



Understanding public opinion formation in Southeast Europe: Exploring social forces and communication dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the mechanisms through which social forces, networks, cognitive frames, and institutions shape public opinion in Southeast Europe via communication. Employing a qualitative approach, data was collected through synchronous focus groups conducted in six Southeast European countries. The findings reveal that social networks play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, with organizational position and relationships influencing communication effectiveness. Cognitive frames significantly impact public perception, with entrenched beliefs guiding interpretation of information. Meanwhile, social institutions, such as language and communication rules, influence the clarity and accessibility of messages, thereby shaping public understanding. The research underscores the need for deeper research, ethical standards, and transparent communication to build and maintain public trust. Continuous engagement with the public and adaptability in communication strategies are essential for fostering mutual understanding and trust. This research emphasizes social forces' complexity and overlapping nature in shaping public opinion and the strategic approaches required for effective communication in Southeast Europe.

Keywords: public communication, networks, cognitive frames, institutions, Southeast Europe, public opinion

INTRODUCTION

As Rončević et al. (2022) explain, social fields have deep roots, drawing inspiration from early scientific principles such as Newtonian gravitation and electromagnetism. However, its theoretical framework is more directly derived from Einstein's theory of general relativity (Hesse, 2005; Martin, 2003; Martin & Gregg, 2015). Martin (2003) identifies three primary theoretical streams within the social sciences based on natural science concepts: socio-psychological Gestalt perspectives (Lewin, 1951), the field theory of domination and capital distribution (Bourdieu, 1977), and the theory of inter-organizational relations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Initially, social fields emerged from Gestalt theories, emphasizing the mutual interdependence of coexisting facts within a wider perceptual field (Lewin, 1951). This perspective highlights the dynamic relationship between actors and the structures of their fields, positing that changes within a field are driven

both by individual actions and internal developments of the field itself (Martin, 2003). The Gestalt tradition also influenced theories of organized striving, which trace their origins to Weber's (1946) concept of 'spheres of value'—social logic held by actors within social fields.

Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) work remains highly influential in the theory of social fields. He explored the relationship between social structures and individual practices, conceptualizing practice as the interplay of habitual schemes and resources (capital) within the constraints and opportunities of social space and time (field). The concept of institutional fields, first suggested by Mannheim (1940), describes the interdependent actions transcending organizations or groups, forming sector fields through interaction and mutual influence.

DiMaggio and Powel (1983, 1991) extended this perspective by linking inter-organizational relations to Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) thinking. They defined organizational fields as encompassing key suppliers, consumers, regulatory agencies, and other related organizations, emphasizing that field structuration results from relational patterns and can be specified through close research of interpersonal relations (Martin, 2003).

In recent decades, interest in social fields has grown, particularly within new institutional theories that seek to explain the creation, stability, and transformation of social institutions and local social orders (Fligstein, 2001, 2008). These theories address the interaction between actors and social structures, recognizing the limitations of viewing fields as interactions among powerful collective groups. To overcome these limitations, Fligstein (2001, 2008) introduced the concept of 'social skill'—the ability to induce cooperation, drawing from symbolic interactionism. Skilled social actors navigate their actions based on the organization of the field, their position within it, and the actions of other groups.

The social field concept effectively addresses the agency structure issue and has informed numerous empirical studies. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing how social forces—institutions, networks, and cognitive frames—shape public opinion and communication. In our case, the Southeast Europe.

Besednjak et al. (2021), in their article, accept Fligstein and McAdam's (2015) concept of strategic action fields, "which can be defined as Meso level social orders and are regarded as a fundamental building block of modern political/ organizational life in the fields of economics, civil society, and state". They speak of the state as a system of strategic social fields that are interlaced and constantly overlapping. In such a setting, it is normal that the interactions between collective actors happen based on rules and shared meanings.

On the other side, Rončević et al. (2022) introduced the social-fields-approach (SOFIA), which can be instrumental in researching social change, building on Beckert's (2010) work, SOFIA is a framework for conceptualization and operationalization designed for empirical research. Beckert (2010) states that social forces influence the social field.

SOFIA approach has been applied to other levels of innovation systems (e.g., Cepoi & Golob, 2017), including different spatial levels (Rončević, 2012; Rončević, & Besednjak Valič, 2022; Rončević & Modic, 2011, 2012; Rončević et al., 2022, 2023), expanding the empirical base and incorporating new sources of primary and secondary data and can be expanded to research other phenomena. The approach is suitable for a wide range of research methods and sample sizes, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies (e.g., qualitative comparative analysis [QCA]) and even computer modelling (Džajić Uršič, 2020). It is applicable in large-N and small-N samples, as well as in single case studies. Moreover, the SOFIA approach can be used for both basic and applied research, having been effectively utilized in four international EU-funded applied projects (Rončević & Cepoi, 2022).

In our case, the SOFIA approach provides a robust framework for analyzing how three social forces interact and influence the public as a social field through communication. The approach's flexibility and comprehensive scope make it well-suited for exploring the complex interplay between institutions, networks, and cognitive frames in shaping public opinion and strategic communication in Southeast Europe.

This is also why Beckert's (2010) social fields theory is the most appropriate to this research. It interprets empirical reality as a social field influenced by three primary social forces. While Beckert (2010) initially used this approach to analyze markets as social fields, the SOFIA approach (Rončević & Cepoi, 2022) extends its application to other social fields. For instance, this comprehensive understanding of social forces provides valuable insights into how Southeast Europe's public opinion is shaped and influenced.

Beckert (2010) defines social forces as

- (1) institutions that encompass laws and formal mechanisms for political rulemaking and enforcement,
- (2) social networks are the structures formed by social actors, such as individuals or firms and the ties between them, and
- (3) cognitive frames involve meaning-making processes, interaction technologies, and opportunities for reflection and learning (Beckert, 2010).

These forces are crucial for explaining various economic and technological outcomes. Beckert's (2010) framework illustrates how these social forces apply to diverse economic phenomena, such as the effectiveness of economies, labor market stratification, and price formation. Beckert (2010) notes that these forces often influence each other, affecting market dynamics, actors' positioning, and resource endowments within these markets (Fourcade, 2007). Additionally, the environmental and organizational economic spheres provide a comprehensive view of the social composition within a common market field of industrial symbiotic networks. Factors like technology and resource scarcity influence market outcomes independently (Preda, 2007).

In communication with public opinion, actors utilize their resources to influence institutions, network structures, and cognitive frames of the people (Džajić Uršič, 2020). However, experts often emphasize the structure of social relations and networks (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997, 2018), considering the roles of institutions and cognition in explaining results (Beckert, 2009).

Traditional analyses often overlook the interconnected nature of various social forces, leading to an analytical disconnection (Archer, 2003). Recognizing the irreducibility of social structures, recent research has taken a more comprehensive approach by systematically investigating the influences of different social structures on each other. Beckert's (2009) work provides a systematic framework that acknowledges these interdependencies. Instead of conceptualizing the influence of one social structure in isolation, Beckert's (2009) approach examines how multiple social forces interact to shape the structure in focus (Džajić Uršič, 2020). The dynamics of cognitive frames can be understood by interacting with other social structures, such as institutions and social networks (Beckert, 2009, 2010).

In Southeast Europe, this perspective is crucial for understanding how social forces such as institutions, networks, and cognitive frames shape public opinion and communication. By applying a social fields analysis, we can explore the complex interplay between these forces and their combined impact on the public sphere. This comprehensive approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how public opinion is formed and how strategic communication can be effectively tailored to this dynamic social environment.

Historically, public opinion was shaped through direct interpersonal interactions, rooted in cultural practices, traditional myths, and rites. However, with the emergence of communication media, these new channels have significantly influenced the formation of public opinion. The advent of internet-based media has further complicated this process, shaping opinion a complex issue influenced by various factors at multiple levels (Aguilar & Terán, 2015).

According to Puerto et al. (2019), the quality of public opinion is also an ethical concern. Freedom and quality of opinion are compromised by manipulation, making it essential to scrutinize the media's influence, especially the formation of opinions on social networks. This process is intricate due to information's diffuse and rapidly evolving nature. This complexity includes anonymous interactions, lack of personal knowledge about others, and the influence of subliminal and decontextualized messages (Poria et al., 2016 in Sánchez et al., 2019).

Recent approaches in opinion mining aim to understand how public opinion is shaped by extracting insights from expressed opinions on specific topics. Traditional methods rely on surveys that aggregate individual opinions at a particular time, which can oversimplify the complex opinion formation process (Bucur, 2015; Kosko, 1986; Maturana & Varela, 1987; Retana, 2012; Schuller et al., 2015).

Some studies propose classifying or predicting opinions (Alkadri & Eikorany, 2016; Asgarnezhad & Mohebbi, 2015; Balaji et al., 2018; Bouras et al., 2020; Maturana & Varela, 1987) but these often overlook the contextual factors affecting opinion quality. At the individual level, opinion formation is influenced by biological factors and the nervous system's structure and properties. At the social level, interaction among

individuals shapes opinions (Gopalakrishnan & Ramaswamy, 2017; Schuller et al., 2015), where media influence creates a new form of social interaction with various consequences (Stuart & Majewski, 2015).

Beckert's (2010) approach allows us to see how institutions exert "normative pressures" that standardize behaviors and beliefs, thereby contributing to a cohesive public opinion (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These pressures are instrumental in maintaining the stability of cognitive frames, as they socialize actors into established norms and values. For instance, in Southeast Europe, media institutions and political entities play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and opinion by framing issues in specific ways that align with broader societal norms and expectations.

Moreover, social networks are vital in amplifying these institutional influences. They act as conduits for information flow, enabling rapid dissemination and reinforcement of opinions within the public sphere. The interactions within these networks can either stabilize or challenge existing cognitive frames, depending on the nature and strength of the network ties (Granovetter, 1973).

Cognitive frames, on the other hand, provide the interpretative lens through which individuals make sense of their social world. These frames are shaped by both institutional norms and social network interactions, creating a feedback loop that reinforces certain perspectives while marginalizing others (Goffman, 1974). In Southeast Europe, cognitive frames are influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts, which shape how issues are perceived and discussed in the public sphere.

If we analyze social institutions, they play a critical role in shaping public opinion and behavior. They provide the frameworks individuals interpret and make sense of the world. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) note, social institutions shape the public's understanding of reality by providing templates for all actions and experiences, including perceptions and thoughts. Similarly, Bourdieu (2005) emphasizes that social institutions such as the family, education systems, and economic organizations regulate individual behavior and shape collective consciousness by transmitting cultural values and norms that influence public perceptions of economic, social, and political realities. Durkheim (1982) further elaborates that social institutions create the necessary framework for individuals to interact, communicate, and form a collective consciousness, influencing public attitudes, beliefs, and values (Stangor & Walinga, 2014).

Considering the research question of the article, "How can social forces (institutions, networks, and cognitive frames) shape the public as a social field in Southeast Europe through communication?" we analyze through the SOFIA approach how institutions, networks, and cognitive frames shape public opinion through communication provides valuable insights into social influence mechanisms and public attitudes' formation. Also, the article highlights the importance of normative pressures and socialization in creating stable and coherent public opinions while acknowledging the potential for change driven by shifts in the underlying social forces.

As defined by Bourdieu (1977, 1990), the creation of relationships is a fundamental process within social fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Without establishing these relationships, a social field cannot exist. In the realm of communication, this concept translates to the idea that without communication, Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) relationships cannot be realized. "Communication as a process is the invisible force that creates dynamics in every social field. Without communication, there is no dynamics; without dynamics, there is no social field" (Stojčevski & Valic, 2022).

"At its core, communication is the discipline of packaging and delivering information strategically to achieve the greatest impact" (OECD report on public communication). Some researchers argue that "communication, and thus, the conformation of public opinion, are the fundamental aspects defining a society and its individuals" (Sánchez et al., 2019). Strategic communication conveys specific information to the public to achieve desired outcomes. If the public does not respond to the communicator's attempt, it signifies a failure of the formal actor in shaping public opinion according to strategically set goals.

By understanding the interplay between networks, cognitive frames and institutions, we can gain deeper insights into the mechanisms that drive public opinion formation and stabilization in this region. This approach underscores the importance of normative pressures and socialization processes in shaping a cohesive and stable public opinion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach based on the theoretical background in the article “Shaping the public in Southeast Europe: Social fields analysis” (Stojcevski & Valic, 2022), where social forces, through communication, shape public opinion in social fields. As a theoretical base, each formal actor has its agent-communicator for shaping the public. And the formal actor and the agent need to have the same strategic approach to communication.

Social fields and the social forces were conceptualized and operationalized in line with the theoretical background and specific research question for qualitative method research.

The formal actors who communicate and shape the public are defined at the horizontal level. Vertically, the categories from Beckert’s (2010) social forces are placed. We also list five categories for each social force that affects the public’s shaping process (Stojcevski & Valic, 2022). The selection of categories is also based on the long-term theoretical and practical experience of the authors in communication with the public.

The focus group aims to “elicit data from small groups of people on the meanings, processes and normative understandings behind group assessments that are unlikely to be statistically applied to a general population” (Stewart & Williams, 2015). To answer the research question, we decided to use the focus group method in the countries of Southeast Europe. Focus groups capitalize as a communication tool (Moore et al., 2015). In this way, “the advantages of technology and the overcoming of geographical distances and other technical obstacles were used” (Stewart & Williams, 2015). We used the method of synchronous online focus groups (Lewis & Muzzy, 2020), where communication took place live at the same time and where all actors from one country debated a certain topic.

We establish real oral communication due to the common simultaneous presence of all participants. Due to COVID-19, we conducted online focus groups in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia in 2022. The focus groups in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro were moderated by the same person in Serbian. In contrast, another person in the Macedonian language moderated the focus group in North Macedonia.

The moderator asked the participants already defined orientational questions. In the focus groups, the theoretical and practical experience of the participants in effective communication and shaping the public was important. Representatives of both genders with different theoretical and practical experiences and from different formal actors (previously defined in eight categories) participated in the focus groups. The focus of the groups is the various representatives of the form of the features. Five respondents from Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro participated, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia had four respondents each. A total of 28 participants were from six countries. Six to eight agent-communicators were invited to participate in each country.

Each respondent in the focus group had training for the correct and coordinated use of these instruments—an assessment tool with several questions about social forces containing various defined categories for each social force ([Appendix A](#)). The values from the defined assessment tool were entered. All participants signed a consent to participate in the research and were informed that the results of this focus group would be published publicly in a scientific article. Each participant in the focus groups was selected according to the following criteria:

1. Represents the most effective actor in communication with the public in his social field.
2. This position of the “most effective” actor implies effectiveness in shaping the public based on the communication process.
3. Knows how to communicate, debate and use technology to participate in focus groups.
4. He is a moral and ethical representative of the group who respects the laws of the state and the rules of the group he represents.
5. Each of them is a representative of a formal actor in the social field.
6. Has the opportunity, desire and time to participate in implementing the focus group.

In this way, the article’s authors abstracted the possibility of influencing the selection of participants in the focus groups. Experts-communicators were selected from various organizations and institutions, with the

Table 1. Key dimensions with the categories of formal actors and the components of social institutions, social networks, and cognitive frames (Authors' own work, 2024)

Category	Components
Formal actors	State institutions, political parties, business communities, international community, academic community, non-governmental organizations, communication agencies, and media
Social institutions	Language, value of information, rules of communication, literacy, and leadership
Social networks	Leader structure, media as a system, communication agencies as a system, social capital, and group position
Cognitive frame	Perception, knowledge, understanding, confidence, and behavior

help of the European public relations agency Chapter 4 network EU and with the support of the School of Advanced Social Studies Nova Gorica (SASS), Slovenia. The authors of the paper did not participate in selecting respondents; instead, this was done by experts from the communication agency that has offices in all the stated countries where the research was conducted, except in Slovenia. Therefore, the selection of participants in Slovenia was carried out by individuals from SASS based on the six criteria previously mentioned. In this way, the potential for direct influence by the researchers in selecting respondents was avoided to achieve the neutrality criterion. Additionally, the selection of research participants was random in the sense of respondent selection, based on the principle of recommendation and mutual recognition of participants.

Each session was recorded and analyzed. Participants initially received an email outlining technical details, topics for debate, rules, moderator introduction, and participation guidelines. Following the focus group discussions, we transcribed the records, and transcriptions were analyzed through code as signatures and categorizations. We refined the categories iteratively, discussing and revising the findings to verify the validity and reliability of the research. In this sense, we followed the approach outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). The categories for analysis encompassed several key dimensions, including formal actors and the components of social institutions, social networks, and cognitive frames, which are presented in [Table 1](#).

FINDINGS

As presented in the introduction, this research delves into understanding how social forces, networks, cognitive frames, and institutions shape the public as a social entity in Southeast Europe through communication-based on respondents' insights. It employs a multi-level approach to scrutinize the role of organizations within society, particularly within (in)formal networks. The findings below are presented as descriptive narratives and respond to the research question, which elaborates on the views, strengths, and shortcomings of social forces shaping communication with public opinion.

Social Networks as Factors for Shaping the Public

Respondents emphasized that an organization's societal position is influenced by multiple forces, such as economic power, political connections, and expertise, rather than a singular factor. These elements collectively determine an organization's standing and ability to influence public opinion. Leading societal positions are often tied to an organization's ability to control information transmission, which shapes communication trends and public perception.

While effective communication strategies are vital for maintaining a leading societal position, respondents highlighted the importance of cultivating relationships with media and other entities. Social capital, which encompasses trust and support from key stakeholders, is critical for fostering effective communication. This network-based approach allows organizations to reach and engage with the public more authentically.

The research explores variations in communication strategies across countries influenced by political institutions and media commercialization. Organizations adapt their approaches based on their socio-political environments, using political affiliations or proprietary media channels. Participation in informal networks provides benefits such as information sharing, credibility building, and peer learning, which enhance organizational effectiveness.

Respondents stressed the necessity of continuously nurturing communication with the target public. Organizations may establish PR departments or hire external agencies to refine their strategies. While professional agencies offer expertise and resources, financial constraints and internal capabilities often influence whether organizations seek external assistance. However, the internal structure of organizations significantly affects their communication strategies. Organizational size, financial resources, and management awareness shape their communication approaches. Two distinct structures emerged:

1. Hierarchically determined structure, characterized by clear rules and designated representatives, ensuring message consistency and control and
2. Flexible or loose structure which assigns communicators based on expertise and event relevance, leveraging informal networks and personal connections.

Respondents recognized the media's dual role as a conduit for information dissemination and a potential source of reputational risk. Media independence is a concern, especially in regions where media manipulation is prevalent. Dependence on advertising revenue, ownership structures, and political pressures challenge editorial impartiality, with some organizations experiencing media blackmail to avoid negative coverage. For instance, the problem of media independence, where financial ties can lead to biased reporting, notes organizations being coerced into advertising to avoid negative coverage, as some of the respondents stated:

"There is a situation where the media, knowingly, when they hear that a company is investing a lot in advertising, creates a crisis. They place bets on the front page, and in this way, they encourage companies to advertise with them. Some companies agree to this, some naturally don't". (SRBBIZ)

"As far as the business community is concerned, there is a racketeering system in some cases. Certain media, especially portals (many do not deserve the title web portals), approach the biggest companies (top 100) to send requests for advertisements and racketeer them. There is no rule; there is no law that they are responsible if they tell a certain falsehood to a company that did not accept cooperation to finance them". (MAKMED)

Despite these challenges, social networks are increasingly used to complement traditional media. Social networks facilitate direct communication and interaction with the public, offering autonomy and immediacy. However, they lack the credibility of traditional media and are prone to misinformation. Balancing communication strategies between traditional media and social networks is crucial for optimizing effectiveness in the evolving media landscape.

Cognitive Frames as Factors for Shaping the Public

The focus groups shed light on how cognitive frames, entrenched in institutional norms and prior relationships, shape public perception in Southeast Europe through communication. Respondents assimilate new information into existing cognitive frameworks, selectively incorporating or dismissing ideas based on prior beliefs. Understanding public perception is paramount for organizations, as it informs communication strategies. However, the authenticity of public perception, influenced by credible sources, poses a challenge.

Organizations recognize the role of cognitive frameworks in shaping public perception and tailor communication strategies accordingly. Despite research efforts, complete authenticity in public perception remains elusive due to inherent biases. Nonetheless, organizations strive to influence public perception through customized messaging and strategies.

Media illiteracy among the public challenges communication effectiveness, leading to superficial understanding and misinformation. Organizations mitigate this by simplifying information and ensuring authenticity in their communication, while mutual understanding between organizations and the public is pivotal for effective communication. In this respect organizations adapt messages based on public feedback, emphasizing two-way communication and continuous engagement. As stated by one of the respondents:

One of the most important social factors of the cognitive frames is trust-building between organizations and the public, which is a gradual process dependent on transparency, honesty, and responsiveness. Trust, once lost, requires substantial effort to regain, necessitating transparency and responsibility.

The influence of actors and information in the social field shapes public behavior, with arguments holding more sway than source cues. Social media's rise has democratized influence and led to insincerity and information overload. For example, one of the respondents said:

"We have to take this with a grain of salt because I'm not sure how many people are honest in the polls; there's nothing to be done. They would beautify reality. Human DNA is that you always want to make things a little better". (BIHBIZ)

Respondents wield varying degrees of influence on the public, with societal institutions and leadership positions exerting significant impact. Social networks amplify organizational influence, albeit with short-term effects and the need for repeated messaging.

Certain societal organizations, such as churches and political parties, wield considerable influence, ideally championing ethical principles for societal betterment. However, role reversals often occur, with NGOs assuming responsibility in critical discourses.

Clear ethical principles guide organizations in communication with the public, ensuring responsible engagement on societal issues. Striving for impactful communication while upholding ethical standards remains paramount for organizations seeking to shape public perception effectively.

Social Institutions as Factors for Shaping the Public

Participants from all Southeast European countries recognize the influence of language as a social institution in shaping the public. Language facilitates access to existing knowledge, enables goal setting and accomplishment, and helps understand and communicate complex social relationships. Rabiah (2018) suggests adapting language to the public's needs and communication channels is crucial for effective message transmission. Clear and simple language enhances understanding and acceptance, making it easier for institutions to shape public opinion.

Participants agree that the content should be clear and "keep it simple" (Thomas & Turner, 1994), affecting understanding and acceptance. Consequently, the use of language needs to be adapted when communicating with the public. This makes the shaping of the public less intensive for the institutions. The agent-communicator should create a synergy between adapting the language and improving its quality to achieve the desired effect in shaping the public.

The value of information significantly impacts public opinion formation. According to Eppler (2006a), information sources' credibility and competence determine the information's value. Respondents from Southeast European countries identified several factors influencing the value of information, including its context, uniqueness, synchronicity with public expectations, and power to create societal change. Accurate, relevant, and frequently repeated information is more likely to shape public opinion effectively. One of the respondents determines the value of the information by whether the information is worth their time/view or payment. In this context, the "backyard" is mentioned, and the respondents explain:

"If I tell the students that they will not get a signature in the index and that they will drop a semester, they will all come. For them, it is valuable information that will remind them why to come to lectures. If that information is not important to them, I cannot change it. You have what is called a managed risk in crisis communication – which is called a Backyard". (BIHAKA)

Communication rules have a dual role. Some experts argue that clear rules facilitate communication by building trust and ensuring information accuracy, while others believe they can limit flexibility. In crises, strict rules may hinder quick responses, emphasizing the need for authoritative and expert communicators (Percy, 2018). A survey of respondents in our research identified several factors influencing information value, which vary by country: context, uniqueness, synchronicity with public expectations, and societal impact. Effective information must be accurate, relevant, objective, and capable of instigating change, with repetition enhancing its effectiveness and understanding (Eppler, 2006a). The credibility and traceability of information are crucial, with monitoring and evaluation matrices helping to assess its value. Media monitoring for reach, social relevance, and clear communication protocols ensure information is verified, truthful, and trustworthy, thus building public trust (Eppler, 2006b).

Agents-communicators state that communication rules can either facilitate or limit communication. Journalist Sally Percy (2018) lists five rules for effective communication: knowing your audience, timing, content relevance, distinguishing broadcasting from communication, and avoiding egocentrism. Communication rules improve communication levels, build good relationships, verify information, and maintain or enhance the communicator's reputation. However, strict rules can slow crisis response times, emphasizing the importance of authority and expertise in crisis communication.

Institutions often apply clear communication rules without adapting language to specific audience needs, leading to losing connection with certain publics, especially young people. Institutions must adapt their language and communication methods to reach young audiences, despite strict public communication rules (Percy, 2010).

In the countries participating in the research, it is noted that institutions apply clear communication rules for different audiences and do not adapt the use of language (because of the rules) to the specificities of the target audience. As a result, institutions lose contact or connection with their chosen public. This is particularly the case when communicating with young people who have specific communication characteristics. To reach this target public, they (especially the institutions) must change their language and how they communicate, but strict public communication rules constrain them. Young audiences respond better to short and mainly visual messages and the use of slang language. The specificity of the use of language is evident in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Macedonia. In these countries, the use of language in communicating with different national minorities is a political context. According to the Constitution, all official communications must be translated into all languages of the national minorities, and one language is used in everyday life, as it is understood and used by all national minorities living in the country in their communication with other national minorities.

The literacy of the communicator affects communication success and public understanding (Corporate Finance Institute [CFI], 2024). Literacy enhances the communicator's reputation and public trust. It involves adapting language semantics and messages to the target audience's literacy level. A literate communicator uses clear, simple, and precise messages for less literate audiences and demonstrates mastery of grammar, knowledge, and terminology.

Literacy also includes tactfulness, considering the context in which messages are crafted. A communicator's literacy and charismatic and rhetorical skills influence the public's reception of messages. The clarity, simplicity, and comprehension of the language/message are crucial for shaping the public (CFI, 2024).

Communicator literacy is crucial for shaping public opinion in Southeast Europe. Respondents highlighted that literate communicators could adapt language semantics and message content to the audience's literacy level, ensuring clarity and understanding. This enhances their reputation and builds trust. Tactfulness, grammar mastery, and the ability to communicate emotional content are key aspects of effective communication, demonstrating how cognitive frames are shaped through skilled communication practices.

A literate communicator demonstrates mastery of grammar, knowledge, and terminology, adapting these elements to suit the audience. This literacy enhances the communicator's reputation and builds public trust in their messages. Tactfulness, another aspect of communicator literacy, involves considering the context in which messages are crafted, displaying charismatic and rhetorical skills, and effectively communicating emotional content. Authenticity and the ability to exploit communication errors also play crucial roles.

The characteristics of the language or message are significant in shaping public opinion. Clear language ("keep it simple") and ensuring comprehension are essential for effective communication. These elements help communicators influence public understanding and behavior, aligning with the research question by demonstrating how cognitive frames are shaped through adept communication practices (Indeed, 2024).

Leadership significantly impacts communication effectiveness. Respondents noted that leaders influence public responsiveness through their positions, shaping information's perceived power. The value of information shared by leaders determines their impact on public opinion. Effective leaders use communication skills to build rapport and convince their audiences, aligning with the research question by showing how social forces shape the public through strategic leadership and communication. While the communicator's position alone does not determine public shaping, it influences the intensity of public

responsiveness, so the public is more likely to respond to information from a communicator with a leadership position. The value of the information shared by the communicator or organization determines the leadership position's influence on public opinion.

Respondents indicated that communication leadership is mainly related to public responsiveness. A higher response rate is observed when communication comes from a recognized leader, regardless of their power or opposition status. For instance, press conferences led by party leaders tend to receive more attention and response than those led by other party members.

Research Limitations and Directions

While the focus groups offer valuable insights into the dynamics of public perception shaping through communication in Southeast Europe, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research relies on qualitative data from focus groups, limiting its generalizability.

Secondly, the study focuses on Southeast Europe, potentially limiting its applicability to other regions. Additionally, the research predominantly explores the perspectives of organizational communicators, potentially overlooking the viewpoints of the broader public. Lastly, the study does not address the rapidly evolving landscape of communication technologies like social media platforms.

There is a clear necessity to extend the research to incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives, including those of the general public, which would enrich the analysis, and comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts would provide a broader understanding of the influence of social forces on public perception; but also could investigate the impact of emerging digital communication channels on public perception formation.

DISCUSSION

The results of the focus group in the six different countries confirmed that all defined categories in the three social forces (networks, cognitive frames, and institutions) influence the shaping of the public in the direction of supporting and defining the strategic communications carried out by the agents - communicators towards their targets publics. It is important to emphasize that all 15 categories were unanimously accepted by all participants in the focus groups as factors that influence the final effect of strategic communication in shaping the public in Southeast Europe.

Social forces in the social field do not act only in a straight line towards shaping the public. Still, there are invisible processes of crossing and/or parallel influence of certain categories of social institutions, social networks or cognitive frames towards the public. The focus group participants' responses confirmed horizontal and vertical overlaps in their statements. It should be emphasized that none of the participants in the focus groups denied, nor categorically rejected, any influence of social forces in shaping the public. The debate amongst all the agents—communicators was not about "if" but "how", which, of course, is directed in response to our research question, which reveals that these forces are interdependent and collectively influence how organizations interact with and shape the public.

Social networks, both formal and informal, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion. These networks leverage economic power, political connections, and expertise to establish an organization's standing and influence. Organizations that effectively utilize these networks can control the flow of information, building robust relationships with media and stakeholders. This network-based approach enhances the authenticity of public engagement and allows organizations to adapt their communication strategies to the socio-political environment of Southeast Europe. Respondents emphasized cultivating relationships with media and other entities to maintain a leading societal position. Social capital, encompassing trust and support from key stakeholders, is critical for fostering effective communication.

Cognitive frames, which include institutional norms and pre-existing beliefs, significantly impact public perception. The study highlights that organizations must tailor their messages to align with these cognitive frames to be effective. The public tends to filter new information through their existing beliefs, making trust and credibility vital components of communication. Transparency, honesty, and continuous engagement are essential for organizations to influence public perception positively. Respondents noted that understanding

public perception is paramount for informing communication strategies, even though achieving complete authenticity in public perception remains challenging due to inherent biases.

Social institutions, including language, information value, communication rules, literacy, and leadership, are pivotal in shaping public opinion. Effective communication requires using clear and simple language tailored to the audience's needs, ensuring that messages are understood and accepted. The credibility of information sources and adherence to communication rules enhance trust and reliability. Literacy and leadership further bolster the communicator's effectiveness, with literate and charismatic leaders impacting public responsiveness more significantly. Respondents from all Southeast European countries recognized the influence of language as a social institution, emphasizing the need for clear and adaptable communication to shape public opinion effectively.

In conclusion, organizations adept at comprehending and strategically harnessing these societal dynamics wield substantial influence over public perception and societal participation. Through expert management of these social forces, organizations possess the capacity to architect communication methodologies that deeply resonate with the populace, nurturing a society characterized by enhanced awareness and active engagement.

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APPENDIX A: ASSESSMENT TOOL AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Shaping the public in Southeast Europe through social field analysis

Based on Jens Beckert's social forces

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Questions of Social Institution (CONDITION)

1. In your opinion, how does the use of language influence the shaping of your public?

Additional questions

- 1.1. How does the use of the mother language of the targeted public influence its shaping?
- 1.2. How does (not)knowing the language of the public you communicate with influence your shaping process? How to bridge the gap, if any?
- 1.3. In your daily work in communicating with the public, do you also use different styles of language (modern language, administrative language, professional language, journalistic language or language of the media, the language of technology, ...)?
- 1.4. How does the context in which you interact influence the shaping of the public? How important do you think it is to give context to each piece of information?
- 1.5. How, in your opinion, does the use of technology influence the linguistic communication of the public?

2. In your opinion, in what way does the value of information influence the shaping of your public?

Additional questions

- 2.1. How do you, in your daily work, evaluate the value of the information you provide to the public?
- 2.2. How do you check and confirm the accuracy, relevance, precision, perfection of the information in your organization that you need to convey to the public?
- 2.3. How much does frequent communication with a certain public influence its acceptance that you as a communicator convey accurate and valuable information?
- 2.4. How do you, in your day-to-day work, know when it's time to pass on some form of information to the public?
- 2.5. How does the public react if a certain organization places information that is not valuable, is not accurate, is not relevant, is not timely?

3. How do your organization's communication rules influence shaping the public?

Additional questions

- 3.1. In your opinion, are there any rules of communication in your organization when addressing the public? How do these rules influence your communication with the public?

- 3.2. Do the communication rules set by your organization limit or improve the level of communication with the public in terms of shaping it?
- 3.3. How do communication rules make communication with the public easier?
- 3.4. How do the different ways and possibilities of communication influence the communication rules set by your organization?
- 3.5. How does your organization adapt its communication rules to the reactions of the public you interact with?

4. How does a communicator's literacy facilitate communication with the public?

Additional questions

- 4.1. How do you, as the person in charge of communicating with the public, know the level of literacy of your public with which you communicate?
 - 4.2. In what way does your organization contribute to the literacy of its public?
 - 4.3. Why is it important for the public to be literate about the work of your organization?
 - 4.4. Does the level of literacy of the public presuppose an easier way of accepting your information through communication?
 - 4.5. What kind of public, in terms of literacy, do you think is easier to communicate with and why?
- 5. How does the group's leadership position influences the process of communicating with the public?**

Additional questions

- 5.1. Do you know the position of your organization in the system in which you interact with a certain public? How do you determine it?
- 5.2. How important do you think your organization's position is in communicating with the public?
- 5.3. How do you, as an agent-communicator, fight for your organization to get or maintain a leadership position?
- 5.4. Does your organization's leadership position influence (would influence) your communication with the public? And if so, in what way?
- 5.5. Is there an unfair "battle" from your competition in communicating with your public?

Questions of Social Networks (CONDITION)

6. How does the structure of your organization in the network of the same organizations influence your communication with the public?

Additional questions

- 6.1. Does your organization has a built structure for defining the information that will communicate with the public?
- 6.2. What do you do to be the first to place certain information to the public, i.e. to define the "information game"?
- 6.3. How does an organization's leadership position strengthen its informal information-sharing network?
- 6.4. Do you happen to be challenged by other competing organizations in the communication with the public on a particular topic?
- 6.5. Is the public ever the first to start communicating with your organization? How do you accept such initiatives?

7. How does the media help your organization with sharing information with the public?

Additional questions

- 7.1. Do you use the media as your network for sharing information with the public?
- 7.2. In your opinion, how do the media help in your communication with the public?
- 7.3. Can the media make communication with the public more difficult? What do you do in such situations?

7.4. As an organization, have you faced a negative editorial policy from certain media? What do you do in such situations?

7.5. Can your organization communicate with the public without using the media? In which way?

8. How do professional communication agencies contribute to your communication with the public?

Additional questions

8.1. Does your organization use the services of professional agencies (public relations agencies, marketing agencies, advertising agencies, event agencies) in communicating with the public?

8.2. If you cooperate, in what way do these organizations help your organization in communicating with the public?

8.3. Can one communication agency combine all communication services (content preparation, advertising, event organization, social media), or is it better to work with different professional agencies for different services?

8.4. In your opinion, how do these agencies help in professionalizing the communication with the public?

8.5. Can a certain public be formed by your organization with quality without using the services of professional communication organizations?

9. How do organizational knowledge, skills, friends, and culture influence communication with the public?

Additional questions

9.1. Is your organization advertised in the media? Do you as an organization make promotional marketing materials and share them with the public? If so, why?

9.2. 2. In your opinion, should the organization you work for "buy" space in the media to share its information with the public? Or is the organization a brand and the media "accept" the information for free?

9.3. Have you had a problem sharing information in media with which your organization does not cooperate on a commercial basis?

9.4. How do you think the organization you work for can share information without having to pay for its sharing?

9.5. Has any information happened to be placed in the public without paying for it, thanks to your professional processing through knowledge, your experience, knowing certain journalists, knowledge of other organizations?

10. How does the organization's position in the network influence communication with the public?

Additional questions

10.1. In your opinion, does the organization you work for have the deserved position in the group of the same organizations (organizations of the same provenance)?

10.2. Is there a connection between the position of the organization in the system and its cooperation with other organizations?

10.3. Does your organization's position in the system make your cooperation with other organizations and institutions in the system easier or more difficult?

10.4. How does the organization's position in the system influence your professional position in communicating with the public? Is there a connection between the positions of the agent-communicator and the organization he works for?

10.5. In your opinion, is it possible for an agent-communicator / team with poor professional qualities to make it difficult for an organization to position itself in communication with the public? Or vice versa?

Questions of the Cognitive Frame (CONDITION)

11. How does the knowledge of the public perception of a certain issue influence the communication of the organization with the specific public?

Additional questions

- 11.1. How important is it for the communicating agent and the organization to know the public perception of a particular issue? Why?
- 11.2. How do you and your organization perceive public perception?
- 11.3. Have you ever communicated with a certain public without knowing its perception of the issue you are communicating with? Explain ...
- 11.4. How does your organization gain the trust of the public? Does the public believe the information provided by your organization?
- 11.5. How is knowing the perception of the public help you in communicating with that public?

12. How does knowledge influence the communication process between the organization and the public?

Additional questions

- 12.1. How does the public check if your organization places accurate and truthful information in mutual communication?
- 12.2. In your opinion, are there organizations that do not know how to communicate with the public?
- 12.3. How does your organization perceive the level of public knowledge of the issue you want to communicate with that public?
- 12.4. Has it happened, in your experience, that the public, due to ignorance, misinterprets certain information that you have forwarded? What do you do in such situations?
- 12.5. How do you educate the public about the issues your organization communicates with that public?

13. How does the understanding between the organization and the public influence their mutual communication?

Additional questions

- 13.1. In your opinion, how important is the organization to understand the public in mutual communication?
- 13.2. Do you know of any organization that has failed to understand the public it communicates with? Do you have your personal experience?
- 13.3. How does knowledge of perception and public knowledge influence the process of understanding between the public and your organization?
- 13.4. How does your organization treat the "others' perspective" on a particular issue? In general, when communicating with the public, does it mean that they understand a certain issue?
- 13.5. How does your organization "listen" to the public / its reaction and involve it in its process of return communication?

14. How does trust influence the mutual communication of the organization and the public?

Additional questions

- 14.1. How do you estimate and evaluate the level of public trust in your organization?
- 14.2. In your opinion, what is the reason for the mutual trust of your organization and the public - the long-term experience, the placement of accurate and quality information, the trust that the public has in the management of the organization or ...?
- 14.3. How does the public's trust in the agent-communicator influence its trust in the organization? Is there a certain interdependence?
- 14.4. How does lack of trust in the organization influence the process of mutual communication?
- 14.5. In what ways can the organization regain lost public trust?

15. How does your organization influence the behavior of the public towards a particular issue?

Additional questions

- 15.1. Do organizations have a moral and ethical basis to influence public behavior in a certain way?
- 15.2. In your opinion, does your organization have the capacity to influence public behavior on a particular issue?
- 15.3. What does your organization do to influence public behavior as it expects?
- 15.4. Does the leadership position of a particular organization influence the behavior of the public more than other organizations?
- 15.5. Have you ever participated in communication with the public to help it choose when it was in a dilemma about a particular issue? Explain ...

ADDITIONAL QUESTION

Question of Communications (OUTCOME)

- 1. In your opinion, does the way of communication between your organization and other organizations influence the shaping of the public?**

Additional questions

- 1.1. How important is communication in the daily functioning of your organization?
 - 1.2. Do you, and how do you communicate with other organizations on behalf of your organization?
 - 1.3. Compared to other organizations, how do you evaluate the level of external communication of the organization in which you work?
 - 1.4. On what does your organization's communication with other organizations in the system depend on?
 - 1.5. How does communication influence the creation of changes/dynamics in your environment and society?
- 2. In what way does the cooperation between organizations from the same branch influence the overall shaping of the public on a certain issue?**

Additional questions

- 2.1. In your experience, does the organization in which you work cooperate with other organizations in the same industry?
 - 2.2. Does your organization's communication depend on other organizations communicating with the public?
 - 2.3. Are there situations when another organization from the same branch has helped your organization's communication with the public?
 - 2.4. How important is it for organizations in the same branch to collaborate with each other in shaping the public?
 - 2.5. Is the influence of mutual performance more influential in shaping the public compared to the individual communication of each organization?
- 3. In your opinion, does the quality of communication depends on who communicates with the public on behalf of a particular organization?**

Additional questions

- 3.1. Is there a communication team in your organization? If yes, who participates in that team?
- 3.2. Who usually communicates with the public - the head of the organization or you as a professional communicator? And why?
- 3.3. How do you build the information (key messages) that you will communicate with the public - independently, in collaboration with the management team, in collaboration with the communication team, or?

- 3.4. How do you most often communicate with the public - through the media, organization of public events, organization of media events, direct meetings, meetings through the so-called brand ambassadors, preparation of various promotional materials, and/or other means of communication?
- 3.5. Do you communicate with the public continuously (daily), do you communicate as needed (on your part) or at the request of the public (seek answers to certain questions)? Do you have a strategic document for communicating with the public?
4. **Does and how does the organization educate you as an agent-communicator and the management for communication with external publics?**

Additional questions

- 4.1. Does your organization provide various ways of further education, improvement of your professional training in the segment of communications for you and/or the communication team?
- 4.2. How much do you personally, informally, spend on education in the field of communication?
- 4.3. Do you communicate with other fellow agents - communicators in order to exchange knowledge, views, opinions, information?
- 4.4. How much does formal education help you in your daily work of communicating with the public?
- 4.5. How does your experience as a communicator help you in your work with the public?
5. **In what way do professional agents-communicators assist the organization in communicating with the public?**

Additional questions

- 5.1. Does the organization's communication with its public depend on professional agents-communicators? Explain ...
- 5.2. How do professional agents-communicators help the organization communicate with its public?
- 5.3. How do your knowledge, skills, friendships, culture influence the level of communication of the organization with the public?
- 5.4. Does your organization set aside money to provide better communication with the public?
- 5.5. In your opinion, should an organization that has professional agents-communicators also cooperate with external professional communication organizations in order to achieve better performance in communicating with its public?

