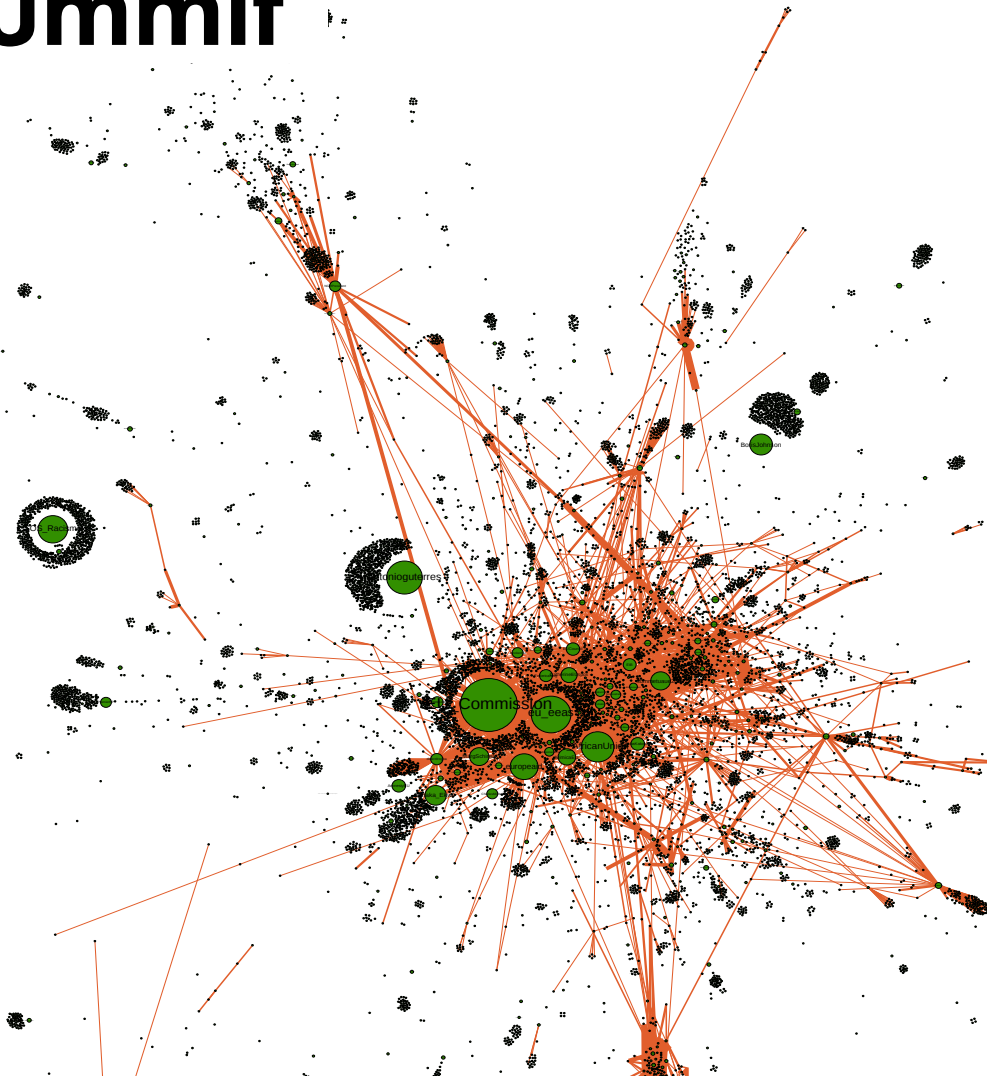**African Policy Circle**

#AUEU: A Twitter Analysis of the 2017 AU-EU Summit

Policy Paper

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Prepared for the African Policy Circle
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About the African Policy Circle

This publication is a joint output by the African Policy Circle, a group of civil society organizations and think tanks from Africa whose goal is to strengthen sub-Saharan voices in global, continental, regional, and national development debates as well as to promote good governance through critical reflection and innovative ideas. The African Policy Circle is supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi).

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1. Introduction

The African Union-European Union Summit (AU-EU Summit) is the premier platform for high-level talks between European and African policymakers. These summits, in the words of the European Union (EU), "take stock of the progress made in the implementation of commitments and provide political guidance for further work."[1] They complement ongoing exchanges between the EU and the African Union (AU) and determine joint priorities for political, economic and social cooperation between the two continents. The 2017 AU-EU Summit, the fifth since 2000, ran under the official theme "Investing in youth for a sustainable future."

This paper presents a Twitter analysis of the AU-EU Summit, which took place on November 29 and 30, 2017, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. An analysis of Twitter data offers the opportunity to determine the views of individuals and groups around certain issues. Moreover, it can offer a window into public debates held over social media, how these debates change over time, which communities share what information, and to what extent filter bubbles and insular groups within and across larger communities exist.

To analyze how the AU-EU Summit debate unfolded on Twitter, we collected around 46,000 tweets shared between the November 25 and the December 5, 2017, which used the #AUEU hashtag as well as relevant keywords. Beyond using retweets to illustrate a network of Twitter users who participated in discussions around the summit, our analysis of the actual tweets shows that a number of topics — notably youth, migration, slavery, and Western Sahara — dominated social media conversations. More interestingly, the Twitter discourse was largely shaped by European Twitter accounts as opposed to African accounts.

This paper proceeds as follows: The next section introduces the methodology used for the Twitter analysis. Section three discusses the results of the analysis of the central and more peripheral Twitter communities as well as the main themes discussed around the AU-EU Summit. A short conclusion summarizes the main findings.

2. Methodology

The initial step of our analysis was the collection - or "scraping" - of Twitter data. To do this, we used the Twitter package of the open-source software for statistical computing R to extract tweets through Twitter's Application Programming Interface (API). To keep the overall amount of data manageable, we only analyzed tweets published between November 25 and December 5, 2017.[2]

Initially, we only considered tweets containing the most frequently used hashtag of the summit: #AUEU. However, since not all users on Twitter included this tag in their tweets when discussing the summit, we expanded our dataset by including additional keywords and keyword combinations referencing the summit.[3] After merging all search results and removing a few duplicate tweets, a final dataset of approximately 46,000 tweets remained.[4] Network analysis is based on exchanges or relationships between individual actors. For the purposes of this analysis, we focused on retweets as the indicator of interactions. While retweets do not necessarily

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1   The Africa-EU Partnership, "Africa – EU Summit" (2017), accessed December 16, 2017, http://www.africa-eu-partnership.org/en/about-us/how-it-works/africa-eu-summit.

2   There was also a limited amount of activity on Twitter relating to the AU-EU Summit before and after this period of time.

3   The combinations were as follows: "aueu," "Africa+Europe+Summit," "African+European+Union," "Africa+EU+Summit," "AU+Europe+Summit," "Africa+European+Summit," "aueusummit," "AUEUYouth," "RoadToAbidjan," "aueuypii," "AU+EU+Summit."

4   Unfortunately, Twitter does not specify how its Application Programming Interface (API) limits search requests, but since this a relatively niche topic, our extracts seem only restricted by the API's time limit. Thus, we are confident that our dataset contains all tweets that match our search criteria published between November 25 and December 5, 2017.

indicate endorsement, a retweet has substantial influence on the reach and visibility of a post on Twitter since it appears prominently in the feed of users who retweeted the original message. Such a retweet can again be retweeted, further amplifying the original message. For this reason and to keep the amount of data manageable, we focused the network analysis on retweets alone. Using the open source software *Gephi* for visualization, we plotted individual Twitter accounts as circles - or "nodes" - in the graph. In the event of a retweet occurring between two users, their nodes are connected with a straight line — or "edge" — We then manipulated the network visually in two ways. First, we used a clustering algorithm which pulled together nodes that are connected while pushing those that are detached apart. This allowed for a visualization of the different communities participating in the discussions around the summit.[5] Second, we adjusted the size of the circles based on their relative importance. The more retweets a Twitter user had, the bigger the individuals' node. Such a layout points to a user's Twitter reach and allowed us to visualize the most influential Twitter voices around the AU-EU Summit.[6]

Finally, we conducted a text analysis of the content of all 46,000 tweets using the "tm" package of the statistical software *R*. This package allowed us to identify themes that were present in the online discussions by determining the frequencies at which relevant keywords were used. We then assigned a thematic label to each tweet for usage in the network analysis.[7] In doing so, we saw how the focus of discussions evolved over the course of the summit.

3. The #AUEU Twitter Network: An Analysis of Communities and Themes

The Twitter analysis is split into two sections: first, we present an analysis of the overall structure of the Twitter network and the clusters of unique communities of users which emerged around the summit. Second, we look at the thematic issues that were most frequently discussed before, during and after the summit, as well as at the different communities that pushed these issues.

## 3.1. Analysis of the Central and Peripheral Communities

Figure 1 below shows a complete graph of the network of retweets which referenced the AU-EU Summit between November 25 and December 5, 2017. This network can be separated into two main parts: the main component in the center and the cloud of users surrounding it. The dense and highly-connected center illustrates the Twitter accounts that engaged in the principal debate online. Each node represents a Twitter account and, in general, each node's proximity to the center can be read as an indication of the frequency with which the Twitter user's posts were shared by others. The more retweets the individual's posts received, the more that user moved to the center. The tweets with the most retweets can thus be considered the most influential views on the summit as expressed through Twitter. In comparison, the outer cloud is made up of the accounts that were isolated from the predominant discussions around the event simply because their posts received few retweets.

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5   We used the *ForceAtlas 2* algorithm, which is a linear-attraction linear-repulsion model with few approximations.

6   Formally, we scaled nodes based on their *eigencentrality*. This is a measure that incorporates not only how many connections an individual node has, but also how many connections the nodes to which it is connected have individually. For example, the posts of two different users may have been retweeted the same number of times, but the one is retweeted by an account with many followers will have a higher *eigencentrality* than the one tweeted by an account with few followers.

7   For example, "youth," "migration," "economy," "Western Sahara."
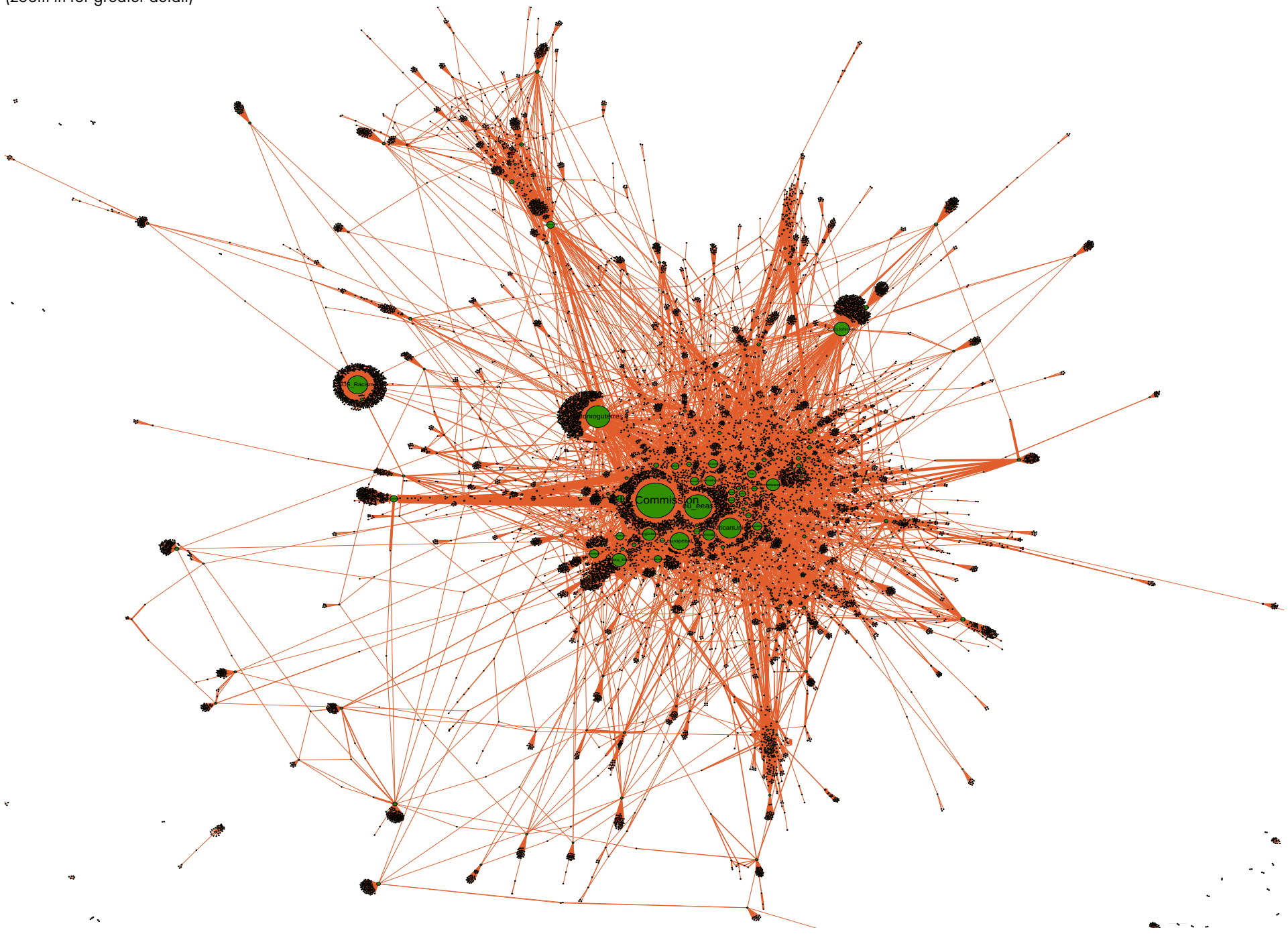
Exploring the highly-connected component in more detail, our analysis shows that the main discussion revolved around a collection of EU and AU governmental accounts — namely @EU_Commission, @eu_eeas, @europeaid, and @_AfricanUnion — whose tweets generated the most retweets. These influential accounts are predominantly European; of the top ten furthest reaching accounts, only two were African.[8] This clustering around accounts from Europe raises a concern that African voices are underrepresented, and that users in the central cluster are likely to share a common audience and express similar views.

The analysis also illustrates the existence of more specialized communities represented by both centralized and decentralized sub-clusters. Centralized sub-clusters are characterized by a single central node surrounded by a larger group of users only connected to this node and otherwise largely disconnected from the rest of the AU-EU network (see Figure 2). In the AU-EU network, the @SOS_Racisme account, the Twitter presence of a French NGO addressing racial discrimination, is a good example of this phenomenon. Less extreme sub-cluster cases are the accounts of the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Boris Johnson, the Polish language account of Poland's President of the Council of Ministers Mateusz Morawiecki, and United Nation Secretary-General António Guterres. Each of these accounts draws large audiences, but these followers are largely absent in the AU-EU Summit network.

For example, a post from Boris Johnson stating that he was on his way to the AU-EU Summit was retweeted a few hundred times. However, the users who retweeted him seem neither involved in AU-EU politics, nor did they share any views on AU and/or EU issues that were retweeted by others.

Decentralized sub-clusters are those groupings without a clear central node. These communities, circled in red, blue, and green in Figure 3 below, are formed by a group of accounts that tend to retweet each other, but garner little attention from other users outside the group. The existence of decentralized sub-clusters can indicate groups with specific interests or characteristics that are trying to push a specific agenda. For example, Figure 3 shows that the Nigerian community (red) and French community (blue) cluster. It is likely that this is because the Twitter users within each cluster are particularly concerned about either Nigerian or French-specific issues which leads to a denser network within each cluster. The community circled in green, on the other hand, is comprised of Western Saharan accounts using Twitter to lobby for autonomy. This case is further discussed in Section 3.2.

A final noteworthy structure are the clusters circled in purple in the lower left section of Figure 3. At the center of these smaller clusters are the Twitter accounts of news agencies such as Al Jazeera (@AJEnglish), News24 from South Africa (@News24) or the French Press Agency (@AFPAfrica). Each account has a fairly large number of followers who retweet their tweets; yet most users who were introduced to the #AUEU network by those news agencies remained largely disconnected from other users discussing the summit and did not retweet any other accounts connected with the discourse. This indicates that most of the individuals who retweeted information from the news agencies did not linger on the topic. This particular part of the network also shows that those individual news agencies, some of which (like @AJEnglish) have millions of followers, had a relatively small reach within and hence impact on the #AUEU network. This is likely due to their fast tweet cycle and an audience that is less concerned about a single issue; yet, the data does not allow us to verify the exact cause.

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8   We calculated the top ten furthest reaching accounts using *eigencentrality*: higher reach translates into higher visibility, largely through retweets by other users. See footnote 6 for more information about this measure.
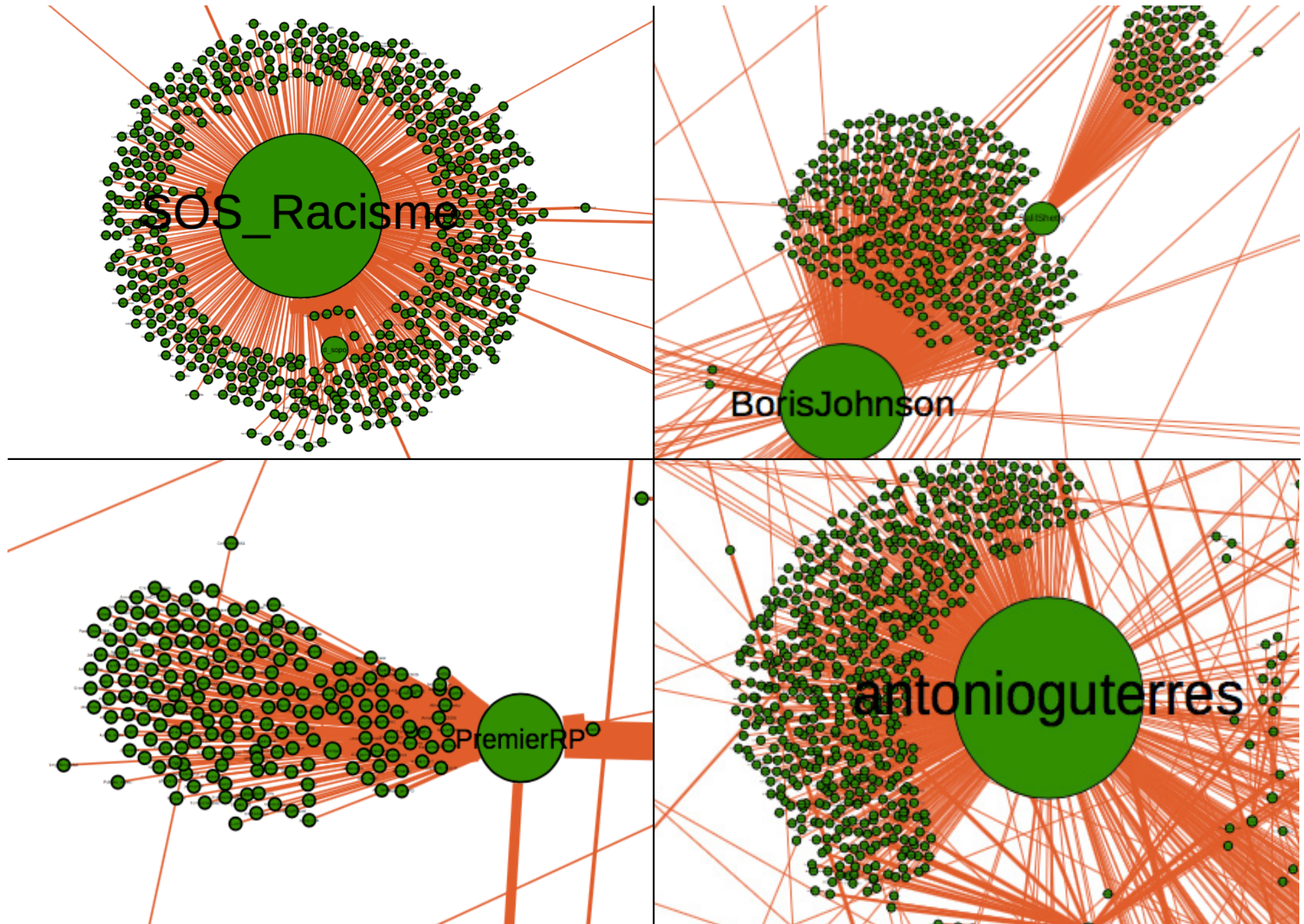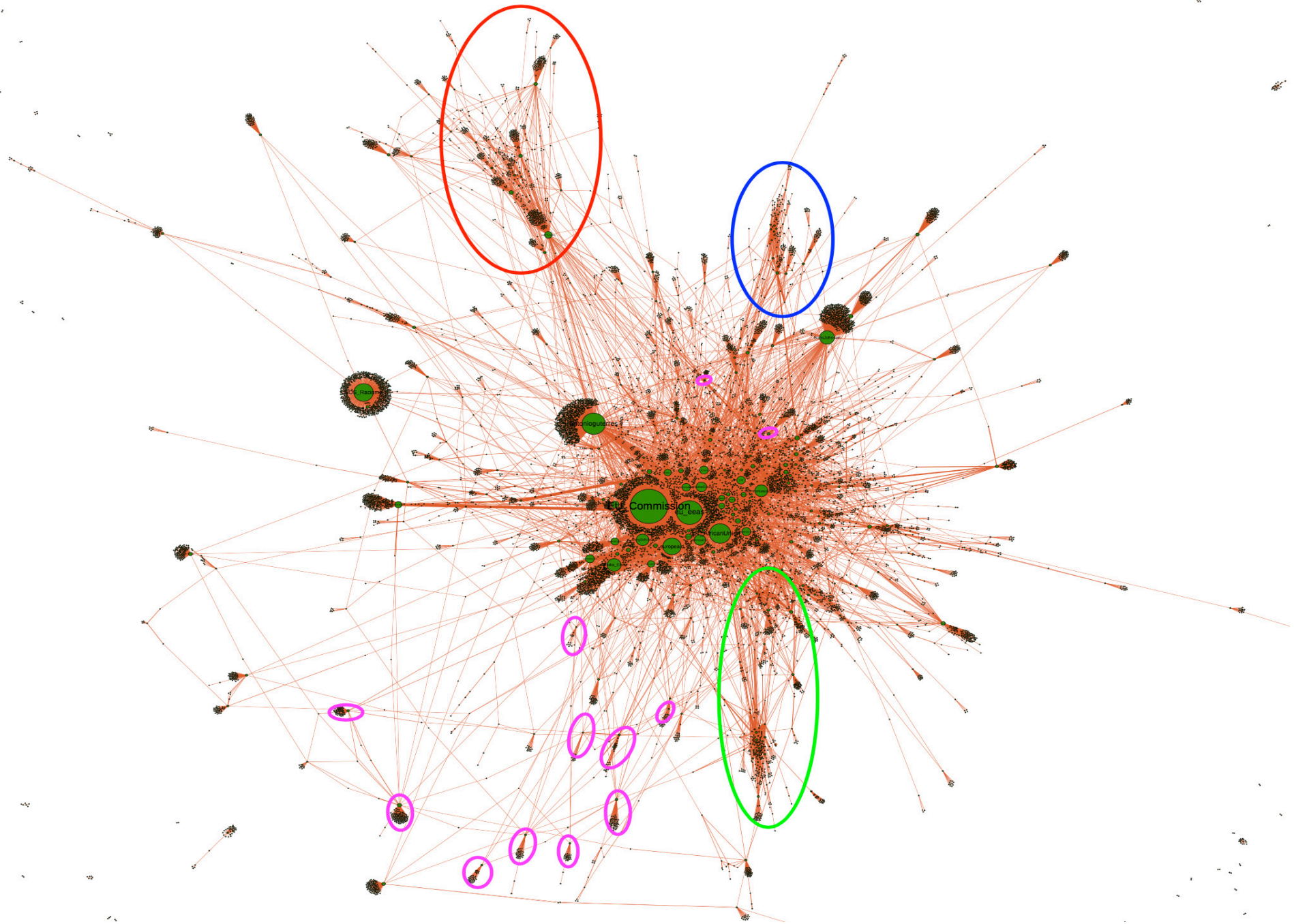
3.2. Analysis of Thematic Issues

This section analyzes the topics that Twitter users discussed when they referenced the AU-EU Summit. By conducting a text analysis of the collected tweets (see Section 2 on the method we used), we identified four major themes which featured prominently in the Twitter conversation: migration, economy, youth, and Western Sahara.

Figure 4 illustrates the prominence of these themes before, during and after the summit. Although the frequency with which these themes appeared varied over time, it is clear from the graph that migration was the most prominent of all the topics discussed on Twitter during the summit. This comes as no surprise, as migration was widely seen as the unofficial theme going into the summit and has been a priority topic for the European Union and its members for the past two years. Interestingly, a large portion of the discussion on migration was related to the enslavement of migrants in Libya — a headline that broke at the beginning of the week of the summit. This could indicate that the immediacy of the situation in Libya was used to justify diverting discussions towards the topic of migration, which as the elephant in the room was bound to be discussed anyway.

In the following sections, we provide more insight on three of the key topics: youth, migration and Western Saharan autonomy.[9] To do this, we isolated all the retweets mentioning these topics and displayed only those in the network graphics below.[10] This allows us to visualize which parts of the network discussed the topics. In addition, it allows us to zoom in on some of the most vocal social media users on these topics.

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9   We do not report results from the theme "economy," because the network and interpretations are very similar to that of "youth."

10   Tweets were assigned labels based on content. If they contained at least one keyword relating to a topic, they were assigned that topic label. Tweets were allowed multiple labels. As a result, some edges appear in multiple network graphs.

Youth

As the official theme of the 2017 AU-EU Summit, it is no surprise that the issue of youth was mentioned and retweeted often on Twitter. Figure 5 shows a high number of retweets around the central main cluster of the network mostly made up of government accounts. The topic of youth was introduced by the Twitter accounts of the government agencies responsible for organizing the summit, such as the EU Commission, the EU's European External Action Service and the African Union, who can all be found in the primary cluster. However, the network layout shows that the issue of youth only resonated to a limited extent outside of those Twitter users shown in the center, indicating a discussion that took place predominantly within the Twitter community surrounding EU and AU institutions and was driven by a few accounts.

A closer examination of the most retweeted posts related to youth reveals that they typically do not make a statement but rather only cite the title of the summit. From that, we can conclude that the discussion on Twitter did not substantially promote or address youth issues. Rather, the activity that did occur was a result of organizers using the summit motto while deliberations on other issues were happening. This was further reflected in the summit declaration, which provided few suggestions on tackling youth issues and instead focused on the unofficial theme of the summit: migration.

Migration

Migration garnered far more interest from the network at large. This is indicated by the web shown in Figure 6, which is less concentrated and more dispersed than that of the youth issue shown in Figure 5. Unlike individuals who are at the center of the network, and thus highly connected to the overall AU-EU network and the main users within it, those users further from the main cluster generally have fewer connections to other Twitter accounts. They do not regularly retweet tweets from the accounts present in the central cluster. From this, we can derive that many accounts

Figure 4: Trending Topics Before, During, and After the AU-EU Summit

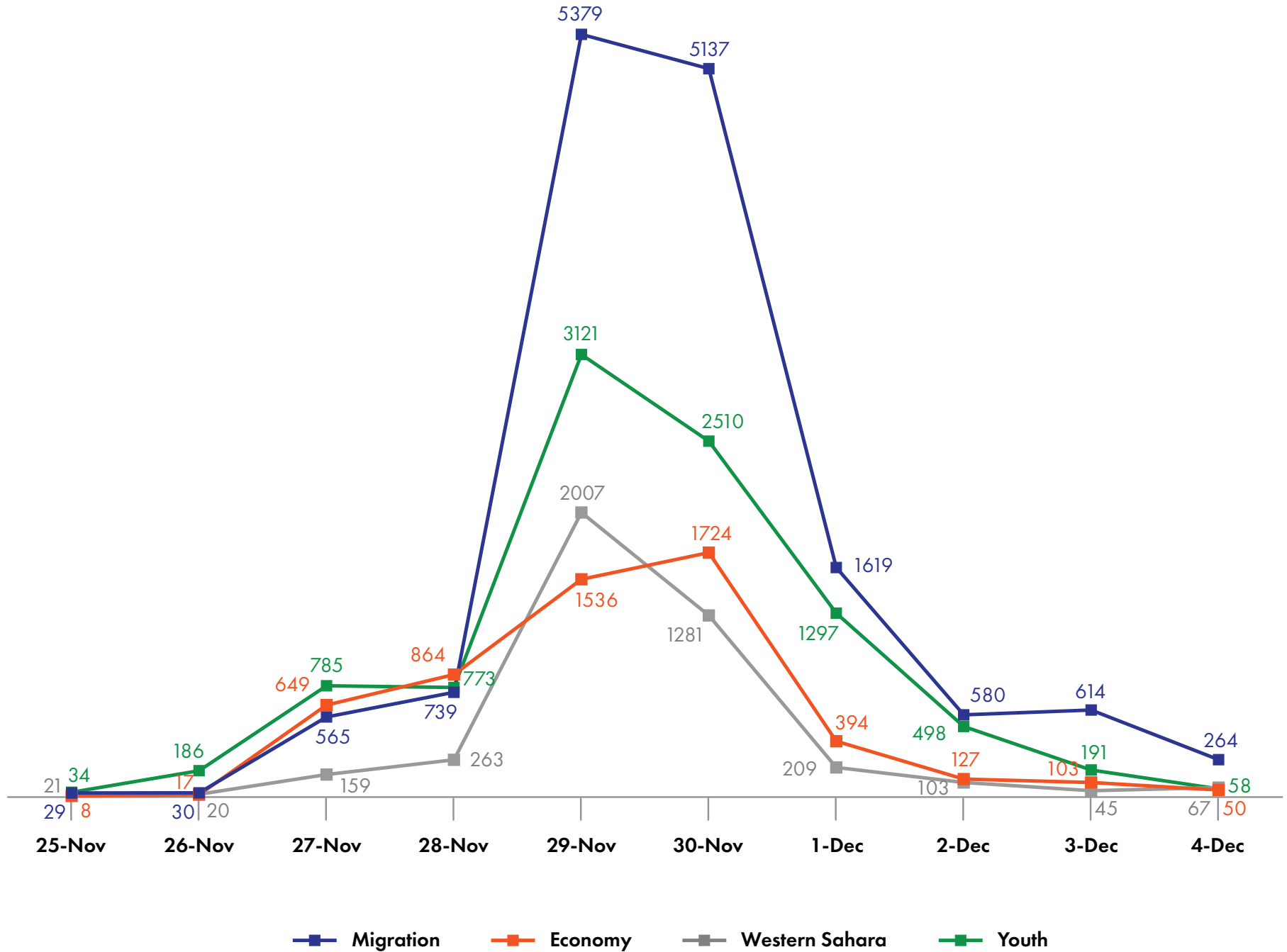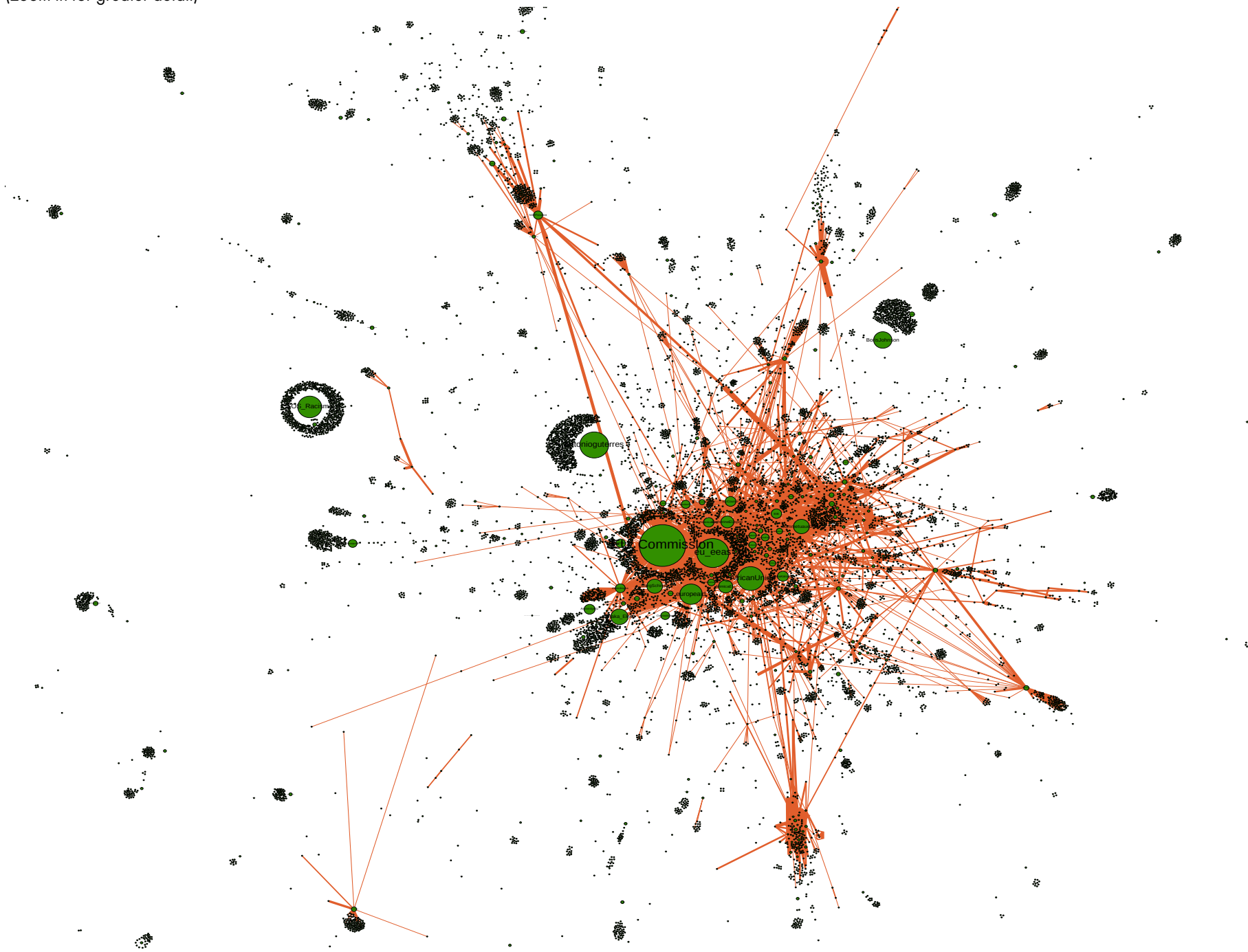|	25-Nov	26-Nov	27-Nov	28-Nov	29-Nov	30-Nov	1-Dec	2-Dec	3-Dec	4-Dec
Migration	29	30	565	739	5379	5137	1619	580	614	264
Economy	8	17	649	864	1536	1724	394	127	103	50
Western Sahara	21	20	159	263	2007	1281	209	103	45	67
Youth	34	186	785	773	3121	2510	1297	498	191	58

Migration   Economy   Western Sahara   Youth

Figure 5: Retweets Referencing "youth"
(zoom in for greater detail)

mentioning migration in the context of the summit are probably not usually involved in AU-EU politics and may have been drawn into the conversation around the AU-EU Summit only because of the mention of migration. This is particularly well illustrated by the cluster of users surrounding the Twitter account @SOS_Racisme, which tweeted a statement regarding the enslavement of migrants in Libya and petitioned the AU-EU Summit to address the issue.[11] This tweet was retweeted by a large group of individuals who were otherwise not connected to the primary Twitter discussions on the summit. The star-shaped sub-cluster formed in this situation is a good demonstration of the phenomenon of internet "slacktivism", i.e., individuals retweeting something they may agree with, but without engaging any further on the topic in question.

Summit organizers were less likely to mention migration through their Twitter accounts, as indicated by a lower concentration of retweets in the central cluster (compared to youth, for example). We further find that governmental organizations which were key nodes in the youth network, for example the EU Commission and AU accounts, were not as prominent in the migration debate on Twitter. This suggests that the organizers attempted to use their Twitter presence to focus attention on the official theme of youth. The actual summit deliberations, however, went in the same direction as the general Twitter discussion: towards addressing the immediate issue of migrant enslavement in Libya. The summit delegates prepared a joint statement on this particular issue even before releasing the summit declaration.

Western Sahara

Going into the summit, a major point of contention was the participation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Although only a partially recognized state, its membership in the AU paved the way for the SADR's inclusion in the summit and caused increased tension with Morocco, which claims sovereignty over the territory. For the Saharawi people, the AU-EU Summit was an opportunity to raise awareness and garner support for their autonomy. This is evident in the Twitter network, where a large number of presumably Western Saharans tweeted about their independence.

However, a closer examination of the network reveals that their voices remained in a silo and failed to gain widespread support outside this echo chamber and within the wider network. As Figure 7 shows, unlike the migration and youth themes, none of the edges associated with Western Saharan autonomy appear in the main central cluster of the Twitter network. This signifies very few interactions with the cluster of governmental organizations responsible for the summit. This particularly localized and concentrated sub-cluster is illustrated by a group of individual nodes that are highly connected among each other, but very disconnected from the rest of the network. As such, we can conclude that the structure failed to attract a more mainstream following.

Comparing the Saharawi cluster with the star-like network surrounding the @SOS_Racisme account illustrates how internet activism can vary. Although we do see clusters that are comprised of users who are poorly connected to the network at large, the connections within the clusters are substantially different. In the @SOS_Racisme cluster, for example, a clear star-like structure is formed by individuals who are only pulled into the network by the central node of this particular issue, indicating a largely "slacktivist" following of users who have just one interaction in the network — retweeting a message to show support. In comparison, the cluster formed by Saharawi autonomists does not have a clear central figure but rather forms a decentralized web of users. This suggests many varied interactions within the cluster, which is in line with a community that is engaged and involved rather than one individual user with a large audience.

From the strong individual involvement and the lack of a central figure, we can conclude that activism about the issue of Saharawi autonomy is a grassroots movement. Nonetheless, even with this high interconnectivity,

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11   See https://twitter.com/SOS_Racisme/status/935919431875690496.

Figure 6: Retweets Referencing "migration"
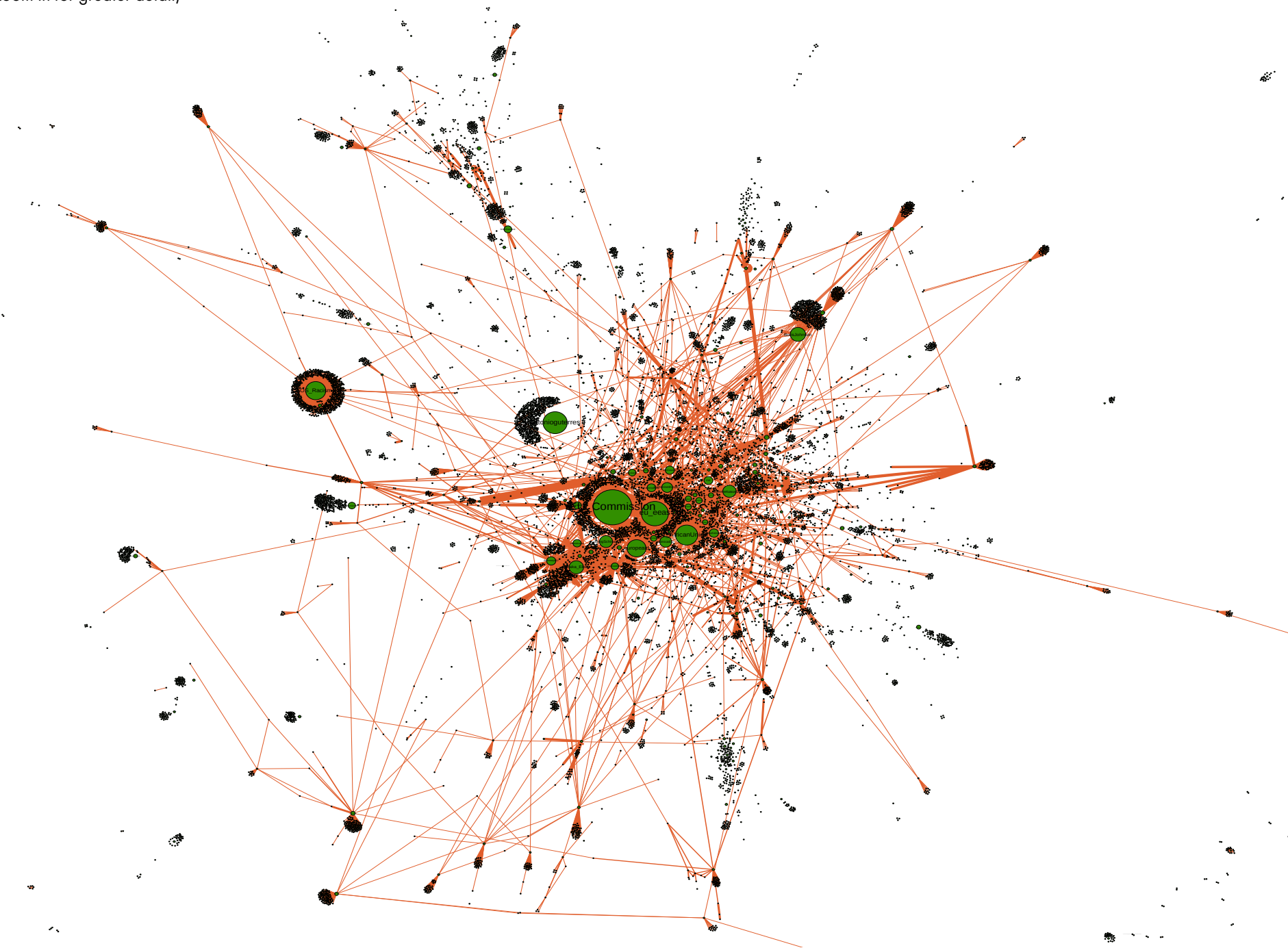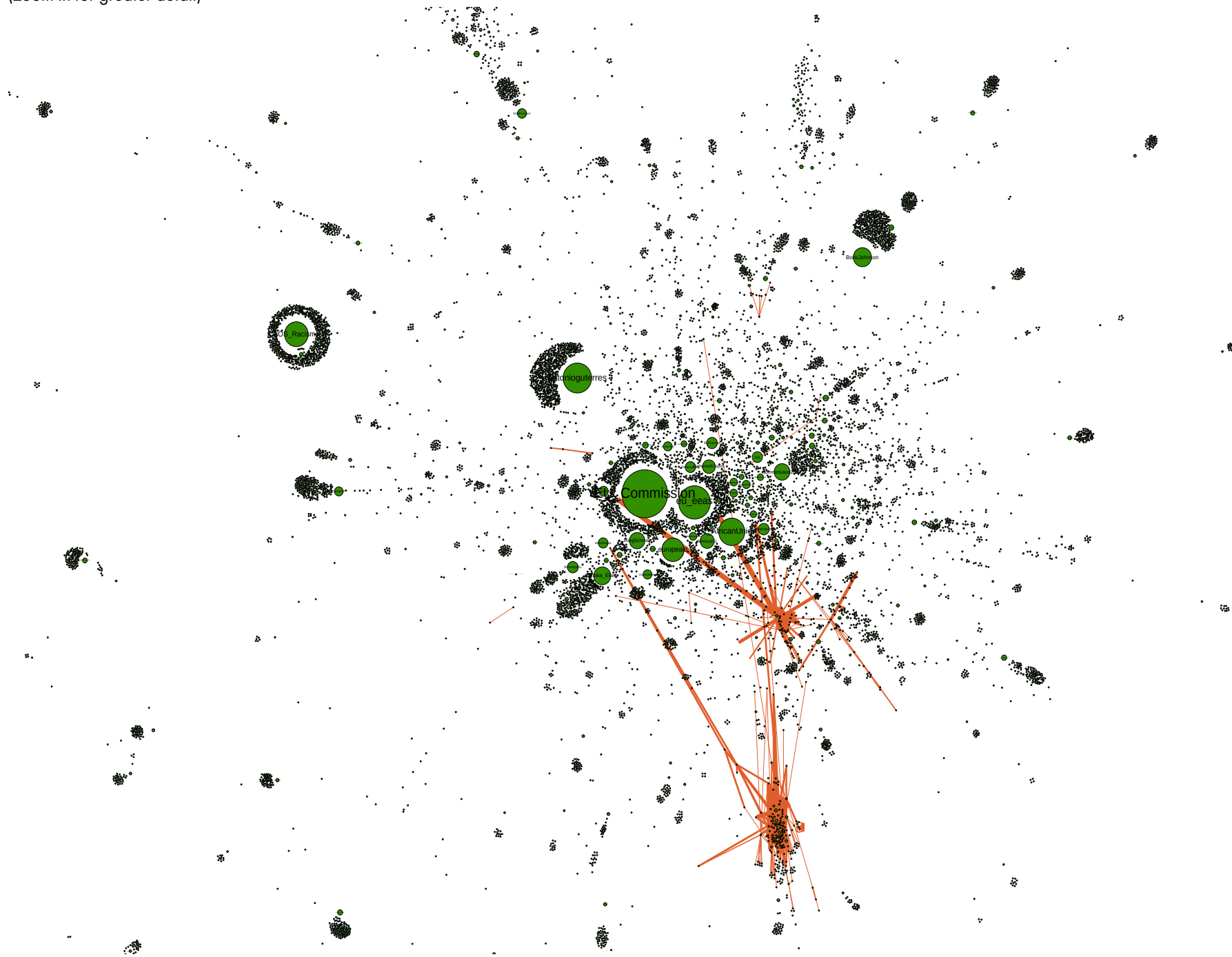(zoom in for greater detail)

Figure 7: Retweets Referencing "Western Sahara"
(zoom in for greater detail)

it is clear that users largely find themselves in an echo chamber; there are very few edges connecting them to the central cluster of EU and AU governmental organizations. Members of the Saharawi community retweet a lot among themselves, thus creating a trending topic, but these retweets rarely break out to other communities. The fact that there are no edges connecting these governmental organizations to the Saharawi activists is unsurprising. EU and AU accounts are unlikely to retweet separatist content as that might be perceived as a sign of endorsement — something that both the AU and the EU refrain from doing publically to avoid tensions with Morocco.

4. Conclusion

Examining 46,000 tweets, our Twitter analysis of the 2017 AU-EU Summit shows an engaged but relatively modest online community consisting of core opinion-leaders mainly from Europe, who drive the discourse. Moreover, we see a set of self-referencing communities operating on the fringes and with little to no impact on the mainstream discourse. Beyond uncovering these distinct communities, the text analysis of all tweets explored the topics that were most prominent and indicated how that prominence changed over time.

Unsurprisingly, given the official theme of the summit, youth was one of the central themes of the Twitter conversations, largely driven by the accounts of the summit organizers. However, during the actual summit, youth was quickly overtaken by migration as the central issue on Twitter. Driven to a large extent by recent media reports of the enslavement of African migrants in Libya, the summit itself quickly became dominated by this issue. This topic — which was subsumed under the theme of migration in our analysis — triggered an almost two-fold increase in migration-related tweets when compared to youth as a follow-on topic. This demonstrates how dominant this particular discourse was on social media.

We cannot determine if the attention on slavery in Libya on social media contributed to a shift in policy at the summit; however, we can note that

the summit led to the creation of a joint EU-AU-UN Task Force with the aim "to save and protect lives of migrants and refugees along the routes and in particular inside Libya, accelerating the assisted voluntary returns to countries of origin, and the resettlement of those in need of international protection."[12]

While these insights about the online discussion which happened around the AU-EU Summit are based on robust data analysis, it is important to keep in mind that the Twitter conversations using the #AUEU hashtag and related keywords are not necessarily equal to public opinion on the summit. The Twitter universe that emerged in the context of the AU-EU Summit itself may well be a self-referential and self-reinforcing community.

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12 European Commission, *Joint press release of the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union,* STATEMENT/17/5029, November 29, 2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-17-5029_en.htm. This task force was the result of some quiet conference diplomacy on the evening of the first conference day which saw a side-meeting between select African and European heads of states as well as the EU and the AU, who developed the task force concept. The task force itself did not become part of the final 2017 AU-EU Summit declaration but can nonetheless be considered the most immediate and actionable outcome of the summit.