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## SHAPING THE PUBLIC IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: SOCIAL FIELD ANALYSIS\*\* FUZZY SET METHOD

*Abstract.* Communication is key to social interaction and people's socialisation. The interaction between people and institutions is based on strategic communication as a vital component for the survival of society. This strategic communication is used by agent-communicators on behalf of formal organisations, and intended for their target public. Moreover, every strategic communication is affected by invisible social forces (institutions, networks, cognitive frames), which 'manage' the process of communication with the public. We use the SOFIA approach to provide an analytical model of influence of the social forces during the shaping of the public. The aim is to combine theoretical and practical approaches of Communication and Social Field Theory. Further, using qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), the causal complexity of these relationships is examined, taking account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for particular outcomes to occur. Institutions and networks are necessary conditions, yet neither meets the criteria for sufficiency. However, the absence of these conditions does not necessarily indicate the absence of communication. Exploring the combinations of necessary conditions for communication reveals complexities such as the interaction between institutions, networks and cognitive frames. The absence of certain social forces, together with the presence of other forces, emerges as a relevant condition for communication. Accordingly, the fact that institutions in the social field exist is not all that is important, but also that they communicate and create networks of interactions for the public's better understanding. The strategic communication framework, navigated by the invisible social forces, actually improves the ability to shape the public in the desired direction.

**Keywords:** social institutions, social networks, cognitive frames, fuzzy set analysis.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sociology is deeply interested in the study of communication, which is a fundamental aspect of human life and society. It is the foundation of social interaction and plays a crucial role in the processes of primary and secondary socialisation. Sociology is considered as a key component of various social institutions such as education, politics and religion. Moreover, it is linked with the issues of power and inequality, thus making it an integral part of society. Cultural symbols, language, media and discourses cannot be studied without referring to communication. The interconnected processes of globalisation and technological revolutions have increased communicative abilities and the contribution made by communication to immense social changes.

The study of communication hence provides insights into social structures, relationships, and the dynamics shaping societies. It is therefore not surprising that communication appears in the work of some of the most important authors in sociology, such as: George Herbert Mead and his symbolic interactionism, emphasising the role of symbols and gestures in communication; Talcott Parsons and structural functionalism, focused on the role of communication in maintaining social order; Jurgen Habermas and his theory of communicative action; Stuart Hall and his exploration of how communication shapes and reflects cultural identities; Mark Granovetter and his work concentrated on the strength of weak ties in social networks and the role of communication in information diffusion; Erving Goffman and a dramaturgical approach that views social interaction as a form of performance; Marshall McLuhan, in his work on the impact of media on society; and Jean Baudrillard, who explored the hyperreality created by mass media and communication technologies.

On top of these foundational contributions to theoretical sociology, we should acknowledge the attempts made in sociology to solve societal problems, successfully or not (Turner 2019), taking the form of public sociology (Burawoy 2005), clinical sociology (Fritz 2021), community engaged sociology (Smith 2022), dialogical sociology (Hanafi 2024) etc., and with any of these, communication is an important aspect of exploration and practice.

The research presented in this article seeks to define the ways and categories of social forces with which agents (communicators) are shaping public opinion on behalf of formal actors. Namely, this is the way that Beckert's social forces – social institutions, the social network and knowledge frames – influence the shaping of reality. The social field's complexity from the aspect of communication is obvious. German sociologist Beckert (2010) explains that social forces are, in fact, an accelerator of the dynamics and economic behaviour of the actors (Beckert 2010). In our work, the dynamics in the social field among social actors creates the process of communication and the intertwined intentions to shape the public according to the communication goals of a formal actor in the social field.

The sharing of information is not a simple process of exchange as it includes a complex set of activities for coding, decoding and interpreting information

(McLuhan and Lapham 1994). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these processes are simplified and sometimes complicated by the creation and use of various technological assets, and globalisation. The establishing of digital platforms and social media has enabled a new communication landscape; namely, new communication channels. Considerable amounts of mis- or wrong information often pass through these channels, often leading to erroneous communication between the agent (communicator) and the public. This raises the question of the role of the agent-communicator and the possibility of certain categories of social forces being misused that then influence the social field in the direction of wrongly shaping the public.

Strategic communications include all aspects of communication with a view to provide for the existence or prosperity of a formal actor in the social field. This term assumes deliberate communication from a formal actor, via the agent-communicator, in order to realise given goals. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an entity to engage in conversations of strategic value for its goals (Zefrass et al. 2018). Entities here refers to different types of organisations, e.g., corporations, government or non-profit establishments, various social movements, and well-known individuals. Accordingly, the influence of the agent on the personal level, transcends to the organisational level, from the level of a formal actor aware that through communication and the use of social forces it is shaping the public and thereby the actor's defined strategic communication goals are accomplished.

Therefore, strategic communication, as defined by Zefrass et al. (2020), is imperative for reaching the goals of communication by shaping the public. In such communication, the agent-communicator has a special role that distinguishes them from other message creators like writers or scientists (Carey 1965): to create key messages for communication that will be separated from their own thoughts and perceptions. By examining the communication process in the social field (while considering certain communication theories and concepts), in this article the authors attempt to reveal the role of the social forces influencing the communication process. In this process, the presence and absence of strategic communication profoundly influences social structures and social dynamics.

Zefrass et al. (2018) refer to the debate on the new role of communication in companies as strategic and decisive, as opposed to the previous role of being tactical and supportive. According to these authors, organisations are defined by way of specific interests, particular structures, the realisation of processes, the organisational culture, and decision-making methods on the micro and macro levels.

Relying on their professional capacities, all agent-communicators follow an internal organisational process of creating information within the framework of the formal actor. This article defines an agent-communicator as a professional who: (1) speaks on behalf of the entire organisation; (2) acts in the social field

equipped with a set of information; and (3) strives to have an impact on shaping the public. In truth, the agent-communicator is a professional who controls the formal actor's internal information while also creating possibilities and ways to market the information and make it effective with respect to the public.

In the presented study, the authors stress the sociological characterisation of the multiple forces influencing the process of communicating for shaping the public. Namely, the communication process is impacted by several social forces (social institutions, social networks, cognitive frameworks) that define the formal actor's communicative performance. Thus, in this article we categorise the formal features found in Southeast European countries, while providing a comprehensive view of how the public is shaped via social forces – social institutions, social networks, and cognitive frameworks. In addition, the SOFIA approach (Roncevic et al. 2021) is used to provide an analytical model of the influence of social forces during the communication and the shaping of the public. The aim of the article is to combine the theoretical and practical approaches of Communication and Social Field Theory with Ragin's (2005) Fuzzy-Set Analysis. The mentioned approach facilitated the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the empirical research.

## THEORY AND CONCEPTS

In any given social field, one can find active formal actors that wish to establish and shape the relationship between themselves and the public. The notion that this relationship forms the basis for the dynamics of the social field is confirmed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), whereby every field is an arena in which formal actors are working to add value on their own. The relationship is established and maintained via communication realised by the formal actors through agent-communicators under the influence of Beckert's social forces, which are definitively in the centre of communication. Therefore, via communication the public receives information that creates motion, relations, competition, and shaping. The right to communication is a basic human right. The idea of communication as a basic human need is vital in the contemporary world where so much of the social interaction of a private and public nature is mediated technologically (Calabrese 2017). The public is shaped by the choice of information that is via the choice of opportunities. "The public is collection of people that have common interest for certain entity" (Tanta 2007). Assisted by technology, public communication is becoming more private and the framing of the public as a mass concept enables microtargeting and communication and/or manipulation. Splichal proposes the creation of a "public knowledge algorithm" as a way for researchers to detect techniques that manipulate public opinion (Splichal 2022).

In the social field, formal actors are structured with regard to five spirals that employ strategic communication to influence the public. Carayaniss et al. (2012) refer to the 'five-helix' model: State actors (state institutions and political parties)

– the political helix; the international community (embassies, institutions, organisations) – the international helix; the academic community (faculties, institutes, other educational institutions) – the educational helix; civil society (non-governmental organisations) – the public as a whole; and the business community (companies, including communication agencies and the media) – the economic helix.

Agent-communicators (Stojčevski 2024) define the participation of the following social institutions categories (language, value of information, rules of communication, literacy of the communicator, leadership) in the communication process for shaping the public. Participants in focus groups (FGs) accept that language has an influence on forming the public, although this influence is limited by language standards. However, agent-communicators from all countries agree that language should be adapted after identifying the public with whom it is to be communicated in terms of the manner of communication, the characteristics of the various target publics, the channels or media for communication and, of course, who is doing the communicating.

Language is the most common tool of communication. It plays a vital role in helping people build a bridge of relationships. At the same time, language acts as a destroyer of bridges of human relations because it separates people from each other (Ahmad 2019). In our interconnected world, language persists as a significant barrier to conveying messages clearly. Regarding the quality of language used by agent-communicators, focus group participants believe that the contents should be clear, easy to grasp, and simple to communicate. All of this should ensure synergy between adaptation and language quality, framed as it is between language norms and the reality of harnessing language as living matter.

When it comes to the value of information, agent-communicators from various countries in South-East Europe agree that the recipient determines its value. Simultaneously, the agent-communicator should consider the possibility of evaluating the information's value by eliminating potential difficulties with verifying it, and establishing a matrix for verifying the source and its competence (trust). Three challenges are entailed in obtaining reliable information from institutions and organisations. First, there is no central place where all relevant information is available. Second, the proper management of information is clearly lacking (Bessick 2016). Third, there are insufficient policies in place. Considering these challenges, the worth of information reflects its correctness, the intensity of its reach (effects, changes), information synthesis, and the quantity of repetition of the same information. This reflects a fundamental principle that communicators should take responsibility for evaluating the information they disseminate and ensure transparency and credibility to build trust with their audiences.

The agent-communicator's experience with the public in reality produces a sense that specific information has a value as well as the possibility of avoiding and recognising attempts at manipulation. Differing attitudes and experiences of communication norms are held by FG participants, with views ranging from

“rules facilitate” to “rules limit”. Scientists define various rules for communication, which sometimes can prove challenging for the agent-communicator. It is nevertheless important that every agent-communicator determines communication rules they will respect so as to assure that the strategic communication is effective. Good communication is not an exact science (Percy 2018). The structuredness, as in the flexibility, of the rules in communication is affected by the type and development of the sector or organisation, the market, the topic, and urgency of its communication, together with knowledge about the public with whom it is to be communicated. An improved quality of communication between agent-communicator and the public fosters excellent relations and trust, but only if the communication norms are regularly checked and tested. In practice, such guidelines aid with learning about the information source, along with its legitimacy and reputation as a source that publishes information in line with the stated criteria.

How literate the agent-communicator is another important factor for success with communication, education, and understanding the public. If language is the key to understanding the world, then literacy is the doorway to effective communication. Literacy impacts the agent’s reputation by either building or confirming his trust. In contrast, a lack of knowledge leads to sensationalism in communication, which limits the ability to shape the audience. “Communication and language skills are key to literacy, but many children can struggle” (Wood 2017). The formal actor’s leadership role, which frames the agent-communicator’s operations, also influences the moulding of the public. Specifically, because the leader is the first to have the opportunity to market (convey) information to the public, his/her leadership position determines the information’s potency. “Leadership cannot be separated from communication; research reveals organizational leaders spend 70%-80% of their time communicating” (Wajcman & Rose, 2011). The leader’s position influences both the public’s reaction (response) and its readiness to be controlled by the formal actor. Agent-communicators, on the other hand, agree that communication produces a leadership role. They argue that the position is not important, and instead the truth and attractiveness of the information given to the leader are, coupled with his/her quality, expertise, reputation, and public trust.

Agent-communicators have also evaluated the participation of social networks (such as the leadership structure of a formal agent in the social field, media as a system, communication agencies as a system, the social capital held by the formal actor, and group position). The organisation’s orientation as a social network category already defines the mutual interweaving and dependency in the process of moulding the public. Leadership is not a place, but a process (Kouzes and Posner 2007). The focus group participants (representatives of media, academia, political parties, international institution and a few others – who were part of focus group = as representatives of different agent-communicators) holding a leadership position of a social institution claim that factors influencing the

formal actor's positioning are the communicator's expertise, the quality of the information, trust in the agent and the formal actor, the actor's reputation, activity, size, and budgeted funding. The formal actor's ability to inform the audience is a positive component of their positioning, while the ongoing struggle for position (maintaining or gaining a higher position in the social field) is a negative aspect. Of course, success in shaping the public depends on the formal actor's internal structure (placement) for the realisation of internal and external communication. Quality communication with the public is possible with a clear framework and a set of communication guidelines. That is, the lack of a clear structure, and spontaneous and flexible communication, leads to an inability to recognise the value of particular information, difficulty with identifying the agent-communicator, their inexperience, and the low level of culture in the organisation, uncertainty, and low-quality information filtration. According to the focus group respondents, the structure of communication with the public is determined by the content of the material. The skill of the agent-communicator and their colleagues, in comparison, allows considerable freedom in the internal structure. Given that the organised method influences the production of information, its impact on the public, the speed and quality with which information is built, its efficacy, the building of trust and cooperation with the public etc., the primary way to persuade or affect people is via communication (Kolzow 2014).

The theory the media environment diverges from the reality. Changes are made in the media's capital independence and the commercialisation of information, along with the effect of populism and sensationalism in public communication and tabloid journalism. The etymological sense of the media should not be neglected, which in addition to its historical and technological genesis, according to Williams (1983), is capitalist and developed when media became profitable enterprises – at once, a means of making money and a means of communication. Luhman (2000) described the importance of the media as a system that mass media are the primary source of our understanding about our own society and the world at large. The media's role in shaping the public is also influenced by public relations specialists who promote their own information, the proliferation of social media, the shortage of professional journalists, and the academic community's apathy regarding the production of excellent media messaging. In fact, the media does not tell us what and how to think because the public receives the messages with a certain criticality. Still, their function is vital in agenda-setting and concentrating public interest on chosen topics (Happer and Philo 2013).

In contrast, the role of communication agencies is determined by the placing of various points of view on specific themes. Formal actors provide credibility for the process of moulding the public via collaboration with professional communication firms. They thus advocate the formation of internal teams to facilitate communication between the formal actors and professional agencies involved in shaping the public. There are substantive reasons for public relations to shape and manipulate public opinion (Izryadnov 2023). Of course, social

networks round them off with the formal actor's social capital. "Social capital" is a prerequisite for the survival of all social areas (Furst et al. 2001). According to Focus Group participants, creating this type of capital is a long-term process that allows for cooperation to be strengthened, as well as own 'media' and 'social networks' for communication, interesting and quality information to communicate with the public via media, and content able to be marketed to the public (with or without payment) to be created.

Modifying a public image of an organization requires an extensive study to be performed, one that involves analysis of the current situation, which will pool together all the facts and, in a sense, describe how members of the organisation breathe'. Such analysis leads to a better understanding of the public's view on a given topic of interest, and so that it may be approached to re-create that view. According to research participants, shaping (changing) the public's perspective is a challenging process determined by the defined target-oriented communication with the public, a correct definition of reality, and the preparations made for the communication.

The limited capacity of the human senses means that perceptions of reality are imprecise and the brain works things out after having stored information (Broadbent 1958). Without understanding the agent's perceptions, the communicator will merely be 'will stand still and improvising while shaping the audience. Aside from perception studies, the agent-communicator must be intimately familiar with a variety of procedures. For example, being media-literate and educating the public about the role of the media. It is only in this manner that information will not be superficial or misinterpreted, there will be no information overload, unprofessional comments, or disinformation. It should, in other words, be the result of streamlined information and communication operations. The agent-communicator must be intimately familiar review specific material before it is published.

Knowing the perception and knowledge of communication as a process adds to understanding of the general public, which entails coexisting with the general public, receiving feedback, and developing a correct communication model. The agent-communicator will provide multiple methods for 'listening' to the public through continuous communication, relationship-building, and understanding since they are aware that misunderstanding with the public can damage a reputation. Understanding of the public can help to cause a shift in the public's perception of given events, organisations, individuals etc.

Understanding the different aspects of reality assists with establishing relationships, leading the public to evaluate the previously held knowledge and revise it in the direction of a fuller understanding of reality (Soltirovic and McLeod 2004). Understanding also builds trust between the agent-communicator (the formal actor) and the general public. Although trust is difficult to establish, it is extremely easy to destroy. Building trust is a long-term and patience-demanding process (Kiousis 2001), one based on constant research and reputation

maintenance, flexibility in reacting to changes in beliefs, sensitivity to others, the creation of reasonable information, honesty, consistency, the fulfilment of promises, expertise, responsibility, and providing accurate and verified information. The formal actor, on the other side, can rebuild audience confidence by engaging in rebranding processes, admitting fault, accepting responsibility for any mistakes made, rapidly responding to blunders, and taking a transparent and creative communication approach. All of this, most of the time, can result in public behaviour being changed (shaped) by allowing organised formal actors at leadership positions to affect such confidence.

### **OPERATIONALISATION, METHODOLOGY, AND DATA COLLECTION**

In order to answer the research question “How can social forces (social institutions, social networks, cognitive frame) use communication to shape the public as a social field in Southeast Europe?”, we conducted research that included agent-communicators from six countries in Southeast Europe. The agent-communicators who participated in the research were selected according to several criteria: success as an actor in communication with the public in the social field; knowledge concerning how to communicate; having moral and ethical standards to represent a group; respecting the laws and rules of communication; being an individual representative of a certain group; and having the opportunity, desire and time to engage in the research.

In everyday experience, we build our knowledge of the general through knowledge of the specific. The data was collected through online focus groups. In these FGs, representatives of formal actors, namely, agent-communicators representing special formal groups answered questions from a questionnaire containing three sets and five questions for each separate variable: Social Institutions, Social Networks, and Cognitive Frames. Communications was identified as the outcome.

To answer the mentioned research question, we used Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) for several reasons. First, because our data set only consists of six cases (Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Croatia), thus we were unable to employ any mainstream statistical analysis. With the help of QCA, we tested the casual complexity of the relationship between the phenomena under study. The causal complexity may be seen as falling within the framework of necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of a certain outcome in the case of small-N situations (Schneider 2009; Rek et al. 2015). Finally, QCA also helps determine the presence or absence of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for a given outcome.

Using set theory and formal logic, each indicator has a membership ranging from 0 (non-membership) to 1 (full membership) (Ragin 2000, 2008). For example, if a case has a membership score of 0.3 for a certain indicator, we may say that it is more “out” than “in” for that indicator. Further, when there is a score of 0.9, in that case we can be certain that the membership is almost full.

The assignment of scores occurs via the process of calibration, for which the research relies on the theoretical framework along with software (Ragin 2000; Schneider 2009). It is important to stress that QCA encourages the use of a theoretical framework and empirical data to answer the research problem and the conditions (independent variables) leading to the selected outcome (dependent variable) (Mendel and Korjani 2012). This means that both the theory and the empirical data are in constant communication.

Within the analysis, the researcher relies on the fit parameter (consistency and coverage) to highlight the important conditions among a set of conditions that are necessary and/or sufficient for an outcome to occur (Ragin 2006; Goertz 2006; Schneider and Wagemann 2007 cited in Schneider 2009). Therefore, as Ragin (2008, 44) notes, consistency “gauges the degree to which the cases sharing a given combination of conditions agree in displaying the outcome in question. That is, consistency indicates how closely a perfect subset relation is approximated”. As such, like with the case of other statistical analyses, both consistency and coverage have a threshold that determines if a condition(s) is relevant for the outcome. As Wagemann and Schneider (2007) emphasise, the setting of this threshold depends on several aspects such as the number and knowledge of cases, the quality of the data, and the research design. Following this line of argument, in this study we set the threshold for consistency at 0.75, and that for coverage at 0.5, for a condition to be considered necessary and/or sufficient. As the mentioned authors state, this threshold is enough to secure causality from the perspective of the closeness of the approximation and the empirical relevance of the conditions.

The categorising of formal features into these eight areas (appearing in five categories) in six different Southeast European countries (Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosna and Hercegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia) provides a diverse professional view of the process of shaping the public through 3 social forces with 15 different categories. For each question, the agent-communicators in the FGs provided a narrative, an explanation and an attitude (qualitative description), and these results were used to define the groups. At the end of each question, following a debate, they agreed on a numerical common group expression. This numerical expression was only reached with complete complexity and acceptance by all group participants. In contrast to conventional crisp set theory that classifies data strictly as either belonging or not belonging to a set, Ragin’s fuzzy set theory accommodates varying degrees of membership within sets (Ragin 2000). This bivalent affiliation makes it impossible to include other inter-expressions, that is to say, to include other potential expressions in this space. All agent-communicators had to reach a consensus on each social force separately, in turn selecting one rating for each separate category. The theory of fuzzy sets was used to determine how and in which way language as a social institution is necessary for communication to shape the public in Southeast Europe. Apart from necessity, with this method it was determined how much

is enough to influence the public with the use of language, namely, the level of sufficiency to form a cause-and-effect relationship. The same principle of necessity and sufficiency was applied to the other social institutions we have already defined (value of information, rules of communication, literacy of the communicator, and leadership). Then, sufficiency and necessity were also used in social networks (leadership structure, media as a system, communication agencies as a system, social capital of the formal actor, and group position). The cognitive frameworks determined the necessity and sufficiency of five social forces: perceptions, knowledge, understanding, trust, and behaviour.

### ANALYSIS

Following the threshold set with regard to consistency and coverage, we observed that to have Communication it is necessary to have Institutions (see Table 1). In addition, Networks also met the minimum criteria and so they may also be considered to be a necessary condition. When it comes to sufficiency, none of the conditions met the set threshold. Still, we observed that the absence of the conditions does not constitute necessary or sufficient conditions for Communication.

*Table 1: NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS FOR THE PRESENCE OF COMMUNICATION*

	CONS.NEC	COV.NEC	CONS.SUF	COV.SUF
Institutions	<b>0.764</b>	<b>0.599</b>	0.599	0.764
Networks	<b>0.732</b>	<b>0.589</b>	0.589	0.732
Cognitive Frames	0.580	0.511	0.511	0.580
~ Institutions	0.576	0.641	0.641	0.576
~ Networks	0.609	0.654	0.654	0.609
~ Cognitive Frames	0.717	0.690	0.690	0.717

Source: The authors' own calculations.

At the same time, we tested the necessary and sufficient conditions, showing that at the moment we have an absence of Communication. This might offer us additional insights, especially when noting that the initial analysis only stressed two results. Following this line of argument, the absence of Institutions is a necessary condition for the absence of Communication. This result complements the results shown in Table 1.

*Table 2: NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS FOR THE ABSENCE OF COMMUNICATION*

	CONS.NEC	COV.NEC	CONS.SUF	COV.SUF
Institutions	0.576	0.641	0.641	0.576
Networks	0.609	0.654	0.654	0.609
Cognitive Frames	0.717	0.690	0.690	0.717
<b>~ Institutions</b>	<b>0.764</b>	<b>0.599</b>	0.599	0.764
~ Networks	0.732	0.589	0.589	0.732
~ Cognitive Frames	0.580	0.511	0.511	0.580

Source: Authors' own calculations.

If we look at the combination of necessary conditions for Communication (see Table 3), several interesting groups of conditions are worth highlighting. First, we can mention that the absence of Institutions with the presence of Networks is a necessary condition for the presence of Communication. Second, the absence of Institutions and Cognitive Frames was shown to be a relevant combination. Third, at the moment we do not have Networks and Cognitive Frames, which could constitute a necessary factor for Communication. Finally, the presence of Networks and the absence of Cognitive Frames is also considered as a condition for Communication. These results revealed that the phenomenon of Communication was more complex than we initially believed. In particular, these results are quite intriguing as they point to the absence of the other two social forces (Networks and Cognitive Frames), which in the initial analysis and individually did not meet the threshold.

*Table 3: THE NECESSARY COMBINATION OF CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNICATION*

	INCLN	RON	COVN
~ Institutions + Networks	0.946	0.348	0.541
~ Institutions + ~Cognitive Frames	0.804	0.733	0.687
~ Networks + ~ Cognitive Frames	0.804	0.765	0.714
Networks + ~ Cognitive Frames	0.946	0.322	0.532

Source: The authors' own calculations.

Moreover, when the focus is on the necessary conditions for the absence of Communication (see Table 4), we observed several combinations composed of both absent and present conditions. For example, we noticed that each condition is involved in a combination where it is either present or absent. Namely, such conditions are Institutions. In one case, we noted the absence of Institutions and presence Networks, the presence of Institutions and absence of Networks, and

lastly a combination between the absence of Institutions and absence of Networks that are seen as necessary for the absence of Communication.

*Table 4: THE NECESSARY COMBINATION OF CONDITIONS FOR THE ABSENCE OF COMMUNICATION*

	INCLN	RON	COVN
~ Institutions +~ Networks	0.762	0.669	0.679
~ Institutions + Networks	0.972	0.382	0.642
Institutions +~ Networks	1.000	0.428	0.672
~ Institutions +~ Cognitive Frames	0.762	0.601	0.637
~ Institutions + Cognitive Frames	0.972	0.382	0.642
Institutions +~ Cognitive Frames	1.000	0.536	0.717
~ Networks + Cognitive Frames	1.000	0.395	0.660
Networks +~ Cognitive Frames	1.000	0.504	0.703

Source: Authors' own calculations.

Finally, in the case of a sufficient combination of conditions for Communication, we can only refer to the case of Slovenia and note that for Communication it is sufficient to have Institutions, Networks, and the absence of Cognitive Frames. The unique interaction with the presence of social institutions and social networks, coupled with the absence of cognitive frameworks, is enough to explain the communication process.

*Table 5: A SUFFICIENT COMBINATION OF CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNICATION*

Institutions	Networks	Cognitive Frames	OUT	N	INCL	PRINT	CASES
1	1	0	1	1	1.000	1.000	SL
0	0	0	0	2	0.637	0.163	MG, NM
1	1	1	0	3	0.567	0.184	BH, CR, SR

Source: Authors' own calculations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Communication is a foundation for creating relationships between various stakeholders – formal actors in the social field. Social dynamics are created in this way, and the capacity for the strategic communication of various formal actors in the field is shown. If there is no strategic communication, there is a high probability of a communication process without effect or a communication that leads to confusion. With the help of strategically targeted communication, formal actors, via their agent-communicators, influence the shaping of the

public, in turn achieving their primary communication goals. The dynamics of the social field are established because each formal actor emits a different type of key message to the public and, subject to various factors (social categories) they have a certain effect on shaping the public. This study delves into the complex interplay of communication processes and the influence of social forces (social institutions, social networks, cognitive frames), using theoretical models to provide a comprehensive understanding of formation of the public in Southeast Europe (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia).

Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), the study examined the causal complexity of these relationships, considering the necessary and sufficient conditions for particular outcomes. Institutions and networks were identified as necessary conditions, and none met the sufficiency criteria. However, the absence of these conditions does not necessarily indicate the absence of communication. Exploring the combinations of necessary conditions for communication reveals complexities such as the interactions between institutions, networks, and knowledge frames. Interestingly, the absence of certain social forces, together with the presence of other forces, appears as a relevant condition for communication. For example, the absence of social institutions together with the presence of social networks is seen as a necessity for communication. Similarly, various combinations involving the absence or presence of institutions and networks were identified as necessary for the presence or absence of communication. These findings emphasise the complex nature of communication dynamics; namely, the interdependence between categories of social forces in the region.

These results permit us to offer several recommendations. For instance, formal actors within the social field should invest in developing adaptable communication strategies that account for the diversity of social forces at play. In line with this argument, stress should be placed not simply on the presence of institutions and networks but on their specific configurations and interactions as well. Tailored communication approaches must be grounded in the contextual realities of each country in Southeast Europe. By addressing the varying levels of institutional trust, network densities, and the influence of informal channels, different actors can significantly improve the effectiveness of public engagement efforts.

Nonetheless, this study should be seen as an initial attempt to explore the qualitative mechanisms behind the phenomenon of communication. Future research should focus on in-depth case studies to better understand how communicators navigate these complex configurations in real-time practice. It is particularly important to examine how the absence of formal institutions may be offset by the strength of informal networks in shaping public discourse as this could produce valuable insights into grassroots-level communication strategies.

In addition, a comparative longitudinal approach is needed to deepen understanding of how communication dynamics evolve in response to political,

economic or technological changes. Such studies could offer important insights into the resilience and adaptability of communication strategies over time. Ultimately, these findings would help formal actors more effectively anticipate and respond to shifts within the social field.

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## JAVNOST V JUGOVZHODNI EVROPI: ANALIZA MEHKIH MNOŽIC

**Povzetek.** *Komunikacija je ključna za družbeno interakcijo in socializacijo ljudi. Interakcija med ljudmi in institucijami temelji na strateški komunikaciji kot ključni komponenti za preživetje družbe. Slednjo uporabljajo agenti komunikatorji v imenu formalnih organizacij pri naslavljanju svoje ciljne javnosti. Na strateško komunikacijo poleg tega vplivajo nevidne družbene sile (institucije, omrežja in kognitivni okviri), ki »upravljajo« proces komunikacije z javnostjo. Da bi zagotovili analitični model vpliva družbenih sil pri oblikovanju javnosti, uporabljamo pristop SOFIA. Želimo namreč združiti teoretične in praktične pristope teorije komunikacije in socialnega polja, ki jih podpira analiza mehkih množic. Z uporabo kvalitativne primerjalne analize preučujemo tudi vzročno kompleksnost teh odnosov, pri čemer upoštevamo potrebne in zadostne pogoje za specifične rezultate. Institucije in omrežja predstavljajo potrebne pogoje, a ne prve ne druga ne izpolnjujejo meril zadostnosti. Vendar pa odsotnost teh pogojev ne pomeni nujno odsotnosti komunikacije. Raziskovanje kombinacij potrebnih pogojev za komunikacijo razkriva kompleksnosti, kot je interakcija med institucijami, omrežji in kognitivnimi okvirji. Odsotnost določenih družbenih sil se skupaj s prisotnostjo drugih izkaže kot pomemben pogoj za komunikacijo. Ni torej pomembno le, da institucije na socialnem področju obstajajo, ampak tudi, da komunicirajo in ustvarjajo mreže interakcij za boljše razumevanje z javnostjo. Strateški komunikacijski okvir, ki ga vodijo nevidne družbene sile, dejansko izboljšuje sposobnost oblikovanja javnosti v zeleno smer.*

**Ključni pojmi:** *socialne institucije, socialna omrežja, kognitivni okvirji, analiza za mehkih množic.*