs towards the pandemic crisis and to their environmental commitments outlined in their legal documents (e.g., the IO's founding agreements). We use legal documents and the social media communication of three IOs to understand their self-legitimation strategies during the pandemic. Legitimation of IOs relates to their reaction to an unexpected global health crisis (not foreseen by their founding agreements) and to global

¹ Co-authors are listed alphabetically and they contributed equally to this project.

² The World Health Organization, for example, has been at the forefront of the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China over the nature of international order, but regional IOs have also been affected. The European Union (EU), for example, has been heavily criticized for being slow and ineffective in coordinating the joint acquisition of vaccines

environmental challenges (an issue that was addressed in their founding agreements and other legal documents, which were all published prior to COVID-19).³

We engage the influence of political regimes in our analysis because the three organizations under study differ in terms of the nature of their membership. In this paper, we follow the terminology of “non-democratic regional organizations” (NDROs) that is the EAEU, versus “democratic regional organizations” (DROs) that is the EU.⁴ All three IOs analysed in this paper have a regional dimension and are referred to as regional IOs (arguably, the AIIB can be considered an exception as described below). Within this approach, the EU is a classic example of a DRO as democracy has always been a pre-condition of membership and the EU’s influence and democracy diffusion has been discussed in multiple studies (Bartels and Bermeo eds. 2014; Lankina et. al. 2016a; 2016b; Obydenkova 2008; 2012; Pevehouse 2005; Rohrschneider 2002). Despite the destructive consequences of the Great Recession 2008, democratic backsliding, decline of public trust in the EU, the legitimacy crisis, and emergence of populism (Armingeon and Ceka 2013; Armingeon and Guthmann. 2014; Böhmelt 2021; Arpino and Obydenkova 2020; Obydenkova and Arpino 2018; Pevehouse 2005), the EU still espouses democracy and the rule-of-law as a prerequisite for membership. The further analysis presented in this paper also demonstrates that the EU retained a focus on environmental policy despite the 2008 crisis and the current pandemic. The EAEU is an ideal example of an NDRO. Launched in 2015, its historic members were three consolidated autocracies, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, although later it also welcomed membership of two hybrid polities, sometimes referred to as “semi-democracies” or “semi-autocracies”, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan (e.g., Libman and Obydenkova 2018b; Obydenkova and Schmitter 2020).

As for the AIIB, also launched in 2015, we will refer to it as a “hybrid IO” or a “half-way house” for two reasons. First, though the name suggests it is a regional IO, the AIIB arguably has lost its regional focus having since 2015 expanded globally beyond Asia to Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Second, though the AIIB was launched by China, about half of its member-states are democracies, including EU member-states. The AIIB incorporates

³ Some studies also linked the environmental commitments of states to trigger states’ legitimacy in the eyes of the public and to gain public support (Nguyen 2021). We expand this logic further to understand the role of an environmental agenda as a tool of self-legitimation for IOs *over* the crisis and *as compared to* the Pandemic crisis, using the literature on COVID-19 and global environmental challenges.

⁴ The terminology was introduced by Libman and Obydenkova (2013) and was further developed in other studies using “authoritarian regionalism”, “*autocracies-led IO*” and NDRO interchangeably as opposed to “*democracies-composed IO*” as a synonym of DROs (e.g., Libman and Obydenkova 2018a; Obydenkova and Libman 2019). DROs exhibit homogeneity in terms of the political regimes. NDROs exhibit heterogeneity in political regimes of the member-states, combining autocracies, hybrid regimes and even democracies (Obydenkova and Libman 2019). In this paper, we will follow this terminological trend and will use these terms interchangeably.

both autocracies and democracies, as it has 82 current members and 20 potential members at the time of writing. Therefore, technically, it can hardly be referred to as an NDRO, despite China's leadership of this IO.⁵ Consequently, analysing these IOs will help us investigate self-legitimation across the environmental and pandemic agendas in three types of the IOs.

The paper proceeds in the following way. The next section discusses the studies on legitimation of IOs and develops hypotheses. Section three describes our methodology and how the evidence was collected. Section four analyses the environmental commitments in the founding texts of the three IOs and whenever applicable in other legal documents issued prior to COVID-19. The fifth section then concentrates on the cases of the pandemic and environmental policies in social media of the three IOs between 2017 and 2021. We conclude by summarizing our evidence in light of the studies on IOs and the global environmental agenda.

2. Self-Legitimation of International Organizations and Role of Political Regimes

IOs require legitimacy to thrive and function, which generates incentives for them to seek to enhance an audience's legitimacy beliefs and even more so over a crises (be that global health or global environmental crises or economic recession, e.g., Bartels and Bermeo eds. 2014; Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018). We pursue an empirical approach to the study of IO legitimacy and legitimation that is concerned not with whether IOs *ought to* be considered as legitimate by assessing them against pre-defined normative standards (see for example, Dahl 1999; Keohane, Macedo and Moravcsik 2009; Moravcsik 2004). Instead, our approach asks how IOs seek to foster belief in their legitimacy by appealing to the normative beliefs of these audiences (for the distinction between empirical and normative legitimacy, see Steffek 2003). We understand legitimacy as the recognition on the part of relevant stakeholders that an IO's authority is rightful (Hurd 1999). Legitimate political organizations find it easier to obtain compliance with their rules and to attract political and financial support. IOs are particularly dependent on legitimacy because they rely on voluntary compliance by member states to make a difference in world politics (Franck 1988). When coercive enforcement mechanisms are absent and material benefits vary across IO decisions, what David Easton (1975) terms 'diffuse

⁵ The AIIB in its hybrid nature is similar to the logic of regional development banks (RDBs) – launched by democracies and the USA, yet sponsoring developing states in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and post-Communist Europe (e.g., Ben-Artzi 2016; Obydenkova and Vieira 2020; for EBRD see Nazarov and Obydenkova 2021). While technically the RDB are “democracies-led”, they are composed of different political regimes, including consolidated autocracies (e.g., China and Belarus among many others).

support' is pivotal to an IO's ability to coordinate solutions to transnational problems among member states.

Given the importance of legitimacy for the functioning of IOs, they have incentives to nourish key audience's legitimacy beliefs strategically. Max Weber expected political organizations "to seek to enhance the belief in its legitimacy" (Weber 1978: 213). We conceive of legitimation as strategic practices that aim to stabilize and enhance the belief in an IO's legitimacy among key audiences (Tallberg and Zürn 2019: 588). Therefore, our focus is on *the process* by which IOs seek to generate, or claim, legitimacy during the present pandemic crisis and the use of global environmental values. In this project we do not aim to evaluate whether IOs are actually successful in doing so in terms of changes in public opinion. Such legitimation may be undertaken by a broad range of actors, including member states, non-governmental organizations and public opinion makers such as the media, but our focus in this paper is on an IO's self-legitimation, that is, IO representatives' own attempts at legitimation via legal documents and social media. We thus follow theorists such as Barker who focus on the "self-justifying activity characteristic of rulers" (Barker 2001: 13), and modern organizational theorists who study public self-legitimation as "one of the principal functions of persons on the institutional level" (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975: 123). Self-legitimation can take different forms, and we focus on self-legitimation on social media that engages both discursive and behavioral claims (for the conceptual distinction between discursive, institutional and behavioural legitimation, see Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018). Whereas discursive self-legitimation relies exclusively on language, either in the form of speech or written text (see Wajner 2019; Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy 2004), behavioral self-legitimation refers to an IO's actions.

From this perspective, self-legitimation by IO representatives constitutes a strategic attempt to justify an IO's claim to authority in such a way that it enhances audiences' legitimacy beliefs effectively. This perspective assumes that IO representatives construct "legitimation warrants" (Halliday, Block-Lieb and Carruthers 2010), including social media posts, purposefully. This is the key premise of Vila-Henninger's definition of political legitimation as "an actor's rationalization (or justification or validation or consecration or defence) of a political system in terms of norms, widely held beliefs, and/or values" (Vila-Henninger, 2020: 491). From this perspective, IO representatives treat legitimacy as a resource that they use in pursuit of their goals (Suchman, 1995: 576). Strategic self-legitimation is most likely to succeed when it engages those norms of appropriate behavior that relevant audiences use to assess an IO's legitimacy. Strategic IO representatives will, as a result, construct their legitimacy claims with a view towards audiences' legitimacy beliefs. This is what Suchman

terms strategic “efforts to conform to the dictates of pre-existing audiences within the organization’s current environment” (Suchman 1995: 587). IOs may engage a variety of norms when portraying their IO as legitimate, and much of the literature has emphasized functional problem-solving and democracy (see for example, Dingwerth, Schmidtke and Weise 2020; Rau and Zürn 2020; Zürn 2018), but our focus is on two norms that have risen to prominence more recently: environmental protection and the pandemic.

This strategic view of self-legitimation generates distinct hypotheses across three analytical dimensions, and we develop them with a particular focus on the nature of an IO’s member states and how this shapes discursive self-legitimation on social media: (a) the intensity of legitimation, (b) audiences, and (c) content (evaluated as discursive versus behavioral). Regarding the first dimension, the intensity of an IO’s discursive self-legitimation is a function of its need for legitimacy. Self-legitimation is costly, requiring financial, institutional and temporal resources that are scarce especially in smaller IOs (Ecker-Erhardt 2018). More importantly, legitimacy arguably only matters across democratic polities with transparent information and critical independent mass media reflecting on all governmental actions. In contrast, closed non-democratic polities have government-controlled official mass media and find it easier to manipulate public opinion. Thus, IOs composed of democracies (DROs) are more likely to engage in extensive and demanding self-legitimation to leverage public opinion and support. In contrast IOs led by autocracies (NDROs) tend to invest less in self-legitimacy due to their low accountability to people, less dependence on electoral results (that are faked), and due to the government control over the national mass media promoting pro-government viewpoints.⁶

Following this logic, we hypothesize that the need for legitimacy, and thus the intensity of self-legitimation, varies systematically with the nature of an IO’s member states. On the one hand, the legitimacy of non-democracies relies on their delivery of public goods, or output legitimacy (Gerschewski 2013: 19-20). On the other hand, due to non-democracies control over mass media, it is easier for them to manipulate public opinion. In extreme case, access to social media and internet is limited and restricted, such as for example in China (e.g., Huang and Yip 2012; Harwit and Clark 2001).

⁶ Governmental control over national mass media can be described as propaganda that is a very different phenomenon (e.g., see Libman and Obydenkova 2021). We develop further Brady’s (2009, p. 434), distinction between “performance-based legitimacy” and “promulgating ideology”. The first one we interpret as part of *accountability to the people* (based on transparent information and facts), while the second notion (propaganda) is interpretative and not supported by facts or independent sources of information. For the sake of clarity, this paper focuses on the first type – actual legitimation (not about propaganda as defined here).

Democratic regimes rely on a broader set of legitimacy sources, including both procedures and performance (for the conceptual distinction, see Scharpf 1999). They, thus, derive legitimacy *inter alia* from the ability of the people to vote their representatives out of office in free and fair elections. For this reason, democracies are concerned about public opinion sustaining their legitimacy that can be challenged over the time of crisis (such as the pandemic, for example). Therefore, democracies are, logically, expected to engage deeper in self-legitimation via social media, among other available tools. Furthermore, democracies are also constrained in their exercise of power by institutional mechanisms, such as checks-and-balances, non-majoritarian institutions and fundamental rights that are beyond the reach of government (Obydenkova and Schmitter 2020). We expect these differences across polities to translate into the organization as a whole because member states are aware of the legitimacy challenges they face.

Given that autocracies are less dependent on public opinion and support (as electoral results and official mass media are subject to manipulation), we expect non-democracies to be less involved in the self-legitimation and of their respective IOs. Even more so, whenever an autocracies-led IO uses social media as a tool of self-legitimation, they mainly do so to mimic practices existing in the Western democratic world. The actual use of social media can be viewed as mimicry without reflecting the substance of social media as a tool of accountability. Based on this, our first hypothesis follows:

H₁ (intensity): Autocracies-led IOs (NDROs) engage in less intensive self-legitimation than democracies-composed IOs (DROs).

Second, strategic legitimizers tailor their discursive self-legitimation to the particular audience that they aim to address. One of the most fundamental challenges of successful legitimation is to cater successfully to different audiences that assess an IO's legitimacy on the basis of different norms of appropriate behaviour (Symons 2011). The audiences of an IO are not homogenous, but consist of a variety of social groups that may encompass civil society organizations (Beetham and Lord, 1998; Bernstein 2011; Scholte 2012), IO bureaucracies (Billerbeck 2020; Gronau and Schmidtke 2016), expert communities (Moschella 2010), international cooperation partners (Ba 2013), and an increasingly attentive public (Chapman 2009; Dingwerth et al. 2019; Hooghe, Lenz and Marks 2018; Zürn 2018). Whereas some of these audiences may increase their support for IOs that justify their authority with reference to the idea that they help protect the environment, others may not. Given the diversity of social media channels, we expect IOs that approach their discursive self-legitimation strategically to

display different legitimation messages when using different social media networks. Different networks tend to be associated with different user groups. Whereas some networks are particularly popular with international audiences, others cater primarily for a domestic or regional audience. The following hypothesis follows from this assumption:

H₂ (audiences): The legitimation messages that IOs distribute vary across different social media networks.

A third hypothesis engages the content of legitimation. As we have noted, designing successful legitimation messages is informationally demanding as it requires detailed knowledge on relevant audiences and the nature of their legitimacy beliefs. Given that information on these issues tends to be incomplete, strategic policy-makers may take short-cuts and rely on heuristics when designing their legitimation strategies (Lenz, Burilkov and Viola 2019; Lenz and Viola 2017). In particular, they may copy the successful legitimation strategies of other actors within their organizational field. Isomorphism, which is the increasing similarity of strategies and practices within an organizational field, has been widely observed across a range of organizations (Haveman 1993; Johnston 2008; Meyer and Rowan 1977), and we entertain the possibility that it may also hold for the realm of IO legitimation. A large literature in organizational theory suggests that isomorphism is a widespread reaction to uncertainty, professionalization and the increasing structuration of an organizational field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Certain norms assume a dominant role in an organizational field and are subsequently emulated by others for reasons of expediency and recognition. Despite a recent backlash, democracy arguably remains the dominant normative standard by which to judge political systems. As Buchanan and Keohane (2006: 416) note, “democracy is now widely thought to be the gold standard for legitimacy in the case of the state.” Thus, we hypothesize that NDROs emulate the legitimation messages of DROs in order to reap the legitimacy benefits associated with democratic legitimation. This leads to our third hypothesis:

H₃ (legitimation content): Autocracies-led IOs (NDROs) mimic the strategy and legitimation messages of democracies-composed IOs (DROs).

Given the demanding nature of self-legitimation practices, we further expect to find strategy and content of autocracies-led IO less persuasive and more superficial. When DROs are likely to report in detail on all previously undertaken actions or future strategy, NDROs are unlikely

to provide details of their policies and are expected to be more superficial in their statements. We further test these hypotheses through analysis of the environmental agenda in (a) legal documents of the three IOs and in (b) their social media over the pandemic crisis. This double focus allows additionally to test whether environmental commitments outlined in legal documents were further implemented in any way, if at all, or remained rhetorical lip-service and ink-on-paper on the part of the EAEU and AIIB as compared to the EU.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

For our exploratory analysis of practices of discursive self-legitimation of the EU, EAEU and AIIB, we investigated the social media networks used by each organisation from January 2017 to the time of writing in 2021. The AIIB only uses Twitter, which is in English. By contrast, the EAEU uses Facebook, Twitter and the Russian language social network VKontakte (VK), and all of its social media networks are in Russian. Although this reduces the audience that the EAEU can ‘speak’ to, there are competing audiences that the organisation tries to reach. Facebook and Twitter are more international and so are more likely to cater to a liberal audience outside of Russia which is English-speaking. As Enikolopov et al (2017) write, Russians who are more anti-regime tend to migrate to Facebook and Twitter, whereas VK – which is now controlled by the regime – caters to a more pro-regime audience. Therefore, the EAEU may cater to different audiences on its social media networks, allowing us to ascertain if more self-legitimation on the green agenda is done on Facebook and Twitter than on VK where the audience is less likely to be concerned with environmentalism.

By contrast there is no unifying social media network for the EU, with each IO institution having a separate social media account. Therefore, in order to ensure comparability with the AIIB and the EAEU we analysed the Facebook and Twitter feeds of the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC). Arguably, the ECB would make an excellent contrast with the AIIB, as both are banks; while the EC is more comparable to the EAEU in terms of agenda. The EC is the most important EU body, thereby making it a good contrast to the EAEU, which was launched as a competitor to the EU (Libman and Obydenkova 2018b). While the latter is an entire organisation many of the policy documents that we analysed come from the Commission, thereby providing an adequate comparative background. Both EU organisations use Facebook and Twitter and so we used these for the analysis. The EC also has a Twitter and Facebook page devoted to the environment on ‘EU Environment’,

which we also investigated. As with the AIIB, English is the dominant language of both EU social media feeds.

By investigating each organisation's social media accounts we located evidence of the self-legitimation agenda of each IO, and gauged how extensive this agenda is for each institution. Through close analysis of all posts and Tweets from January 2017 to the present (March 2021) we provide a comprehensive analysis of the self-legitimation practices of the three IOs over the period of the pandemic and trace the changes in discourse regarding this event and the changes (if any) in environmental commitments made in legal documents prior to the pandemic. Analysing a four-year period gives a microcosm of the self-legitimation practices of the three IOs, over the pandemic.

4. Environmental Commitments in Founding Treaties and Other Documents

What is the place of the Environmental agenda in legal documents of three IOs under investigation? Only if the green agenda was addressed in founding agreements and other legal documents, can we expect the IOs use environmental issues as one tool of their respective self-legitimation during the pandemic.

Due to the pandemic being a recent phenomenon, it is unlikely to be mentioned appeared in the founding documents issued prior to 2019. In contrast, the environmental agenda has a longer history and is likely to have appeared in legal and/or founding documents of each IO. Both the AIIB and the EAEU are fairly new IOs having been formed around 2015 and might have been influenced by the EU's higher environmental standards. The EU is an older IO than the others and the most advanced regional integration organization in the world (despite the crises triggered by 2008 and by 2020). We analysed first all the documents on the EU's website, while paying special attention to the European Commission (EC) and European Central Bank (ECB) in order to maintain consistency with our analysis of social media data.

The EU and Legal Framework for an Environmental Agenda

The EU provides a wealth of information on its environmental policies with detailed reports on the environment and climate change. This is backed up with the EU's statistical office, Eurostat, providing a constant stream of data on the environment and climate change. We focus on the Maastricht Treaty of the EU (1992) and other documentation available from the ECB and the EC on the issue. On the first page of the text of the 1992 treaty, the EU speaks about the environment in the following way:

“DETERMINED to promote economic and social progress for their peoples, within the context of the accomplishment of the internal market and of reinforced cohesion and *environmental protection*, and to implement policies ensuring that advances in economic integration are accompanied by parallel progress in other fields.”

Not only does the EU state that it will protect the environment, but that it will work to make sure that other IOs and states worldwide do the same as well (Ibid). The EU will also develop penalties to make sure that polluters are brought to account (Ibid). We will investigate the number of other references that the Maastricht treaty makes to the environment.

Table One: Environmental Agenda in the Maastricht Treaty of the EU (1992)

Treaty on European Union (1992)
<u>Article 2</u> : “The Community shall have as its task, by establishing a common market and an economic and monetary union and by implementing the common policies or activities referred to in Articles 3 and 3a, to promote throughout the Community a harmonious and balanced development of economic activities, sustainable and non-inflationary growth <i>respecting the environment</i> , a high degree of convergence of economic performance, a high level of employment and of social protection, the raising of the standard of living and quality of life, and economic and social cohesion and solidarity among Member States.”
<u>Article 3(k)</u> : “A policy in the sphere of the environment.”
<u>Article 130d</u> : “The Council, acting in accordance with the same procedure, shall before 31 December 1993 set up a Cohesion Fund to provide a financial contribution to projects in the fields of environment and transEuropean networks in the area of transport infrastructure.”
<u>TITLE XVI</u> – devoted to the environment. Articles 130r-Articles 130t (2 pages).

We then analysed the most recent available reports from the EC and the ECB which were published in 2021 and 2019 respectively. The 2021 EC report states that there is a need for stronger legislation “to cover environmental and climate change disaster loss⁷.” Another idea in the report is to increase public access on what the EU is doing relating to environmental policies⁸. The EC then moved on in the report to how the IO can tackle climate change and do this more effectively: “the climate adaptation gap is wide and increasing, so we must bridge it more swiftly⁹.” The report finished with the argument that the EU was likely to achieve success and it had established many partnerships to tackle climate change: “the EU has a history of

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2021/EN/COM-2021-82-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF> (p. 6).

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2021/EN/COM-2021-82-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF> (p. 6).

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2021/EN/COM-2021-82-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF> (p. 12).

cooperating with other countries to work on climate adaptation at all levels¹⁰.” Therefore, it can be shown that the EC does use the environment as a key self-legitimation practice.

This is also the case for the ECB, with the Bank referencing the environment throughout its 2019 annual report, one example of which is “the ECB contributes to the efforts against climate change through its own investment decisions and environmental activities¹¹.” The activities of the ECB will follow a green agenda and no decision will be made without taking this issue into account¹². Like the EC’s 2021 report, the ECB also has a green section in its statement, entitled “Green ECB,” which sets out the many ways that the ECB worked to tackle climate change during 2020¹³. The ECB’s environmental report provided detailed analysis of all environmental issues and activities that the Bank was involved in 2019 and 2020¹⁴. It appears clear from the analysis of the documents above that both the EC and ECB have used an environmental agenda as an important legitimation tool before 2019 but also throughout the pandemic.

The EAEU and the AIIB: Legal Framework for Environmental Agenda

We continue the analysis of legal documents and founding agreements of the EAEU and the AIIB in terms of their environmental agenda. In the case of the EAEU, we investigated the Treaty of 2015 to locate if the document mentions the environment. As table two summarizes, the EAEU mentions environmental issues multiple times. This, arguably, points to some engagement with environmental issues and possible influence of the EU’s environmental agenda.

¹⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2021/EN/COM-2021-82-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF> (p. 18).

¹¹ <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/annual/html/ar2019~c199d3633e.en.html>.

¹² <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/annual/html/ar2019~c199d3633e.en.html>.

¹³ <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/annual/html/ar2019~c199d3633e.en.html>.

¹⁴ <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/ecb/orga/climate/green/html/ecb.environmentalstatement202010~d0c3d15950.en.html>.

Table Two: Environmental Agenda in the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (2015)

Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (2015)
<u>III. Measure with no Trade-Distorting Effects – 25 (1):</u> “eligibility for the payments shall be conditioned by the manufacturer’s participation in a state programme for the protection or conservation of the <i>environment</i> and shall depend on the fulfilment of specific conditions provided for by the state programme, including conditions related to production methods or materials required.”
<u>Article 29 (1)((1)):</u> “Environmental protection.”
<u>Article 52 (1):</u> “Technical regulations of the Union shall be adopted in order to protect life and/or health of people, property, <i>environment</i> , life and/or health of animals and plants, prevent consumer misleading actions and ensure energy efficiency and resource conservation in the Union.”
<u>Article 68 (5):</u> “If a Member State becomes aware of any actions of service providers, persons engaged in incorporation or activities or investors that may harm the health or safety of people, animals, plants or the <i>environment</i> on the territory of the Member State or on the territories of other Member States, the first Member State shall inform all Member States and the Commission thereof as soon as possible.”
<u>Article 86 (2) ((7)):</u> “Reduction of harmful effects generated by transport on the environment and human health.”
<u>VII. General Expectations – Article 38(2):</u> “Required to protect human life and health, the environment, animals and plants.”
<u>VII. General Expectations – Article 38(10):</u> “Required to ensure compliance with legal acts related to the application of customs legislation, <i>environmental protection</i> , intellectual property protection that are not inconsistent with the international obligations, and other legal acts.”
<u>Annex 9(2):</u> ““risk” means a combination of the probability of harm and consequences of such harm to human life or health, property, <i>environment</i> , life or health of animals and plants.”

The Treaty offers other mentions of the environment, but those pertain to the business or investment environment. As will be seen in later sections on self-legitimation in social media the EAEU justifies its existence by making it easier to do business for Member states.¹⁵ Comparing this with the EU, there were more limited references by the EAEU to environmental issues, yet these were significant when compared to the AIIB.

With respect to the AIIB we investigated the Founding Document, AIIB By-Laws, Rules of Procedures of Governors, Rules of Procedures of Governors, Code of Conduct of Board Officials, the Code of Conduct of Personnel and finally the Policy and Strategy Committee. We found that only the Founding Document, Code of Conduct of Personnel and

¹⁵ Somewhat prophetic sections of the Treaty are devoted to how the EAEU would cope with a mass epidemic; pointing to the EAEU prescient prediction of such an event that has dominated the world since 2019.

Policy and Strategy Committee made any mention of the environment. The references to the environment from the AIIB are summarized in table three.

Table Three: Environmental Agenda in the AIIB’s Official Documents

Agreement (2015)	Terms of Reference for the Policy and Strategy Committee (2020)	Code of Conduct for Bank Personnel (2016)
Article 13 (4): “The Bank shall ensure that each of its operations complies with the Bank’s operational and financial policies, including without limitation, policies addressing environmental and social impacts.”	Section B: Responsibility and Authority 2(1): “Review AIIB’s operational policies (other than financial and risk-related policies), including but not limited to the environment, social and procurement policies, and report thereon to the Board.”	Section B: Bank Core Values – 4: Green: “Providing environmentally and socially sustainable financing, support and solutions to clients.”
		“Monitoring and measuring the environmental impact of our development efforts.”
		“Inspiring and empowering each other to take purposeful steps to improve environmental efforts at work and in our lives.”
		“Celebrating among ourselves and with our clients when we improve the environment.”

As the table shows, the AIIB only provides a limited number of references to the environment in any of its documents. The Article of Agreement only makes reference to the environment once in the text, stating that all Bank policies will take into account the organisation’s current ecological policies. However there is no mention of what these initiatives are, which points to vagueness in the AIIB’s environmental policies. Similarly, the strategy document of 2020 does not give much space to the environment at all, only stating that the committee will review existing Bank policies including in green practices. Only the document on the Code of Conduct of Bank Personnel offers any more than one textual environment reference, offering an entire “green” section. However, we think it is enlightening that the Code of Conduct of Bank Directors has no reference to the environment. Therefore, we contend that the AIIB is providing a façade of caring about the environment, which can be interpreted as purely rhetorical. This contention will be analysed further in the following sections on social media.

5. Social Media in Times of Crisis: Pandemic and Environmental Agenda

We now turn to address how the EC, the ECB, the AIIB, and the EAEU have legitimised themselves through the analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental rhetoric in social media. The pandemic affected the entire world and, in a way, it is a control variable, a

context that holds constant for all types of IOs (democracies-composed IOs and autocracies-led IOs), but the reaction of these IOs as reflected in social media might have been different. The example of how these IOs react to the coronavirus pandemic and whether the goal of promoting a green-agenda changed over the pandemic, as reflected in their respective social media, allows us to test the paper's hypotheses.

The first hypothesis is that authoritarian regimes engage in practices of self-legitimation less than democratic IOs as they lack accountability do not care about public opinion, and the mass media is controlled by the government. Therefore, the analysis of the EC's, the ECB's, the AIIB's, and the EAEU's, reaction to the coronavirus pandemic and environmental agenda on their social media feeds will ascertain whether this is the case.

The second hypothesis is that the EAEU caters to different audiences when using its different social media networks. Analysis of how each of the EAEU's social media networks speak of the coronavirus pandemic and green-agenda will allow us to ascertain whether this is the case. The third hypothesis is that authoritarian IOs engage in mimicry of democratic IOs. Analysis of the social networks of each organisation will determine whether this is indeed the case regarding the coronavirus and the green-agenda.

While we focus on different types of social media, our main attention is dedicated to Twitter. Twitter is an excellent case of comparative discourse analysis as it has the limitation of 140 characters available to post a Tweet. This requirement is imposed on all IOs forcing them to term their messages carefully. Therefore, the choice of these 140 characters is crucial for analysis, as it is carefully chosen to reflect the essence of every message. It also presents a unique unit of comparison across three cases. Facebook and VK do not mention the number of posts made on a profile, so it is difficult to gauge how intensively the EAEU, ECB and EC are posting on these mediums. However, Twitter does record the number of Tweets on a profile, and the EAEU with 2,186 appears to Tweet slightly more than the AIIB (1,387 Tweets, many of which are re-Tweets), but a lot less than the ECB (15,100 Tweets) and the EC (37,600 Tweets). On the face of it, it appears that the ECB and the EC are prodigious Tweeters and therefore effective at legitimation. However, this does not equate with self-legitimation, which needs closer analysis of the content of the messages in social media. We refer to social media as digital mirror – as close reflection on all the steps made by IOs over the study period with regard to the Pandemic and their Environmental commitments.

5.1. Self-Legitimation of IOs and the Pandemic Crisis: Digital Mirror

The ECB and the EC

The ECB very rapidly stated on 12th March 2020 that there would be “a temporary envelope of additional net asset purchases of €120 billion until the end of the year¹⁶” and that this €120 billion package was but one of the available funds for dealing with the pandemic¹⁷. Believing that €120 billion was insufficient, on 18th March 2020 the ECB announced a bigger fund of €750 billion to protect businesses from the pandemic¹⁸. The date of the creation of both of these funds occurred in quick succession on 12th and 18th March 2020.

Both ECB Vice-President Luis de Guindos and Chair of the ECB’s Supervisory Board, Andrea Enria, stated that the ECB is doing everything to limit the fragmentation of the Euro and that the ECB has reacted very quickly to the crisis¹⁹. Another Tweet from the ECB highlights the self-legitimation of the organisation during the pandemic, that “as European banking supervisor, we’ve taken a number of supervisory measures so that people and businesses continue to have access to credit during these difficult times²⁰.” On 8th June 2020, ECB President Christine Lagarde Tweeted that “the monetary policy measures taken by the ECB in March were critical in removing the tail risk of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing drop in economic activity morphing into a financial crisis. Since March, that risk has receded materially²¹.” This emphasises that the ECB’s uses its quick reaction to the pandemic as a self-legitimation tool. Similarly, Isabel Schnabel stated in a Tweet on 27th June 2020 that “without the PEPP, we would now be in the middle of a severe financial crisis²²,” again highlighting that the rapidity of reaction to the pandemic was a crucial ECB self-legitimation tool. A final self-legitimation device is the testing that the ECB undertook during the pandemic, whether that be structural and vulnerability analyses of all European banks²³ or making sure that Euro banknotes are not carriers of the coronavirus²⁴.

The EC’s reaction to coronavirus is similar to the ECB’s response, with the EC stating that it is also working to “support European businesses²⁵,” and that rapidity is essential because

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1238098317051035650> (12/03/2020).

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1238098396193447939> (12/03/2020).

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1240411016078536709> (18/03/2020).

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1244676058852536320>;
<https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1252136961873149954> (30/03/2020; 20/04/2020).

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1257331293886582787> (04/05/2020).

²¹ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1269992837547995136> (08/06/2020).

²² <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1276805346640769024> (27/06/2020).

²³ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1287992034473783297> (27/07/2020).

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1273986594601566208> (19/06/2020).

²⁵ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1266295899392667650 (29/05/2020).

this is what citizens expect the EU to do during a crisis²⁶. This notion of haste is a message that the EC constantly refers to on Twitter during the pandemic with a 4th July 2020 Tweet stating that “we have been mobilising all the means at our disposal to support EU countries in tackling the #coronavirus outbreak²⁷.” However, while there are many Tweets, the EC has not been as explicit as the ECB in Tweeting what actions have been taken. Rather the EC has been focused on the more abstract dealing with the need for speed with another Tweet asserting that “there is no time to lose. Future generations depend on us²⁸.” The ECB reacted rapidly and while the EC talks a good game over the pandemic it has been less effective.

The AIIB and the EAEU

With the pandemic AIIB’s Twitter feed exploded, constantly posting about how the organisation has been dealing with the coronavirus. Early on in the crisis in March 2020 the AIIB tweeted an announcement that “we’re scaling up investment to support our members²⁹.” Similarly, in March the AIIB tweeted a message from President Liqun that “This is a litmus test of our ability to deal with a crisis and emergency. This is the time for us to demonstrate our adaptability, resilience, responsiveness and relevance³⁰.” Very quickly the AIIB recognised that it needed to make significant investments in member states, as countries with inadequate infrastructure would be unable to cope with coronavirus. Therefore, the organisation announced a fund of \$5 billion that member states could use³¹. This fund could also be increased if it is deemed inadequate and member states require greater investment to stave off COVID-19³². The original Tweet of a \$5 billion fund was announced on 4th April 2020 and by 17th April the AIIB clearly felt more needed to be done and announced that the fund was being increased immediately to \$10 billion³³. As well as this fund, the AIIB created the panda bond which offered long-term loans for member states at 2.4%³⁴. There have been many Tweets about AIIB investment in member states from China to Bangladesh and Mongolia to Turkey to help these states, and many others, cope with the economic fallout of coronavirus. The AIIB’s self-legitimation during COVID-19 can be seen in the Tweet about “our #COVID19

²⁶ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1267745636608335872 (02/06/2020).

²⁷ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1279354381696004098 (04/07/2020).

²⁸ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1289943286900121600 (02/08/2020).

²⁹ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1242836269450829825 (25/03/2020).

³⁰ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1243369693005537280 (27/03/2020).

³¹ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1242704204684115968;

https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1246407167126712321 (25/03/2020; 04/04/2020).

³² https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1246996046523305985 (06/04/2020).

³³ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1250929246811217920 (17/04/2020).

³⁴ Information on the panda bond: <https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/news/2020/AIIB-Prices-RMB3-Billion-Inaugural-Panda-Bond.html> (11/06/2020).

Crisis Recovery Facility aims to support members and clients in alleviating and mitigating economic, financial and #publichealth pressures³⁵.”

The AIIB has tackled the time of disruption caused by the coronavirus by clearly stating that it has the financial resources to support member states during this difficult period and that the finances can go further. This is in contrast to the EAEU which seemingly has talked a good game, but has seen little action. Whereas the AIIB announced a \$5 billion fund on 4th April 2020, the EAEU was more laissez-faire taking until 3rd April 2020 to approve a potential package that needed further approval³⁶.

Not only were the Tweets of the EAEU vague and ambiguous, but there has also been very little detail on Facebook and VK with only two posts about COVID-19 on the latter social media network over the research period. Both the Facebook and Twitter feeds have very little detail with most posts and Tweets pertaining to joint responses, with vague notions that “the EAEU will take joint measures to combat the spread of coronavirus³⁷” being the only response. However, what constitute these “joint measures” was not specified or explained. Even a video of EAEU President Mikhail Myasnikovich on Facebook did not provide any specific information about how the EAEU was going to tackle coronavirus.³⁸ This is compared to the AIIB which publicised action from a very early stage of the pandemic. The EAEU has not provided much on the actions that the organisations has taken during coronavirus and unlike the AIIB has not appeared to self-legitimise its role during the crisis. Again there is evidence that the three different social media networks were used for different audiences (national and regional audiences of Russian-speakers and international audience for English speakers). For Russian speakers (national and some former Soviet states, where Russian is still used), the EAEU’s VK feed had only two posts about coronavirus. The EAEU’s Facebook and Twitter also had little about how the EAEU was dealing with coronavirus, leading to the assumption that the organisation was not coping well, if at all.

Although the AIIB’s 34 Tweets directly linked to the coronavirus dwarfed the EAEU’s three social media networks effort of 24, the EC and the ECB provide a vast array of Tweets reaching 84 Tweets directly linked to how both institutions are legitimating themselves through their efforts to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Another important observation is a trace of mimicry on the part of the AIIB that followed the pattern of the ECB. The

³⁵ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1255708455299690505 (30/04/2020).

³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/eecommission/photos/a.463606043849132/1351301358412925/> (30/03/2020).

³⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/eecommission/photos/pcb.1340289929514068/1340275706182157/> (17/03/2020).

³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/eecommission/videos/267059257638461> (14/04/2020).

announcement of two different ECB's funds occurred on 12th and 18th March 2020. The AIIB announced its fund of \$5 billion to deal with the coronavirus pandemic on 4th April 2020, a few weeks after the ECB.

5.2. Self-Legitimation through Environmental Commitments: A Digital Mirror

Unlike the Pandemic, the environmental agenda was clearly outlined in a number of legal documents in the EU, the AIIB, and the EAEU. All three IOs committed to promote an environmental agenda, albeit in different ways. How was this commitment respected throughout the period under analysis, if at all? Are there any differences across the three IOs in implementation of their respective environmental commitments as reflected in social media? As argued above, social media serves an excellent tool of self-legitimation for any IO as it helps inform how funds are spent and what goals are achieved. We turn to the case study of the environmental agenda implementation for the three IOs as reflected in the digital mirror (social media).

The ECB and the EC

The ECB and the EC have a clear focus on an environmental agenda before and during the pandemic. Reporting on goals and policy implementation of environmental commitments have been a crucial aspect of the EU's economic development over the period, despite the remaining importance of the pandemic. The ECB Executive Board members, Philip Lane and Isabel Schnabel, both pointed to the importance of a green agenda for future economic development. Thus in September 2020, Lane stated that "new approaches are needed to revitalise our economies, including a focus on the green...transition",³⁹ and Schnabel pointed to "market failures prevent a timely transition towards a carbon-neutral economy".⁴⁰ In November 2020, the ECB continued provision of financial support for banks to offer loans supporting businesses' green investments⁴¹, and the Bank has created the Green Bond to support business growth⁴².

The ECB emphasized the priority for continuous green investments over the pandemic in the Tweet that "when investors go green, they go European"⁴³ highlighting the EU's constant support for implementation of its environmental commitments. Sustainable finance offered by the ECB is another aspect of the implementation of an environmental agenda and arguably

³⁹ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1309117901761392646> (24/09/2020).

⁴⁰ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1310573047267631104> (28/09/2020).

⁴¹ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1332323297686659075> (27/11/2020).

⁴² <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1333354147953975297> (30/11/2020).

⁴³ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1333354141658324992> (30/11/2020).

successful self-legitimation: the Bank claims that these financial incentives are designed for the better well-being of EU citizens, and that its sustainable finance program is copied by other banks⁴⁴. Twitter states that the EU has already established comprehensive treaties which allow the Bank (ECB) to take sustainable development further and help EU citizens and businesses⁴⁵.

Similar to the ECB, the European Commission (EC) was equally restless in its environmental rhetoric over the pandemic, before and after the COVID 19 crisis. The notion that the EU is ahead of its time is also seen in the Tweets of the European Commission (EC), one example of which is that the Commission “proposed a new transatlantic agenda for global cooperation⁴⁶” on a green agenda, pointing to the EU being a global leader in this area which is a crucial self-legitimation tool. The EC has organised climate change schemes, such as the Green Deal and the Climate Pact and the Commission consistently highlights these programs and their effectiveness. The EC has also opened up its environmental agenda to getting public feedback, and this is particularly the case for the Climate Pact, with one Tweet stating “shaping a greener Europe with you”⁴⁷ in December 2020. Another environmental self-legitimation scheme for the Commission are the Tweets focused on the projected green development of the EU and where the Commission hopes the IO will be by certain yearly dates. For example, one Tweet states that by 2050 the Union will hopefully have achieved “a climate-neutral Europe⁴⁸.” The EC also has two social media feeds on Facebook and Twitter called ‘EU Environment’, which provides a wealth of information on the actions of the EC and other EU institutions in tackling environmental change.

The EC has been very vocal about the environmental policies of the EU, their implementation, as constantly reflected by multiple feeds in social media uninterrupted throughout the pandemic crisis. This is epitomised in the 3rd July 2020 Tweet that “Europe’s most significant challenges *before* the #coronavirus crisis *will remain the same* once this crisis is over: climate change, digitalisation and the EU’s position in the world”⁴⁹ [italics added]. Therefore, with climate change being key to the EU’s future economic prowess the EC advocates investment in hydrogen⁵⁰ and perhaps more importantly “€1 billion in innovative clean technology projects to boost the EU’s green recovery⁵¹.” In the EU’s biodiversity

⁴⁴ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1353655805992718336> (25/01/2021).

⁴⁵ <https://twitter.com/ecb/status/1360562406687191043> (13/02/2021).

⁴⁶ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1334100781675520001 (02/12/2020).

⁴⁷ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1336645494165151747 (02/12/2020).

⁴⁸ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1336654743326875650 (02/12/2020).

⁴⁹ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1278947680908165120 (03/07/2020).

⁵⁰ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1280810278339391489 (08/07/2020).

⁵¹ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1279000103257362434 (03/07/2020).

programme which has existed since 2011, the EC has stated that by continuing this programme to 2030 the EC wants to “restore our endangered ecosystems and natural habitats by establishing protected areas⁵².” Similarly, the EC maintains the environmental self-legitimacy tool through the message that without it, EU citizens would not have clean bath water “clean bathing water is usually taken as something that is gifted, but it’s actually one of the European collective achievements⁵³.”

Throughout summer 2020, the coronavirus has given the EC incentive to re-design the EU “supporting EU countries to recover; kick-starting the economy; and learning the lessons from the crisis”⁵⁴ (June 2020). These three pillars will allow the EU to recover and become a more effective organisation, developing an economy that is green digital and resilient⁵⁵. To do so the EC will invest upwards of €1.85 trillion which will help the EU achieve its goals and adapt to the changing world brought about by the coronavirus⁵⁶. Sustainable development has been a key self-legitimation tool for both the ECB and the EC, reflecting on their environmental commitments throughout the Pandemic and reporting to the public on their actions. But has this been the case for the other two IOs led by China (AIIB) and by Russia (EAEU)? What place has a green agenda occupied in their actions as reflected by the digital mirror of social media? Did they successfully reach out to the public and shed light on their implementation of their environmental commitments made in their legal documents and founding agreements?

Scaling down: the AIIB and the EAEU

The AIIB has not gone so far as the EC in creating social media feeds *exclusively* for the environment. However, at least *before the pandemic*, the AIIB Twitter feeds regularly showed how its own environmental specialists operate and their role in making the AIIB greener. We list below some of these feeds reflecting the place of the green agenda of the AIIB mainly *before* the start of the Pandemic. Throughout 2019, similar to the case of the EC and the ECB, the AIIB also had its’ own environmental campaigns, such as Sustainable Cities⁵⁷ and the Bank also used Sustainable Development objectives as one of its key strategies for deciding on investment⁵⁸. The Sustainable Cities initiative is one of the key “priorities” for the

⁵² https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1269879331049914368 (08/06/2020).

⁵³ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1269935436883021826 (08/06/2020).

⁵⁴ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1269584890187530240 (07/06/2020).

⁵⁵ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1268891500852764672 (05/06/2020).

⁵⁶ https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1270241718764474368 (09/06/2020).

⁵⁷ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1176315488428707840 (24/09/2019 in English).

⁵⁸ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1166636540338102272 (24/09/2019 in English).

AIIB⁵⁹ and according to the AIIB's Chief Investment Officer, Jagatheesa Pandian, "investing in clean, #renewableenergy is a big part of our strategy to promote a sustainable and #lowcarbon future for our members⁶⁰." In 2020, the AIIB tried to maintain its focus on sustainable development, yet the number of references to any environmental issues declined on Twitter. According to the Bank's Twitter feed, the mission statement is split between tackling climate change⁶¹ and developing sustainable development and infrastructure⁶². As with the ECB's Green Bonds, the AIIB has developed its own environmental bond, the Climate Bond⁶³, and like the ECB the AIIB has developed strong partnerships with other IOs to better tackle environmental challenges⁶⁴.

The AIIB does not just make statements on how climate change is part of its mission statement, but also provides references to environmental investments whether by helping with renewable energy projects across Asia⁶⁵, or financing solar power in Oman⁶⁶. It also regularly posts reports about its actions in the sector on dealing with climate change, such as its 2018 report on the topic⁶⁷. Similarly, the Bank also regularly Tweets about public engagement and trying to get the citizenry of member states involved to provide opinions on policies. This is seen regarding climate change with the announcement "we are inviting comments and suggestions on the scope, content and implementation of the AIIB Environmental and Social Framework (ESF)⁶⁸." Like the ECB and the EC, the AIIB appears to use social media to report on implementation of its environmental commitments outlined above. However, first, the number of feeds on environment are significantly lower than those of the ECB; second, most of these feeds were posted before 2020. Throughout the pandemic the feeds on implementation of green commitments almost disappeared, in contrast to the ECB.

One of the main green self-legitimation tools of the AIIB can be split into two linked areas, which can be described as "environmentalism" (general term for any type of environmental issue and agenda) and "sustainability" (specifically related to economic development). The popularity of environmentalism and sustainability plays well to a wide

⁵⁹ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1176315488428707840 (24/09/2019 in English).

⁶⁰ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1173798239851577345 (17/09/2019 in English).

⁶¹ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1188727099600883712 (28/10/2019 in English).

⁶² https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1215189296220520449;
https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1242340790627635202 (09/01/2020; 24/03/2020).

⁶³ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1172344371762515968 (13/09/2019).

⁶⁴ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1176421009664159744 (24/09/2019).

⁶⁵ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1257278803031633920 (04/05/2020).

⁶⁶ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1245531396208238594 (02/04/2020).

⁶⁷ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1164462211265388545 (22/08/2019).

⁶⁸ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1225237675097108482 (06/02/2020).

audience, giving the AIIB popular legitimacy and acceptance beyond its targeted region of Asia. Arguably, the green focus adds to building its' global image of benevolent actor in the global economy and world politics. It is indicative to a strategy of gaining increased popular legitimacy in democratic member states as sustainable development is more important for democracies compared to non-democratic regimes (Fredriksson et. al. 2005; Fredriksson and Neumayer 2013; Obydenkova et. al. 2016; Obydenkova and Salahodjaev 2016; 2017; Libman and Obydenkova 2014; Payne 1995; Fredriksson and Wollscheid 2007). The AIIB, through its refrain of investment that takes into account sustainability and environmentalism, gives the organisation a purpose, with the AIIB's mandate being "critically linked to the global effort toward #sustainabledevelopment and improved living standards⁶⁹." This is further emphasised by a 2020 Tweet stating that the main purpose for the formation of the AIIB was that "AIIB was created by 57 founding members as a multilateral institution focused on supporting #sustainabledevelopment through #infrastructure⁷⁰."

It is not possible to list all forty Tweets on sustainability and environmentalism, but we will take a cross-section of these feeds. Some of the Tweets focus on AIIB investment into Asia with the AIIB existing to "unlock Asia's #sustainablegrowth potential" as well as Tweets on the development of a #SustainableCities Strategy that "outlines our vision of realizing economically, environmentally and socially sustainable Asian cities⁷¹." With the cities of Asia becoming the global economy's powerhouse, the AIIB stated on Twitter that the organisation "will continue to invest in #sustainableinfrastructure as a key contributor for ensuring the connectivity, productivity, efficiency and overall competitiveness of these cities⁷²." Another key aspect of the self-legitimation of the AIIB linked to Asia is the strategy to support water sanitation projects, to reduce the lack of clean water for 1.49 billion Asians⁷³.

However, it is important to note, that infrastructure investment, particularly in Asia but also beyond, remains one of the key self-legitimacy tools for the AIIB. Sustainable development and environmentalism into non-Asian states is one of the key tenets of the AIIB. Through a Project Preparation Special Fund, the AIIB aims to provide concrete funding for "the #sustainabledevelopment targets of our members⁷⁴." Tweets often refer to how the AIIB is investing to tackle climate change, with one Tweet mentioning a \$175 billion investment by

⁶⁹ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1152040394516918274 (19/07/2020).

⁷⁰ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1214018840754917376 (06/01/2020).

⁷¹ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1164462211265388545,
https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1168788911205675008 (22/08/2019; 03/09/2019).

⁷² https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1189904863943176192 (31/10/2019).

⁷³ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1251782588747792386 (19/04/2020).

⁷⁴ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1187941925040427008 (26/10/2019).

2025⁷⁵, and that the organisation will not necessarily spend more, but spend better⁷⁶. Notably, those Tweets were posted before 2020.

However, already in January 2020, another Tweet points to sustainable development and climate change as being integral to the AIIB's self-legitimation with the IO constantly refereeing to both concepts, and this Tweet emphasises this point: "our mandate is critically linked to the global effort toward #sustainabledevelopment and improved living standards...we will continue to support our members' efforts to meet their commitments under the #ParisAgreement⁷⁷." Another key self-legitimation topic for the AIIB is that the organisation is providing a large amount of funding for renewable energy "the promotion of global public goods—specifically #renewableenergy generation projects—is one of three guiding principles outlined in our strategy on financing operations⁷⁸."

However, it is crucial to state that the shift to an environmental agenda for the AIIB has been relatively recent and often mentioned before the pandemic. The latter might have changed the sequence of goals on the priority list of the AIIB. Of course the AIIB is a younger IO than the EU, but the EU's green agenda is relatively new and came before the AIIB's own environmental policy. It might be indicative to some imitation on the part of the AIIB. Indeed, imitation of the green agenda of the EU by the AIIB has been almost unavoidable due to, first, some of the AIIB's members being EU members who need to keep up with environmental commitments; second, to achieve acceptance by democracies in Asia and beyond and increase its global image of a benevolent actor the AIIB initiated environmental rhetoric.

Finally, despite the EAEU's environmental commitments outlined in its legal documents, it has not made any references to sustainable development in its' social media (including Twitter, Facebook, and VK). The trend was consistent before, during, and post-pandemic. It is indicative of an environmental agenda being nothing but a lip service for the EAEU. Those few environmental clauses made in the EAEU legal documents remained rhetorical. It is safe to say that if the EAEU had made any steps towards implementation of its claimed environmental goals, it would have been reflected by its multiple social media. The fact that the EAEU actually uses three types of social media is already a solid indication that it tries to make the best out of social media to increase its legitimacy in the eyes of public at national and international levels. This was clear as there were no mention of the environment

⁷⁵ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1177779965535768578 (28/09/2019).

⁷⁶ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1184057650780098561 (15/10/2019).

⁷⁷ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1215189296220520449 (09/01/2020).

⁷⁸ https://twitter.com/AIIB_Official/status/1257278803031633920 (04/05/2020).

on the EAEU's VK or Facebook pages. The Twitter feed alluded to a possible environmental policy or sustainable development for this IO. One example is the Tweet made back in 2016 that the EAEU is reducing the customs duties for electric cars⁷⁹, alluding to a need to increase the number of electric cars in the member states to tackle climate change. Back in 2018, there were allusions to the need for sustainable development, with the Minister for Integration and Macroeconomics, Tatyana Valovaya, stating that "economic integration within the EAEU is an additional factor contributing to the achievement of sustainable development by the EAEU countries⁸⁰." How exactly economic integration within the EAEU is linked to sustainable development remained unclear in this and other statements. Another Tweet, also from 2018, further alludes to sustainable development, stating that "the priority goals of economic policy for the medium term will be to revitalize the recovery of economic growth and create a basis for sustainable economic development of the EAEU countries⁸¹." Unlike in the other cases, there was no specification on the investment and amount of funds for specifically environmental projects, or details of those projects. Moreover, the Tweets cited above make a clear reference to the only "economic" not "sustainable" development. In fact, sustainable development as a concept was not even mentioned by Facebook and VK. However, there were two Tweets mentioning sustainability back in 2018. One feed stated that the EAEU plays a crucial role in supporting member states with sustainable development⁸². The other Tweet mentioned that one of the priority goals is to create "a basis for sustainable economic development of EAEU countries⁸³." None of these tweets gave any details on specific actions that took place or will take place supporting the promised goals of sustainable development. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that any environmental agenda, scarce as it might be in legal documents, of the EAEU was ever implemented.

Conclusion

This paper offered an analysis of the legal documents and social media communication of the AIIB, the EAEU and two EU institutions (the ECB and the EC) to determine the differences in their self-legitimation strategies. With the regard to the EU, the environmental agenda is detailed in a number of documents from the 1992 Maastricht Treaty to after the Pandemic 2021). Further on, the EU reports in detail on implementing this

⁷⁹ https://twitter.com/EEC_EAEU/status/753598618913873921 (14/07/2016).

⁸⁰ https://twitter.com/EEC_EAEU/status/969536562013855744 (02/03/2018).

⁸¹ https://twitter.com/EEC_EAEU/status/996674438279163904 (16/05/2018).

⁸² https://twitter.com/EEC_EAEU/status/996098525040664577 (14/05/2018).

⁸³ https://twitter.com/EEC_EAEU/status/996674438279163904 (16/05/2018).

environmental agenda through social media (Twitter) even throughout the pandemic crisis. The EAEU has outlined some environmental agenda in its legal documents. Yet, the implementation of this agenda is questionable and was not reflected at all in the IOs social media. Given the EAEU was actively trying to use different platforms of social media, it is safe to conclude it simply had nothing to report in terms of its environmental policies. The EAEU feeds were highly vague and superficial as compared to both the EU and the AIIB. Finally, the AIIB was more modest than the EAEU in targeting environmental issues in its legal documents, but more active in implementing these issues, as we summarize below.

From theoretical perspectives, we first conclude that the NDROs (the EAEU) are less active in social media as they care less about public opinion and self-legitimation as compared to DROs. The AIIB, as argued, is a hybrid actor with multiple democracies as member-states. Therefore, its involvement in social media was of significantly higher quality than the EAEU, yet of lower quality compared to the EU (both in dealing with global health and global environmental crises). To sum up, we confirmed the first hypothesis. Unlike the other institutions, the EAEU does not have a significant social media presence. While legal documents of the EAEU clearly state its commitment to environmental policy, the EAEU did not follow up on its promise in its strategy both before and post-pandemic.⁸⁴

Second, the actual *use* of social media by the EAEU can be viewed as superficial mimicry. The EAEU attempts to cater to different audiences when using its different social media networks, yet fails to deliver meaningful messages on any of these platforms. As mentioned, the EAEU's dealings with the coronavirus pandemic were different on its Facebook, Twitter and VK feeds pointing to the EAEU using each social network to cater to different audiences. Aiming at an international and English-speaking audience, the EAEU provides more information on its Facebook and Twitter feeds compared to VK which caters to an exclusively Russian speaking audience.

Thirdly, we argued that autocracies-led IOs engage in mimicry of democratic IOs. The mimicry takes place through (a) (environmental) rhetoric in legal documents and (b) the use of social media, which continues the debate on NDROs interaction with other IOs.⁸⁵ There needs to be further research done on this topic, but there are pointers to the corroboration of

⁸⁴ Posts on VK are more forthright in their messages promoting the EAEU as crucial to the world order and hampered by outside forces who want to weaken the organisation. By contrast, posts on Facebook and Twitter are less vitriolic in their messaging, focusing more on what the EAEU has done and achieved.

⁸⁵ An entire special issue was dedicated to the analysis of the nature, causes and implications of the interactions of autocracies-led IOs with other actors in the global economy and world politics (see Libman and Obydenkova 2021a; 2021b; Izotov and Obydenkova 2021 for summary)

this hypothesis. This can be seen in the AIIB and the EAEU copying from the EU's environmental agenda in documents of the EC and the ECB through three examples. Firstly, the EAEU's self-legitimation message on aims to improve standards for citizens appears to have copied an existing device of the EC. Secondly, is the ECB announcement of a €120 billion fund increased to €750 billion package that occurred in mid-March 2020 and was followed up by the AIIB's announcement on 4th April 2020 of a \$5 billion fund which was increased to \$10 billion by 17th April 2020. Thirdly, are the examples the Green and Climate Bonds. The Green Bond was first introduced in 2016 by the EU and was followed up two years later by the AIIB's Climate Bond. Certainly, there needs to be more research, but the evidence appears to support the hypothesis.

However, there is a crucial difference between the EAEU and the AIIB, that can be explained by the differences in the political regimes of their members. The AIIB actually tries to *implement* its environmental commitments. It can be described as *diffusion* of high environmental standards of the EU and the EU influence over other IOs, including those led by autocracies. As a trend, attempted implementation of the environmental promises deserves some recognition of the efforts made on the part of the AIIB. This is different when mimicry remains an empty and superficial imitation at the level of rhetoric and "lip service" to an environmental agenda and is not followed by any specific policies or strategies at all. This is the case of a pure NDRO - the EAEU.

To our knowledge, this is the very first study focusing on environmental policy-implementation as reflected by social media of different IO types during the pandemic. It hopefully contributed more evidence to the ongoing discussion on dealing with the global health and global environmental crises and amplified our vision and understanding of actors involved in crisis management and outcomes. Many of the issues raised here will stay on the agenda for further investigation and can be considered as first steps in our understanding of social media as a digital mirror of global environmental actors and their challenges over times of crises.

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