

PRODUCTIVE POWER THROUGH DISCOURSE: DE WEVER'S POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN EU EUROCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS

Alan Munandar¹, Nanda Putri Adila², Novianah Dwi Pratiwi²

^{1,2,2}, LSPR Institute of Communication and Business, Jakarta

¹25072230072@lspr.edu, ²25072230043@lspr.edu, ²25072230091@lspr.edu

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana komunikasi politik berfungsi sebagai kekuatan produktif dalam tata kelola multilevel melalui wacana strategis Perdana Menteri Belgia, Bart De Wever, dalam negosiasi Uni Eropa pada Desember 2025 terkait aset Bank Sentral Rusia yang dibekukan di Euroclear, dengan menyoroti fenomena komunikasi berupa kemampuan framing politik dalam membentuk legitimasi, persepsi risiko, dan arah kebijakan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus tunggal dan teknik process tracing, dengan sampel berupa pernyataan publik De Wever, liputan media internasional, serta dokumen resmi Uni Eropa, yang dianalisis melalui analisis framing dan penafsiran interpretif atas penguatan retorik serta dinamika pembangunan koalisi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa framing hukum-keuangan, pembangunan koalisi, dan penguatan retorik bekerja secara simultan untuk memperkuat posisi tawar Belgia, mempersempit ruang kompromi, dan menggeser konsensus kebijakan dari skema pinjaman reparasi sebesar €185 miliar menuju pembiayaan utang bersama sebesar €90 miliar. Meskipun terbatas pada penggunaan sumber terbuka dan tidak menjangkau negosiasi tertutup, penelitian ini memberikan implikasi praktis bagi diplomat dan komunikator politik dalam merancang pesan yang selaras dengan norma institusional, serta merekomendasikan riset komparatif lanjutan pada berbagai negosiasi Uni Eropa dengan memadukan process tracing, wawancara elite, dan dokumen internal untuk memperjelas interaksi antara wacana publik dan proses tawar-menawar tertutup.

Kata Kunci: Analisis wacana, teori framing, komunikasi politik

Abstract

This study aims to analyze how political communication functions as productive power in multilevel governance through Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever's strategic discourse during the European Union's December 2025 negotiations over frozen Russian Central Bank assets held at Euroclear, with particular attention to the communication phenomenon of how political framing shapes legitimacy, risk perception, and policy direction. The research employs a qualitative single-case study design with process tracing, drawing on samples consisting of De Wever's public statements, international media coverage, and official European Union documents, which are examined through framing analysis and interpretive assessment of rhetorical entrenchment and coalition-building dynamics. The findings show that legal-financial framing, coalition-building, and rhetorical entrenchment operated simultaneously to strengthen Belgium's bargaining position, narrow the room for compromise, and shift the emerging policy consensus from a proposed €185 billion reparations-loan scheme to a €90 billion joint-debt financing arrangement. Although the study is limited by its reliance on open-source materials and lack of access to closed-door negotiations, it offers practical implications for diplomats and political communicators and recommends future comparative research across other European Union negotiations using process tracing, elite interviews, and internal documents to clarify the interaction between public discourse and private bargaining.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, framing theory, political communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Political communication has long been recognized as a fundamental instrument of statecraft, yet its capacity to generate concrete policy outcomes in high-stakes multilateral negotiations remains insufficiently theorized. In multilevel governance contexts, particularly within the European Union, power is conventionally understood through material lenses: military capability, economic leverage,

and demographic scale (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). These assumptions, however, were dramatically challenged during the EU's December 2025 negotiations over frozen Russian Central Bank assets held at Euroclear in Brussels (BBC, 2025; The Guardian, 2025; European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2025). The European Commission proposed an extraordinary "reparations loan" mechanism, a financial instrument utilizing approximately

€185 billion in frozen Russian assets as collateral, representing roughly 75 percent of total EU-frozen Russian assets, designed to provide interest-free lending to Ukraine while maintaining technical compliance with international law (Euronews, 2025; Associated Press, 2025). What followed was neither military confrontation nor economic coercion, but a sophisticated political communication campaign that reshaped European consensus from within.

Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever, leading a small-to-medium member state with no structural military or demographic advantage over larger EU counterparts such as Germany, France, or Italy, orchestrated a strategic discursive intervention that rendered the Commission's flagship proposal politically untenable (Belgian Federal Government, 2025). By December 18–19, 2025, the reparations loan had been effectively abandoned in favor of €90 billion in conventional joint EU debt financing, a reversal attributed in significant part to De Wever's communication strategies rather than to material bargaining power (Euronews, 2025; Payne et al., 2025). His public declaration "Europe has won, and financial stability has clearly prevailed. We were disciplined and did not scatter. Europe is still one" (Euronews, 2025), encapsulates how he reframed Belgium's resistance not as obstruction, but as a defense of shared European values.

Contemporary scholarship offers several theoretical lenses for understanding this phenomenon. Barnett and Duvall (2005) and Johnson and Foster (2024) advance the concept of productive power, influence exercised through discursive meaning-making rather than material coercion, as particularly salient in institutionalized settings governed by rule-of-law principles. Within such settings, the capacity to define what is legally permissible, institutionally legitimate, and politically feasible constitutes a substantive form of power. Framing theory, as elaborated by Chong and Druckman (2007) and extended by Van Hulst and Bos (2025), demonstrates that strategic selection and presentation of information can alter policy preferences even when the underlying facts remain unchanged. De Vreese (2003) further confirms that political communication frames significantly shape issue

perception and public evaluation of policy alternatives.

In the domain of EU negotiations, rhetorical entrapment, as theorized by Berge and Kuyper (2024). Identifies how public normative or empirical statements constrain negotiators' subsequent flexibility, increasing the political cost of reversal and thereby functioning as a commitment device. Simultaneously, small-state influence scholarship. Thorhallsson (2018) demonstrates that structurally weaker states can achieve disproportionate policy influence through coalition formation, policy expertise, and strategic exploitation of consensus decision-making rules. Šimunjak and Caliandro (2020) further document how unified message framing within coalitions amplifies collective bargaining efficacy. Bunea (2017) contributes the observation that strategic communication in multilevel governance operates through both formal institutional channels and deliberative meaning-making processes involving multiple stakeholders (Pegan & Lovec, 2025).

Despite this growing body of literature, critical lacunae remain. First, existing scholarship on productive power and framing theory rarely examines their joint operation within the specific institutional architecture of EU consensus decision-making, where legal legitimacy and financial stability serve as primary discursive resources (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). Second, while coalition-building literature documents alliance formation, it insufficiently explains how communication strategies specifically enable coalition formation in real-time, high-stakes international negotiations (Panke, 2011). Third, rhetorical entrapment theory, though compelling, has received limited empirical application in EU summit-level contexts. Most significantly, no prior study has examined how legal-financial framing, coalition amplification, and rhetorical entrenchment function simultaneously and interactively as a unified communication strategy capable of reversing major EU policy initiatives (Berge & Kuyper, 2024). The Euroclear case provides a rare, well-documented empirical opportunity to address this gap: it features a clearly documented policy reversal, traceable communication mechanisms, explicit position shifts by

identifiable actors, and substantial primary source material from a politically sensitive negotiation (Beach & Rohlfing, 2018).

This study therefore addresses the following central research question: How did Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever's political communication strategy influence EU negotiation outcomes regarding frozen Russian Central Bank assets held at Euroclear in December 2025? Three secondary questions guide the inquiry: (1) What specific rhetorical strategies and communicative mechanisms did De Wever deploy? (2) How did this communication mechanisms align with and exploit EU institutional decision-making procedures? (3) Through what discursive pathways did De Wever's framing produce observable policy reversal?

The significance of this study lies at the intersection of applied communication, international relations theory, and EU governance studies. By demonstrating that communication-based strategies can generate material policy outcomes, in this case, redirecting €90 billion in EU financing the research advances understanding of how discursive power operates in contemporary multilateral institutions (Johnson & Foster, 2024; Barnett & Duvall, 2005). For communication practitioners, diplomats, and EU negotiators, this study offers a documented model of how medium-sized states can leverage strategic framing (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Van Hulst & Bos, 2025), public commitment mechanisms (Berge & Kuyper, 2024), and coalition communication (Panke, 2011; Högenauer & Mišik, 2024) to exercise influence disproportionate to their structural position (Thorhallsson, 2018).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative single-case study design utilizing process tracing methodology. Process tracing examines complex causal processes linking causes to outcomes through systematic evidence evaluation (Beach & Rohlfing, 2018). This approach permits in-depth examination of communication mechanisms connecting De Wever's statements to actor position shifts and negotiation outcomes.

The Euroclear case constitutes "critical case" for productive power analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It presents strong communicative influence claims: documented leader behavior, clear policy outcome reversal, explicit position shifts by other decision-makers, and substantial primary source material (Yin, 2003). Temporal proximity enables comprehensive reconstruction while information remains fresh (Beach & Rohlfing, 2018).

Interpretive epistemology guides this research, recognizing that social reality construction occurs through communication and meaning making (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Researchers investigate how actors interpret situations and justify actions through discourse (Van Meegdenburg, 2023). This paradigm aligns with productive power frameworks emphasizing discursive construction of social reality (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Johnson & Foster, 2024; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Primary sources included: (1) De Wever's parliamentary speeches, press briefings, and media interviews (November-December 2025); (2) International news coverage (BBC, Euronews, EU Observer, Reuters, The Guardian, Associated Press, Xinhua); (3) Official EU documentation including Council of the European Union (18-19 December 2025), Commission statements, and European Parliament research briefs. Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed articles on political communication, framing theory, negotiation rhetoric, and small-state EU influence.

Bennett & Checkel (2015) define process tracing as "strategy for making sense of causal mechanisms linking causes to outcomes through evidence evaluation defines process tracing as "strategy for making sense of causal mechanisms linking causes to outcomes through evidence evaluation." Analysis followed three sequential steps: (1) developing causal chain from initial November statements through December 18-19 summit to final conclusions; (2) establishing observable implications for each mechanism (legal framing effectiveness indicated by Commission legality defenses; coalition-building effectiveness demonstrated through member state public alignment; rhetorical entrenchment effectiveness shown through metaphor recurrence in coverage); (3) testing evidence

alignment with predictions (Commission recurrent legal defense, multi-member state convergence, metaphor persistence in media) (Bennett & Checkel, 2015; Beach & Rohlfing, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Van Hulst et al. (2025) approach framing analysis through strategic information selection examination. Analysis identified most active frames (legal compliance, financial stability, European principles), traced frame trajectories across negotiations, examined competing frames (innovation versus legal-risk frames), and assessed effects on actor positions. Frame analysis focused on what information received salience and what remained excluded.

Analysis examined public commitment statements for normative and empirical entrapment mechanisms. De Wever's parliamentary declarations were analyzed for commitment strength, public visibility, and reversal costs. Metaphor analysis identified recurring language (golden-egg-laying-chicken, World War II precedents) and assessed psychological entrenchment function (Berge & Kuyper, 2024).

Multiple independent sources verified findings: BBC, Euronews, EU Observer, Reuters, The Guardian coverage; European Council official conclusions; Commission documents; member state position statements. Temporal sequencing established causality: De Wever's statements preceded documented position shifts, particularly German Chancellor Merz's reversal following trilateral discussions (Beach & Rohlfing, 2018).

Inaccessible confidential EU deliberations constitute methodological limitation. However, extensive media coverage, multiple independent sources, official EU documents, and De Wever's public statements substantially mitigate this constraint. Single-case studies cannot establish definitive causation but effectively trace mechanisms and assess predicted pathway alignment (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Counterfactual analysis remains limited to single critical case. Analysis focused on November-December 2025 period, with long-term effects remaining uncertain.

Analysis examines public statements and official records without confidential deliberations or sensitive information access. Research presents factual claim and policy

outcome analysis without normative judgment (Checkel, 2021).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political Context and Euroclear Situation

The findings show that Belgium occupied a uniquely exposed position in the EU debate because Euroclear, the Brussels-based depository holding the bulk of the Russian Central Bank assets frozen in Europe, was located on Belgian territory and held about €185 billion of the roughly €210 billion immobilised in the EU (Reuters, 2025; BBC, 2025; Euronews, 2025). This institutional location made Belgium more than an ordinary participant in the negotiations, as any legal, financial, or reputational fallout from the proposed use of the assets would be concentrated disproportionately on the Belgian state and on Euroclear itself (BBC, 2025; Euronews, 2025). As a result, the Euroclear issue was constructed in Belgian political discourse not only as a foreign-policy question related to Ukraine, but also as a domestic problem of sovereign risk, financial stability, and legal liability (BBC, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).

The situation became more acute in December 2025, when the Russian Central Bank pursued legal action against Euroclear and EU institutions simultaneously moved to immobilize the assets indefinitely to avoid an unexpected release or liquidity shock (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025). These developments transformed previously abstract concerns into immediate and documented risks, thereby creating the conditions under which political communication could operate as a productive force rather than as mere rhetorical positioning (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).

Mechanism 1: Legal-Financial Framing

The first mechanism identified in the data is legal-financial framing, through which De Wever and Belgian officials recast opposition to the proposed reparations loan as a principled defense of international legality and financial stability rather than a refusal to support Ukraine (Reuters, 2025; BBC, 2025). In this framing, the central issue was not whether Ukraine required assistance, but whether the EU could lawfully and safely transform immobilized sovereign

assets into an instrument of wartime financing without generating retaliation, litigation, or damage to market confidence (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).

This strategy was effective because it fused legal and financial concerns into a single argumentative structure (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025). Belgian objections repeatedly linked the possibility of Russian legal claims to Euroclear's repayment capacity, the need for immediate liquidity, and the danger that Belgium would bear losses far beyond what its fiscal position could comfortably absorb (BBC, 2025; Euronews, 2025). By framing the policy as both legally uncertain and financially fragile, De Wever shifted the burden of proof to the proposal's supporters, who then had to show not only political resolve but also legal defensibility and technical solvency (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).

The framing gained further institutional force because Belgium translated its concerns into concrete technical conditions rather than leaving them at the level of broad caution (Euronews, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Belgium demanded extensive risk-sharing, full guarantees against losses, and liquidity safeguards to ensure that Euroclear could immediately honor a successful Russian claim if necessary (Euronews, 2025). In practice, these conditions raised the threshold for agreement so sharply that the original reparations-loan model became harder to sustain politically and operationally, which demonstrates how discursive framing produced a direct effect on policy design (Euronews, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Ridho & Affafa, 2025).

Figure 1. Belgian Prime Minister Bart de Wever & Ursula von der Leyen



Source: (BBC, 2025)

Mechanism 2: Coalition-Building and Institutional Voice Amplification

The second mechanism is coalition-building, through which Belgium's position evolved from what might have appeared to be isolated resistance into a broader cluster of member-state concerns (Euronews, 2025). Euronews reported that Italy, Bulgaria, and Malta joined Belgium in calling on the Commission to explore alternative solutions with more predictable parameters and significantly lower risks, while a later account also included the Czech Republic among the states aligning with this cautious position (Euronews, 2025). This development matters analytically because it changed the meaning of Belgium's stance: the issue was no longer "Belgium blocks," but rather "several member states question whether the proposal is viable under current legal and financial conditions" (Euronews, 2025). Coalition-building amplified Belgium's bargaining power in at least two ways (Euronews, 2025; Reuters, 2025). First, it lowered the reputational cost for other governments to express concern, because the language of "alternative solutions" and "risk reduction" allowed them to distance themselves from the proposal without appearing unsupportive of Ukraine (Euronews, 2025; Praprotnik & Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2024; van der Veer, 2021; Ryu, 2025). Second, it made Belgium's legal-financial frame more difficult to dismiss as parochial or self-serving, especially once larger actors such as Germany and the Commission entered into direct negotiations with De Wever over how to distribute risk more evenly across Europe (Etzold, 2024; Reuters, 2025).

Reuters reported that Ursula von der Leyen and Friedrich Merz described their talks with De Wever as constructive and emphasized the need to address Belgium's concerns in a way that ensured all European countries would bear the same level of risk (Reuters, 2025). This is a significant finding because it indicates that Belgium did not merely defend a national veto position; it succeeded in making the distribution of legal and financial risk a central criterion of EU-level decision-making (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025; Sandulli & Nato, 2024). The eventual outcome confirms this shift: Reuters reported that EU leaders agreed on €90 billion

in financing for Ukraine but failed to reach agreement on direct use of the frozen assets, showing that the negotiating center of gravity had moved away from the original reparations-loan model (Reuters, 2025; Schramm, 2025).

Figure 2: Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy & Ursula von der Leyen



Source: (BBC, 2025)

Mechanism 3: Rhetorical Entrenchment and Moral Framing

The third mechanism is rhetorical entrenchment, meaning the repeated use of public language to narrow the space for acceptable compromise (BBC, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Belgium argued not only that the plan carried financial and legal dangers, but also that it could undermine a future peace settlement and expose Europe to long-term strategic costs that had not been fully considered in the rush to secure funding for Ukraine (BBC, 2025; Reuters, 2025). This widened the debate from technical feasibility to moral and strategic responsibility, thereby increasing the political cost of treating Belgian objections as mere obstruction (BBC, 2025).

Rhetorical entrenchment was strengthened by repetition across venues and by the consistency of the Belgian message over time (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025). De Wever’s position remained anchored in a stable vocabulary of taxpayer protection, legal uncertainty, retaliatory risk, and financial-system vulnerability, which made his stance appear credible and difficult to reverse without a corresponding shift in the underlying conditions (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025). In a consensus-based institutional setting, this consistency matters because publicly articulated red lines create audience costs at home and signal to partners that bargaining flexibility is limited (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).

Figure 3: Friedrich Merz and Ursula von der Leyen.



Source: (Euronews, 2025).

The results therefore indicate that De Wever’s communication was productive in a precise political sense: it shaped not only how the problem was interpreted, but also which policy pathways remained institutionally acceptable at the European level (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025). Belgium’s leverage did not derive primarily from superior material power, but from its ability to define the legal, financial, and normative terms through which the negotiation had to proceed (BBC, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025). This finding supports the broader argument that productive power in multilevel governance can enable structurally weaker states to exercise disproportionate influence when they successfully control the framing architecture of consensus-based bargaining (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).

Table 1. Summary of Findings and Policy Effects

Mechanism	Core communicative practice	Main empirical indication	Policy effect
Legal-financial framing	Belgium framed the issue around legality, liability, and financial stability rather than simple political preference (Reuters, 2025; BBC, 2025).	Belgian officials warned about retaliation, legal claims, repayment risk, and liquidity needs at Euroclear (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).	The burden of justification shifted to the proposal’s supporters, and the reparations-loan design became harder to defend technically (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).
Coalition-building	Belgium linked its concerns to other member states through	Italy, Bulgaria, Malta, and later the	Belgium’s stance gained legitimacy as a broader institutional

Mechanism	Core communicative practice	Main empirical indication	Policy effect
	the language of alternative solutions and lower risk (Euronews, 2025).	Czech Republic were reported as aligning with Belgium's caution (Euronews, 2025).	concern rather than a solitary national obstruction (Euronews, 2025; Reuters, 2025).
Rhetorical entrenchment	Belgian discourse repeatedly tied the proposal to peace-process risk, legal uncertainty, and strategic irresponsibility (BBC, 2025; Reuters, 2025).	The message remained consistent across media and intergovernmental negotiations, signaling firm red lines (Reuters, 2025; Euronews, 2025).	Compromise became more politically costly, helping move the EU toward a €90 billion financing outcome without consensus on direct asset use (Reuters, 2025).

Source: Authors, 2025

Theoretical Analysis: Productive Power in Institutional Contexts

De Wever's strategic communication illustrates how productive power operates in institutionally constrained settings. Drawing on Barnett and Duvall (2005), productive power shapes actors' understandings of what is possible, legitimate, and desirable within a policy environment. In the Euroclear case, De Wever reframed the issue from an opportunity for innovative asset deployment into a threat to international law and financial stability. This reframing mattered because the EU's institutional logic privileges rule-of-law reasoning, financial prudence, and consensus-based decision-making. By aligning Belgium's objections with these institutional norms, De Wever transformed resistance from a narrow national preference into a position that appeared procedurally legitimate and politically responsible.

Guzzini (2013) helps explain why this strategy proved effective. In institutional settings where overt coercion is illegitimate or unavailable, political influence depends on the ability to justify one's position in terms recognized as valid by the institution itself. In the EU, where unanimity, legality, and procedural legitimacy

are central, communication becomes a major resource of power. De Wever did not rely on threats or material leverage. Instead, he articulated principled objections grounded in legal certainty and financial stability, and these arguments resonated because they fit the normative grammar of EU negotiations. His strategy therefore demonstrates how productive power works through institutional affordances rather than outside them (Bosse, 2022; Leuffen et al., 2024).

Johnson and Foster (2024) further argue that discursive practices can generate material effects. This study supports that claim. De Wever's communication strategy did not remain symbolic; it influenced negotiation dynamics, contributed to the recalibration of the Commission's position, facilitated Germany's repositioning, widened opposition to the original reparations proposal, and helped steer the process toward a €90 billion alternative. Belgium's military and economic capabilities did not change during this period, yet its bargaining power increased. The case therefore shows that meaning-making can produce tangible political consequences even in the absence of shifts in conventional material power.

Framing Theory: Legal-Financial Framing Applications

De Wever's legal-financial framing extends framing theory by showing how abstract principles can become strategic resources in high-stakes negotiations. Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that identical facts can produce different policy preferences depending on how those facts are framed. In this case, De Wever shifted the central question from "How can Russian assets be mobilized for Ukraine?" to "Would such action violate legal principles and destabilize the financial system?" This shift altered the structure of the debate. It moved discussion away from immediate policy innovation and toward legal continuity, institutional credibility, and systemic risk.

A particularly important element of this strategy was the reversal of the burden of proof. By presenting the reparations proposal as potentially unlawful and financially hazardous, De Wever placed its supporters in a defensive position. The Commission was no longer able

to assume that the proposal was legally and operationally sound; instead, it had to demonstrate both. This aligns with the diagnostic and prognostic dimensions of framing discussed by Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) and Van Hulst et al. (2025). De Wever diagnosed the problem as one of legal uncertainty and financial exposure, while also advancing an alternative logic based on stronger legal review, enhanced financial guarantees, and broader burden-sharing (Kyriazi, 2025; Koon et al., 2016; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). In this way, he did not merely criticize the proposal, but redefined the standards by which it had to be evaluated.

The metaphorical dimension of this framing also deserves attention. The “golden-egg-laying chicken” metaphor illustrates how metaphors structure cognition rather than merely decorate speech. As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue, metaphors shape how abstract issues are understood. In this case, the metaphor conveyed that Euroclear was a productive asset whose value depended on preservation, and that using it recklessly would destroy the very source of future benefit. The metaphor condensed legal, economic, and strategic concerns into a simple and memorable image. As a result, compromise became cognitively harder because deeper asset deployment was implicitly associated with self-destructive behavior.

Small-State Influence Theory: Coalition-Building Mechanisms

De Wever’s coalition-building strategy also contributes to small-state influence theory. Högenauer & Mišik (2024) emphasizes that small states can exert influence when they combine policy competence with effective coalition formation. De Wever demonstrated both. He did not merely object to the proposal in general terms; he articulated a technically informed alternative rooted in legal and financial reasoning. This strengthened Belgium’s credibility and allowed him to operate not only as a veto player but also as an agenda shaper. His influence therefore rested on substantive expertise as well as formal institutional rights.

The coalition-building process further shows how small states can convert formal veto authority into genuine bargaining power.

Thorhallsson (2018) argues that consensus rules provide leverage, but that leverage becomes effective only when it is politically legitimate. De Wever achieved this by framing Belgium’s concerns as broadly shared risks rather than as narrow national interests. Other states aligned with Belgium not simply to obstruct the proposal, but because the legal and financial concerns were presented as relevant to them as well. This gave the coalition normative credibility and made it more difficult for larger actors to dismiss Belgium’s stance as exceptional or self-serving.

Panke’s (2011) distinction between bilateral partnerships and coalition politics is also helpful here. De Wever’s strategy combined both approaches. He built a core coalition among states with immediate concerns while also engaging larger actors such as Germany and France through targeted diplomacy. This dual strategy preserved coalition cohesion while creating space for major states to shift position without losing face (Van Brakel & Govaerts, 2022; Moloney & Whitaker, 2023). Germany’s repositioning illustrates this dynamic clearly (Krommendijk, 2025; Högenauer & Mišik, 2024). Once a broader coalition had formed, a larger member state could adopt a more cautious stance and justify the change in legal and technical terms rather than as submission to a smaller state (Krommendijk, 2025; Truchlewski & Schelkle, 2024). This suggests that small-state influence is strongest when coalitions are broad enough to confer legitimacy and flexible enough to accommodate larger actors.

Rhetorical Entrapment: Public Commitment Effects

De Wever’s parliamentary testimony also exemplifies rhetorical entrapment, as discussed by Berge and Kuyper (2024). Public normative statements constrain later flexibility because they create political and reputational costs for reversal (Rubin, 2026). By declaring that there could be no compromise on matters threatening Euroclear and Belgium’s financial stability, De Wever transformed his position into a public commitment before domestic and international audiences (Bunea, 2020; Chelotti, 2023; de Silva, 2025). This strengthened his credibility in negotiations because other actors could

reasonably infer that retreat would be politically costly.

This entrapment was reinforced by the values-based language he employed. De Wever justified Belgium's position not only in terms of national interest, but also in terms of legal certainty, financial stability, and the rule of law. Values are more difficult to abandon than interests because reversing them risks charges of inconsistency or hypocrisy. Once Belgium's objections were framed as principled rather than merely strategic, compromise became harder not only materially but normatively. Other negotiators were therefore confronted with a more demanding task: persuading Belgium not just to accept risk, but to repudiate its own publicly articulated principles (Berge & Kuyper, 2024; Ledderer et al., 2020).

The historical dimension of De Wever's rhetoric deepened this effect further. By invoking the World War II precedent, he connected the debate to foundational European memories and norms (Törnquist-Plewa, 2024; Koschut, 2024; de Vries, 2018). In the EU context, such references carry substantial moral weight because they resonate with the Union's self-understanding as a legal and civilizational project built in response to historical catastrophe (Tuori, 2022; Weiler, 2011; Törnquist-Plewa, 2024). This elevated the dispute from a technical policy disagreement to a question of whether Europe would undermine the very legal norms it claims to defend (Lascurettes, 2023; Syrpis, 2024; Rapoport, 2023). Rhetorical entrapment therefore operated not only through repetition and public commitment, but also through historical resonance and moral elevation (De Vries, 2020; Sierp, 2020).

Applied Communication Implications

For organizational and political communication practitioners, this case demonstrates that strategic communication can generate material policy effects when it is aligned with institutional norms and translated into actionable negotiating positions. Actors in materially weaker positions can expand their influence by framing their preferences through broadly legitimate principles such as legal certainty, systemic stability, and rule-of-law compliance (Corbett et al., 2018; Guilfoyle,

2023; Menon, 2020). Several practical lessons emerge from this case. First, particular interests become more persuasive when expressed through universal institutional logics (Reed, 2025). Second, coalition-building is more effective when organized around shared risks rather than coordinated obstruction (Bunea et al., 2022; Gawerc, 202; Ashworth & Ramsay, 2024). Third, public commitments can increase bargaining credibility by raising the political costs of retreat (Takei, 2022). Fourth, metaphor can simplify technical complexity and shape interpretation. Fifth, historical and normative framing can elevate a dispute beyond short-term policy trade-offs (Brugman et al., 2019; Dodge & Metze, 2024; Vestergaard, 2025).

For EU institutions and practitioners of multilevel governance, the case also shows that communication-based power should be treated as a substantive form of political influence rather than as rhetorical ornament (Bunea, 2020). In consensus-based settings, actors who successfully define the meaning of legality, risk, and legitimacy can alter the trajectory of negotiations even without superior material capabilities. Institutional rules such as unanimity, legal review, and rule-of-law norms create an environment in which framing, public justification, and coalition signaling become strategically decisive. Policymakers should therefore pay closer attention to how communication structures the range of options considered acceptable or unacceptable during negotiation.

Limitations, Practical Implications, and Future Research Opportunities

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it relies primarily on qualitative analysis of public statements, media reporting, and official documents. Although this approach is well suited to examining productive power and strategic framing, it cannot fully capture closed-door bargaining, informal diplomatic exchanges, or confidential legal assessments that may also have shaped the final outcome. Second, the study focuses on a single case within a highly specific institutional and geopolitical context. Its findings therefore provide strong analytical insight into causal mechanisms, but they should not be generalized automatically to all EU negotiations or all forms

of small-state influence. Third, because the analysis centers on De Wever's communication strategy, it gives less attention to the independent role of other actors, including the European Commission, Germany, France, and financial institutions, whose calculations may also have contributed to the policy shift.

Despite these limitations, the study has important implications for practice. For political leaders, diplomats, and communication strategists, it shows that influence in multilevel governance depends not only on material capabilities but also on the ability to frame preferences in institutionally legitimate terms. For EU policymakers, the case suggests that negotiations in consensus-based systems are shaped as much by communicative legitimacy as by formal voting power. Communication strategy should therefore be incorporated into analyses of institutional power, especially in disputes involving legal ambiguity, financial exposure, and coalition politics.

Future research could extend this study in several directions. Comparative analysis across other EU negotiations could test whether legal-financial framing and coalition-building operate similarly in different issue areas. Process-tracing research using elite interviews, internal memoranda, or archival materials could clarify how public discourse interacts with private bargaining. Further studies might also compare how productive power functions when exercised by small states, large states, supranational institutions, or non-state financial actors. Such research would refine the scope conditions of productive power theory and deepen understanding of communication as a mechanism of influence in multilevel governance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that political communication can transform formal veto capacity into substantive influence within consensus-based institutions. In the Euroclear negotiations, Bart De Wever's strategy worked through three connected mechanisms: legal-financial framing, coalition-building, and rhetorical entrenchment. Together, these mechanisms enabled Belgium to reshape the terms of negotiation and exercise influence beyond its material capabilities. The study therefore

demonstrates that, in multilevel governance, communicative power can be as consequential as conventional resources when it aligns with institutional norms and decision rules.

The findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they strengthen scholarship on productive power, framing, and small-state influence by showing how discourse can alter policy outcomes in legally constrained and consensus-oriented settings. Practically, they suggest that negotiators in structurally weaker positions can increase their leverage by framing national preferences in universal institutional terms, building credible coalitions, and using public commitments strategically. Future research should test these mechanisms comparatively across other EU negotiations and examine more closely how public discourse interacts with closed-door bargaining in shaping final outcomes.

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