Research Article

The tale of words and power: Institutional narratives in Southeast Europe

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The article examines how institutional frameworks influence communication strategies and public engagement across six countries in Southeastern Europe. Findings from focus group discussions reveal that formalized communication rules enhance credibility and consistency, but hinder adaptability, especially when engaging younger audiences who prefer informal and visual communication styles. Communicator literacy fosters clarity, trust, and audience connection, including adapting language and employing rhetorical and emotional intelligence. Leadership amplifies the perceived authority of institutional messages, increasing public responsiveness. Regional complexities, such as multilingual requirements for national minorities, highlight the tension between inclusivity and efficiency. Grounded in the social-fields-approach, the article emphasizes the interplay between institutional structures, sociocultural contexts, and public opinion formation. Institutions must adopt adaptive and inclusive strategies to effectively engage diverse publics and foster trust.

Keywords: media, communication, institutions, Southeast Europe, public opinion

INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by information, access and control over information are powerful tools that shape public opinion and societal dynamics (Pettigrew, 1972; Zhu & Hu, 2018). However, the pervasive spread of disinformation poses significant risks to social cohesion, as highlighted by the 2024 global risks perception survey by the World Economic Forum (2024). According to the survey by the World Economic Forum (2024), disinformation is expected to be central in shaping public discourse and elections in major economies. Recent studies have further crystallized the concept of "information disorders," distinguishing between misinformation (false but not intentionally harmful), disinformation (deliberately false and malicious), and misinformation (genuine information shared with the intent to harm), each requiring distinct institutional responses (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This dual nature of information–empowering and destabilizing– underscores the importance of understanding how institutional frameworks structure communication strategies and public engagement. The contemporary media ecosystem is characterized by "platformization", where social media algorithms dictate information visibility, often prioritizing engagement over truth and accelerating the spread of polarizing content (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). This environment challenges traditional institutions' monopoly on public discourse and necessitates a re-evaluation of their communication models.

Information dissemination today operates across a multilayered spectrum, from localized communication within small communities to global networks facilitated by technological advancements. These networks form the social backbone of an information-driven society, where the generation and management of information are pivotal to societal growth and transformation (Milutinović, 2022; Valič et al., 2023). The shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, as articulated by Bell (2001) in The Coming of Post-Industrial Society, underscores the way in which institutional frameworks have evolved in response to an era in which information is not just a resource, but a strategic tool for shaping public engagement, discourse, and social cohesion (Bell, 2001).

Given global challenges, this research focuses on Southeast Europe to address the central question: *How do institutional frameworks shape communication strategies and language use in regional public engagement?* By examining the historical, cultural, and institutional dynamics of this region, the study investigates how communication strategies are adapted to unique socio-political contexts and the evolving demands of public discourse.

The effort to shape public opinion is not a new phenomenon. From the Roman Empire's use of roads and forums to unify messaging (Ward-Perkins, 2005) to the printing press's disruption of information monopolies in the 15th century (Eisenstein, 2005; Mullett, 2023). These historical shifts, such as the Protestant Reformation, sparked by Martin Luther's 95 theses, demonstrate how communication technologies can empower competing voices and decentralize control over information (Mullett, 2023). By the 18th century, the French Revolution showcased the power of emerging media. Revolutionary pamphlets and newspapers became tools for challenging the monarchy, demonstrating how communication innovations could empower dissent and reshape societal hierarchies (Darnton, 1982). These developments laid the groundwork for the mass communication era.

The 19th century's industrial revolution saw technological advancements that enabled mass printing, allowing governments and corporations to systematically influence public opinion through media campaigns. However, the accessibility of print media also empowered marginalized voices, illustrating the dual-edged nature of technological democratization (Soundy Unwin et al., 2025). During World War I, propaganda became a state-driven enterprise, with centralized offices like Britain's War Propaganda Bureau producing visual media, such as posters and films, to mobilize the populace. This established a precedent for large-scale, coordinated efforts to influence opinion during crises (Taylor, 2013).

In the 20th century, the Cold War highlighted television's role in institutional communication. Both the United States and the Soviet Union used television to project ideological narratives, emphasizing the medium's ability to maintain legitimacy and influence both domestic and international audiences (Cull, 2010). Finally, the 21st century saw the rise of social media, a transformative force that shifted communication power to decentralized networks. During the Arab Spring, platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) enabled grassroots movements to coordinate protests and challenge authoritarian regimes, as exemplified by the 2011 Egyptian revolution (Howard & Hussain, 2013). This represented a significant challenge to traditional institutions, which had to adapt their strategies to contend with the influence of digital technologies.

Research suggests that institutional communication strategies, particularly through formal actors such as government representatives and PR professionals, are crucial in shaping public narratives (Palmisano & Sacchi, 2024). These strategies often encounter limitations, particularly in their ability to engage more informal and younger audiences, who are more accustomed to visual and interactive forms of communication. The value of information and its role in public trust have been key focuses in the literature. Institutions that consistently provide relevant, accurate, and impactful information are more likely to secure public trust (Palmisano & Sacchi, 2024). This aligns with our findings from focus group discussions, where communicators emphasized the need for language adaptation and rhetorical skill to connect with diverse audiences. Institutions that adapt their communication to the audience's expectations and societal needs, as noted by Terchila (2025), are more effective in fostering trust and engagement.

The work of Doudaki and Filimonov (2024) offers a comprehensive overview of the relationship between media and institutional communication in Southeastern Europe. Their review highlights the role of multilingual communication in addressing the diversity of national minorities in the region, a challenge that resonates with our findings. In Southeast Europe, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia,

institutional communication must navigate the complexity of multilingual requirements, complicating both message clarity and audience reach. This dual necessity of inclusivity and efficiency is a recurrent theme in our analysis and reflects the growing challenges faced by institutions in the region.

Modern influence, for instance, can be represented by Donald Trump's presidency, which redefined institutional communication by leveraging social media, particularly X, to bypass traditional media and engage directly with the public. His emotive, personalized messaging amplified polarization and disinformation, challenging traditional institutions while exposing vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem (Benkler et al., 2018; Ott, 2017). This phenomenon is part of a broader global trend of "populist communication," which often employs a logic of "bad manners" (breaking professional norms) and direct accusation to foster an anti-elite identity (Waisbord, 2018). Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Meta, accused the Biden administration of pressuring his platform to censor content related to COVID-19. At the time, President Biden publicly criticized social media platforms, claiming they were "killing people" by spreading COVID-19 misinformation. Similarly, Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, has highlighted disinformation as one of the most critical challenges facing young people today. He noted that addressing this issue has become the responsibility of the younger generation. Gates proposed solutions, including promoting digital literacy and enhancing content moderation on social media platforms.

The effectiveness of such content moderation, however, is hotly debated, with research indicating that it can reduce the reach of misinformation but also raising concerns about censorship and the "moderation paradox," where platforms are tasked with being arbiters of truth (Jhaver et al., 2021).

Throughout history, various methods of influencing the public have emerged, shaped by technological advancements and industrialization. From early cave paintings to social media, mass communication tools have evolved to deliver information more effectively and rapidly. Initially, communication was a one-way process, where the sender controlled the message and the receiver passively consumed it, as seen in speeches, broadcasts, and advertisements (Steinberg, 2007). Over time, this evolved into two-way communication, enabling feedback and interaction, transforming information exchange into a dynamic process that connects individuals, groups, and societies.

Communication is essential to human existence, as it profoundly influences cultural, economic, and social structures. It is not just the transmission of messages but a process of creating meaning, forming relationships, and shaping reality (Koković, 2007; Tutnjević & Savić, 2019). Interactional and transactional communication models emphasize the active role of participants in creating shared meaning and new social realities (Barnlund, 2008; Schramm, 1997). At the same time, technology has facilitated these processes, making communication faster, broader, and more interactive. As Milovanović and Jovanović (2018) stated, we now live in an "ecstasy of communication," where information is a valuable commodity that shapes human interaction and reality. This dynamic process of creating and reconstructing reality occurs within and across generations, where each generation develops and adapts communication models to form new social dynamics and forces.

Social field theory emphasizes the interplay between institutions, networks, and cognitive frames in shaping societal dynamics (Beckert, 2010). Within this framework, communication serves as a medium through which actors shape shared beliefs, knowledge, and goals, reinforcing the role of institutional frameworks in public engagement. According to Foucault's discourse is a powerful tool that shapes and limits collective realities. Those who control communication can define what is discussed and how (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). Communication is a mirror and a lens for reality, reflecting and shaping our understanding. Carey (1992) argues that while an objective reality exists independently, its meaning emerges through the interpretive power of language. This interplay underscores the critical distinction between reality and perception, emphasizing humanity's continuous effort to align subjective interpretations with the external world.

The Southeast European Context

Southeastern Europe has a rich and complex history. It served as a crucial juncture for numerous empires, including the Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Venetian, each leaving a profound and lasting impact on its political, cultural, and economic landscapes. The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453,

marking the end of the Byzantine Empire, was a pivotal event. The region's strategic location has made it a focal point for external powers, from the European Union to China, influencing its contemporary geopolitical and economic dynamics (Mankoff, 2022). More recently, this has extended to hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns, with the region serving as a testing ground for tactics that seek to exploit ethnic divisions and undermine democratic processes (Fruscione, 2020). The legacy of the Ottoman Empire is particularly evident in the region's financial systems and legal frameworks. For instance, areas previously under Ottoman rule exhibit a 10% lower bank penetration than other parts of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (Grosjean, 2011). This influence persists even within partially occupied countries like Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia, highlighting the enduring impact of historical governance on current economic conditions (Grosjean, 2011). Southeast Europe is characterized by its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, reflecting its complex historical context. Languages spoken include Romance languages such as Italian and Spanish, Slavic languages like Serbian and Croatian, as well as Greek and Turkish (Ballinger, 1999; Windley & Berentsen, 2025). Predominantly Orthodox countries like North Macedonia, Greece, and Serbia have seen a resurgence of religious identity post-socialism. In contrast, Catholic countries exhibit higher levels of religious practice (2024 World Population Review, 2024)

The political landscape of Southeast Europe is dynamic and shaped by historical events and regional conflicts. The division of Europe into communist and non-communist states following World War II had a lasting impact on the region's political structures. Ethnic diversity and nationalism continue to pose significant challenges, complicating efforts towards greater integration with Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO (Vrăbiescu, 2018). The EU accession process itself serves as a powerful external institutional force, shaping media reforms and public communication strategies in candidate countries, although often with mixed results due to the resilience of local patronage networks (Štětka et al., 2021). The rise of new global power centers and alliances continues to reshape the political landscape, making Southeast Europe a focal point for contemporary geopolitical maneuvers (Krstić et al., 2018).

The interplay between religiosity and informal economic practices characterizes social dynamics in Southeast Europe (2024 World Population Review, 2024). The region has undergone significant political transformation, particularly since the end of socialism, which has impacted ethnic minority issues and reshaped power relations (Gobel et al., 2018). Historical events, including the legacies and dissolutions of the Byzantine, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires, as well as the impacts of the Industrial Revolution and the cultural divisions post-Berlin Wall, have collectively shaped the region's political boundaries and cultural identities, creating a unique mosaic of influences and traditions (Albion Gould, 2023; Barzun & Mayne, 2025; Berentsen & Poulsen, 2025; Gobel et al., 2018; Mamchii, 2024; New World Encyclopedia, 2025). The region's complex history and cultural diversity, shaped by numerous empires, set the stage for understanding how public opinion in Southeast Europe is formed through intricate social forces and modern communication frameworks.

While tackling the context of Southeast Europe and the interaction between political actors and media, subjective reporting often amplifies the construction of reality through harmful narratives (Trajkoska, 2024). This dynamic illustrates the dual nature of communication as both a medium for disseminating truths and a mechanism capable of distorting reality, reflecting broader tensions in the sociopolitical discourse.

Research on "networked propaganda" in the region shows how political elites, media tycoons, and automated social media accounts (bots) can form synergistic networks to amplify partisan content and create a false sense of popular consensus (Stojarová, 2020).

We assume that communicators, guided by strategic communication frameworks, comply with established professional norms while considering the institutional influence on the formation of public opinion. As Bourdieu (2005) posits, social fields cannot exist without relationships, and these relationships are sustained through communication, which serves as an essential yet often invisible institutional force driving dynamics within the social field (Grosjean, 2011; Soundy Unwin et al., 2025). Social capital, as discussed by Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988), complements this perspective by suggesting that networks and shared values play a critical role in the effectiveness of communication. Moreover, Gvozdanović and Stanojević (2024) and Giddens (2023) observed that trust in institutions in Southeast Europe is highly contingent upon institutional communication strategies. Institutions in this region are often perceived as less trustworthy due to their

association with historical power structures, a trend exacerbated by the rise of populism and the spread of disinformation. This highlights the challenge faced by institutions in rebuilding credibility and trust, particularly among a public that is increasingly skeptical of formal communication channels. Our research builds on this, focusing on how institutional communication can be adapted to foster trust in this complex sociopolitical context.

Recent studies have further expanded these ideas, particularly in the context of political communication and the formation of public opinion. Gvozdanović and Stanojević (2024) examine youth political trust in Southeast Europe, highlighting how generational perspectives shape trust in institutions. While Gvozdanović and Stanojević (2024) focus on youth, our study broadens this scope by examining adult professionals, whose communication roles in institutions form the core of shaping public opinion in the region. This distinction is important as institutional trust among adults can often be more stable, but still heavily influenced by communication strategies.

Understanding public opinion formation in Southeast Europe involves exploring the intricate institutional dynamics that shape the region's public discourse. This process is deeply embedded in the area's historical and cultural contexts, where historical experiences, power distribution, and ethnic traditions interplay to create a distinct regional identity. Such factors foster a sense of community belonging, influencing collective perceptions and opinions (Abdullah & Benny, 2013; Čeginskas et al., 2021). Historically, public opinion has roots among elites and has evolved over centuries, with media now playing a pivotal role in shaping contemporary views (Davison, 2024b; European Commission, 2024).

Models like opinion exchange elucidate how public views can quickly shift the dominant perspective, emphasizing the complexity of public debates (Davison, 2024a). Additionally, mass media's agenda-setting and framing power substantially influence public attitudes, underlining the importance of how issues are reported (European Commission, 2024).

However, cultural policies have historically shaped national identities and continue to influence public engagement and societal cohesion, underscoring the ongoing relevance of heritage in fostering a shared history and identity in Southeast Europe (Čeginskas et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

Media's influence on public opinion in Southeast Europe is multifaceted, encompassing both traditional and digital platforms. Access to media technologies, literacy rates, and socio-economic factors significantly dictate how information spreads within communities. The rise of social media has further amplified this dynamic, enabling real-time interaction and fostering political and social movements (Banisch et al., 2010; Xiong & Liu, 2014). The ownership and control of media outlets also play a critical role, potentially introducing biases that shape public discourse (Trošt & Mandić, 2017). The region's political landscape and governance structures are equally influential. European integration processes and the establishment of supranational institutions have introduced new dimensions to public opinion formation, aligning regional norms with broader democratic and human rights standards (Massey & Miller, 2018; Yun, 2011). However, challenges like populism and government corruption complicate these dynamics, underscoring the need for public involvement in regional integration efforts (The European Newsroom, 2022; Wafiq, 2023).

The intricate social forces shaping public opinion in Southeast Europe are deeply intertwined with the region's complex history and the lasting impacts of numerous empires.

The Concept of Social Fields–Institutional Frameworks

Social fields have deep roots in scientific principles, from Newton's theories of gravity and magnetism to Einstein's theory of relativity. In the social sciences, the concept of social fields emerged from Gestalt theory, which emphasizes the dynamic relationships among actors within these fields. Communication processes and agents' actions, including communicators and formal actors, drive the structural evolution of these fields. Bourdieu's (1998, 2008) contributions emphasize the significance of relational dynamics within social fields, where formal actors may either uphold the status quo or strive to improve their position and influence within the field (DiMaggio, 1979; Hilgers & Mangez, 2014; Painter, 2000). Traditional analyses often overlook the interconnected nature of various social forces, e.g., institutions, 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 (2010) work provides a systematic framework that acknowledges these interdependencies. Instead of conceptualizing the influence of one social structure in isolation, Beckert's (2010) approach examines how multiple social forces- in our case, institutions interact to shape the structure in focus (Džajić Uršič, 2019). In this case, the dynamics of institutions can be understood by interacting with other social structures, such as cognitive frames and social networks (Beckert, 2010). According to Beckert (2009), institutions, they serve as systems of collective rules that provide stability and meaning within the social field, influencing the behavior and strategies of actors. These institutional frameworks complement social networks and cognitive frames, which interact dynamically to shape the outcomes of the field. Bourdieu's (1998) relational perspective further emphasizes the role of institutions in structuring interactions among agents, noting that actors derive meaning and value only through their relationships within institutionalized fields.

Institutions play a decisive role in the communicative processes examined in this research. They establish the norms, rules, and expectations that guide the actions of formal actors and professional communicators. For instance, institutionalized communication structures define formal actors' strategies, messaging frameworks, and public engagement mechanisms to shape public opinion. Moreover, institutions influence the creation and dissemination of information, embedding communicative actions within a larger socio-dynamic framework.

Beckert's (1999) model emphasizes the interdependence of institutions, networks, and cognitive frameworks, where institutions define the structure and boundaries of networks, provide legitimacy, and shape the norms governing social interactions.

In recent years, theories of social fields have become central to institutional studies, particularly those examining the development, stability, and transformation of social orders (Fligstein, 2001, 2008). These theories examine the relationships between actors and structures, acknowledging that fields are not merely arenas of collective power struggles. Fligstein (2001) introduced the concept of "social skill" to address this limitation, defining it as the ability to foster cooperation through symbolic interactions. Skilled actors navigate their strategies by understanding the structure of the field, their position within it, and the behavior of other groups.

Drawing on the pragmatist understanding of social interaction, cooperation emerges from the actors' situational context. This context includes physical objects, shared expectations, and reciprocal understandings of intentions, needs, and goals. According to Mead's (1981) concept of identity formation, cooperation becomes feasible when actors adopt each other's perspectives, thereby predicting their attitudes and behaviors. Role-taking is central to this process, as it enables mutually oriented actions. As Mead (1981) argues, to successfully cooperate with others, we must incorporate their ongoing acts into ourselves to ensure the common act is executed. Role-taking provides the anthropological basis for coordinated social action and addresses a critical issue in cooperation: how trust in others' intentions is established (Beckert, 1999; Biesta, 1998). Mead (1981) emphasizes that role-taking involves dialogical processes in which the expectations of others shape the actor's interpretation of the world. This is reflected in his concept of social control, where an actor's behavior is influenced by their reflection on the group's attitudes (Mead, 1981). In this sense, goals and strategies are not solely individual constructs but arise from the actor's interpretation of group expectations, forming "constitutive expectancies" that provide cognitive and practical frameworks for decision-making.

Constitutive expectations are reinforced through communication and shared participation, forming a foundation for generalized trust. As Mead (1934) and Mead et al. (2015) noted, communication inherently draws groups closer, establishing a shared understanding of reciprocal expectations. These expectations, encapsulated by Mead's (1934) concepts of the "rules of the game" or the "generalized other", enable trust even in relationships with strangers (Allen, 1999; Krzemiński, 2019). While trust does not eliminate uncertainty, it creates a shared social horizon in which actors' decisions are guided by culturally and institutionally rooted understandings and power dynamics.

Harold Garfinkel extends this perspective by linking constitutive expectancies with trust, which he defines as the assumption that others will act by shared rules and norms (Garfinkel, 1963). Trust, in this view, is not simply a psychological state but a product of compliance with established norms and behaviors

communicated through adherence to the "rules of the game." However, cooperative relationships remain fragile due to the lack of complete control over others' decisions, making trust dependent on continuous communication and reinforcement (Getha-Taylor et al., 2018).

This fragility of cooperation underscores the importance of communicative acts in maintaining trust. Giddens (1990, 1994, 2023) and Beck et al. (1994) highlight that trust must be actively sustained through mutual disclosure and communicative reassurance. In modern societies, where institutions and interactions are increasingly removed from traditional contexts, trust often relies on abstract systems such as banks, legal firms, or airlines. These systems signal trustworthiness through communicative performances–marketing, personal reassurances, or the confident demeanor of representatives–anchoring trust in the communicative dynamics of the situation (Giddens, 1991)

According to Fligstein (1999) the ability to induce cooperation is a critical social skill of strategic actors and a prerequisite for stable social fields. This skill involves effectively demonstrating one's interest in maintaining cooperative relationships, whether through credible assurances or the threat of consequences in the event of defection. However, contrary to purely economic reasoning, the social relevance lies in the agent's ability to credibly communicate their interest in cooperation. This highlights that risk assessments are socially constructed interpretations shaped by beliefs, narratives, and contextual understandings rather than purely calculative decisions.

Institutions play a fundamental role in shaping these interpretations by creating frameworks that foster cooperation and offer constitutive social interaction expectations. Legal systems, product warranties, and organizational norms provide institutionalized assurances that reduce uncertainty and enable actors to interpret situations that promote trust and cooperation. The continuous reinforcement of trustworthiness through institutional and communicative mechanisms underscores the inherent uncertainty in social interactions, particularly in principal-agent dynamics.

This perspective emphasizes that institutions are not merely structures but active facilitators of trust, shaping social interactions and stabilizing cooperation through their ability to construct shared meanings and expectations. Communication remains central to this process, enabling the creation and reinforcement of trustworthiness, which is vital for the persistence of cooperative social fields.

Building on existing research (Stojčevski et al., 2024), this article examines communication systems across six Southeast European countries (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia), focusing on the interplay of historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and technological advancements. By examining how institutional frameworks influence communication strategies and public engagement, this research offers insights into the formation of public opinion in a dynamic and diverse region, as well as the intricate communication systems operating at individual, organizational, and societal levels across Southeast Europe. Various social forces shape these systems, including historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and technological advancements. Employing the social-fields-approach (SOFIA), this research offers a nuanced understanding of public opinion dynamics and provides actionable insights for tailoring strategic communication to complex social environments.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

This study employs a qualitative research design to address the research question, drawing its theoretical foundation from Beckert's (2010) theory of social fields and Rončević et al.'s (2022) SOFIA. Focusing on institutions as social forces, we investigate their role in shaping communication strategies and public opinion formation in Southeast Europe, highlighting their pivotal role as social forces. Operationalizing these concepts, the research identifies two analytical levels: the horizontal level, which examines formal actors responsible for shaping public opinion, and the vertical level, which categorizes the influence of institutions.

Data collection was conducted through synchronous online focus groups, selected for their ability to capture the complexities of group norms, meanings, and processes that underpin public opinion formation (Stewart & Williams, 2005). These focus groups were held in six Southeast European countries: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Some were online during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring inclusivity while maintaining methodological rigor.

The focus groups, comprising 28 participants, were selected based on six predefined criteria to ensure representation of effective communicators in the Serbian language. At the same time, the session in North Macedonia was moderated in Macedonian. Participants were required to demonstrate effectiveness in public communication, expertise in shaping public opinion, technological competence, adherence to ethical standards, and willingness to participate. They were selected to represent formal actors across various sectors. Moderators guided discussions using predefined orientational questions to explore participants' theoretical and practical experiences in effective communication and shaping public opinion. Participant selection was conducted externally to ensure neutrality and minimize researcher bias, with all participants receiving training on the assessment tool, which included structured questions aligned with the five categories of social forces. They were also provided with guidelines on technical requirements and discussion topics before participating in synchronous online focus groups. These sessions facilitated real-time debates and collaborative discussions, generating rich qualitative data. Moderators followed a consistent protocol to ensure comparability across countries, and all participants signed informed consent forms, acknowledging their voluntary participation and awareness of the study's publication plans. The discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an iterative coding process based on an approach that identifies patterns and refines categories and subcategories for reliability and validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002). Ethical considerations ensured informed consent, participant anonymity, and adherence to ethical guidelines throughout the research process (Stojčevski et al., 2024).

This study was designed as a series of online focus groups with adult professionals, ensuring that a diverse range of participants from different professional backgrounds, regions, and institutional contexts were included. The focus group participants were not from vulnerable groups, and no minors or individuals with diminished decision-making capacity were included. Sensitive topics such as health, political or religious beliefs, sexual life, trauma, or violence were not addressed during discussions. The participants' professional views, within their occupational contexts, were collected, with no special categories of personal data involved. All participants were selected based on predefined criteria to ensure a balanced representation of effective communicators and their expertise in shaping public opinion. Participation was based on prior clear information and written consent. Data were handled with confidentiality safeguards and anonymized reporting, without deception or covert observation. Given the minimal risk to participants, the absence of vulnerable groups and sensitive data, and the fact that participants acted in their professional capacity, formal ethics approval under institutional criteria was not required; instead, we implemented standard safeguards (voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality, and limited data use) appropriate for low-risk research. The citizen participatory focus groups, as in our case, as reported by the EU Joint Research Center (Kantar, 2024), emphasize the importance of ethical communication in focus groups, underscoring how clear communication protocols can influence the accuracy and reliability of responses. This aligns with our study's ethical framework, which prioritizes transparency, informed consent, and participant anonymity. In the production and language editing of this manuscript, AI tools were utilized to assist with language refinement, ensuring the clarity and readability of the text .

Coding Rulebook

Table 1 provides a structured framework of categories (5) and subcategories (17) for understanding formal actors, institutional components, and associated challenges that shape public communication and societal engagement. It categorizes formal actors, such as institutional and agent communicators, highlighting their roles in implementing communication strategies and the influence of hierarchical structures and leadership. Institutional components, including language adaptation, communication rules, and cultural or political contexts, emphasize how institutions tailor messages to diverse audiences while navigating societal constraints. The literacy of communicators, through semantic adaptation, tact, and emotional engagement, impacts message delivery and audience connection. **Table 1** illustrates the value of information, which is determined by audience perception, content quality, credibility, and timeliness. It addresses challenges such as rigid communication rules, crisis communication delays, and media framing, which can impact the effectiveness of public communication. This framework offers a comprehensive approach to analyzing how institutions shape public discourse and adapt strategies to dynamic environments.

Table 1. Key categories of formal actors, institutional components, and associated challenges

Category	Subcategory	Description	Example
Formal actors	Institutional communicators	Representatives of formal institutions or organizations responsible for public communication.	Government representatives, international organization spokespersons.
	Agent-communicators	Individuals are tasked with implementing strategic communication and shaping public opinion on behalf of formal actors.	PR officers, media spokesperson, and social media managers.
	Hierarchical vs. informal structures	Hierarchically structured organizations have formalized communication rules, while smaller, informal organizations rely on ad-hoc practices.	Large organizations use protocols; small groups rely on informal norms.
	Leadership influence	Leadership positions amplify communication impact, increasing public responsiveness.	Party leader's press conference receives more coverage than a low-level spokesperson's briefing.
Components of social institutions	Language adaptation	Language used by institutions must align with rules and adapt to target audiences for effective message transmission.	Government institutions use formal language, limiting outreach to younger audiences who prefer informal styles.
	Communication rules	Structured protocols for public communication, improving trust and information accuracy.	Institutions follow guidelines to ensure message consistency and truthfulness.
	Cultural and political context	Communication is influenced by cultural, political, and legal constraints, such as linguistic requirements for minorities.	Bosnia and Herzegovina mandates translation into national minority languages. The same is North Macedonia–institution should translate communications into Macedonian and Albanian language and that means to engage two different agent communicators or translators.
Literacy of communicators	Semantic adaptation	Adjusting language, grammar, and terminology to match the audience's literacy levels.	Using simple, clear messages for audiences with lower literacy levels.
	Tact and rhetoric	Employing charisma, rhetorical skills, and emotional resonance to enhance comm.	Communicators showing authenticity or turning errors into advantages.
	Emotional engagement	Creating a personal connection through relatable content and vulnerability.	A communicator demonstrates authenticity by sharing a personal story.
Value of information	Audience perception	Value determined by the audience based on relevance, utility, and engagement.	Students react strongly to information affecting their academic outcomes (e.g., grade impacts).
	Content quality	Information value enhanced by relevance, accuracy, and power to create societal change.	Information that addresses societal issues or resonates with public concerns is valued more highly.
	Uniqueness and context	Information perceived as valuable when unique or timely relative to the audience's expectations.	Exclusive news on an urgent policy change is gaining more attention.
	Credibility and traceability	Verified origins and sources enhance public trust and the perceived value of the information.	A news source cited by a reputable institution receives higher credibility.
Challenges and constraints	Rigidity of rules	Strict adherence to institutional communication rules may reduce responsiveness and connection with specific target audiences.	Institutions struggle to connect with youth due to formal language requirements.
	Crisis communication	Communication delays caused by rigid rules, requiring authoritative communicators to manage effectively.	Delayed responses in emergencies due to protocol adherence.
	Media interpretation	Media plays a role in shaping the perceived value of information through framing, views, and societal relevance.	Information's value judged by metrics such as media reach and audience engagement.

FINDINGS

This study highlights the critical role of institutional frameworks in shaping communication strategies and public engagement across Southeast Europe. Analysis of focus group discussions revealed that language use, communication protocols, and the perceived value of information are central to the effectiveness of institutional communication. While formalized communication rules enhance credibility and trust, they often restrict flexibility and responsiveness to diverse audiences. These dynamics are further influenced by communicators' literacy and the sociopolitical context, underscoring the complex interplay between structured institutional practices and the diverse needs of the target public.

Social institutions are foundational structures within society, designed to meet the needs of its members and provide templates for actions, experiences, and perceptions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). They regulate behavior, transmit cultural values, and shape collective consciousness (Bourdieu, 2005). As Durkheim (2023) explained, social institutions create the frameworks for interaction, communication, and the development of shared attitudes, beliefs, and values. These frameworks are crucial in shaping the public's understanding of social, economic, and political realities, thereby influencing public communication and engagement. Focus group discussions emphasized the dynamic and adaptable nature of language as a tool for public communication. Effective communicators tailor language to diverse audiences, fostering understanding and ensuring information is transmitted effectively. However, institutional adherence to formal communication rules often limits this flexibility, particularly when engaging with younger demographics who prefer informal, visual communication styles. For example, youth audiences respond more favorably to concise, visually driven messages that incorporate colloquial language, which formal protocols often exclude.

The degree to which communication rules are formalized varies across organizations and countries. Smaller organizations without hierarchical structures typically rely on informal communication practices, while larger institutions and government bodies implement structured regulations. The structuring of communication rules evolves as organizations grow and is influenced by factors such as the sector in which they operate, market conditions, and the frequency of crisis communication. Well-defined communication rules are a marker of successful organizations, as they improve communication quality, foster trust, and maintain reputability. However, rigid adherence to these rules can slow response times during crises, emphasizing the need for skilled communicators to navigate these constraints effectively.

The findings emphasize the critical role of communicator literacy–the ability to adapt language effectively to different audience characteristics. Communicator literacy goes beyond clarity and simplicity; it incorporates rhetorical skill, emotional intelligence, and the strategic use of language to foster connection and trust. Skilled communicators are able to craft messages that resonate with a diverse audience by tailoring content to cultural norms, audience expectations, and perceived information value. As Bourdieu (1998) and Beckert (2010) suggest, communicators not only transmit information, but actively shape social fields by influencing cognitive frames and reinforcing institutional power structures. Skilled communicators craft short, precise messages for less literate audiences and demonstrate rhetorical and emotional intelligence to build trust and rapport. Literacy in communication is linked to credibility and enhances the communicator's reputation, making them more effective in engaging the public.

Another significant factor identified is the value of information, which is determined by its relevance, uniqueness, and societal impact. The public assigns value to information based on its perceived importance, synchronicity with their expectations, and potential to drive change. Effective communication requires delivering valuable information and ensuring its credibility through traceable sources and evaluation mechanisms. Institutions consistently providing relevant, accurate, and impactful information are more likely to secure public trust and engagement.

Leadership emerged as a key factor in communication effectiveness, amplifying the authority and legitimacy of institutional messages. Leaders are often perceived as more credible and influential, enhancing public responsiveness and media engagement. This aligns with Fligstein's (2001) concept of social skills, where strategic actors leverage their positions to shape interactions and outcomes within social fields.

The focus groups identified specific regional and cultural factors influencing institutional communication in Southeast Europe. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, institutional

communication is shaped by constitutional requirements mandating the use of multiple languages to cater to national minorities. While this ensures inclusivity, it can also complicate communication processes. These findings highlight the complexity of institutional communication strategies and emphasize the importance of tailoring language use and communication frameworks to meet the diverse needs of the target audience.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The article offers a nuanced understanding of how institutional frameworks influence communication strategies and language use in public engagement across Southeast Europe, addressing the core research question while illuminating the interplay between formal institutional structures, the adaptability of communication strategies, and the sociocultural contexts that shape public opinion formation.

Institutions are not passive entities; they shape communication processes by embedding norms and expectations into public discourse. As Beckert (2010) posits, institutional frameworks operate within a dynamic interplay of cognitive frames and social networks, influencing public engagement by structuring the rules and mechanisms of communication.

One of the key findings is the dynamic and living nature of language, which institutions utilize as a tool to foster understanding and ensure the effective dissemination of information. However, the rigidity of institutional communication rules often impedes this adaptability. While such rules enhance the credibility and consistency of institutional communication, they can alienate specific target audiences, such as youth, who prefer informal and visual communication styles. This tension illustrates the broader theoretical interplay between the institutionalized stability of social fields and the evolving demands of public interaction.

Institutional frameworks significantly impact the structure and application of communication rules, which vary across organizations and countries. Smaller organizations rely on informal practices due to a lack of hierarchical structures, whereas larger institutions and government bodies implement formalized and structured communication protocols. These protocols evolve with organizational growth and are shaped by factors such as market dynamics, sectoral demands, and the frequency of crisis communication. These findings align with Fligstein's (2001, 2008) concept of social skills, highlighting the importance of strategic actors in navigating social fields' structured and relational dimensions to foster cooperation and trust.

Communicator literacy emerged as a critical factor influencing public opinion formation. The ability to adapt language to the target audience's characteristics, ensuring clarity, simplicity, and comprehension, is essential. Skilled communicators employ rhetorical and emotional intelligence to connect with audiences, reinforcing their credibility and enhancing trust. These findings echo Bourdieu's emphasis on relational dynamics within social fields, where communicators derive their legitimacy and influence through their ability to align their strategies with institutional norms and audience expectations.

The research also highlights the value of information as a determinant of effective communication. Public perception of information is shaped by its relevance, accuracy, and potential societal impact. Meeting audience expectations and addressing pressing concerns will likely lead to trust and value. This aligns with Giddens' (1991) perspective on trust as a socially constructed phenomenon maintained through continuous communication and mutual reassurance.

Regional and cultural nuances significantly influence institutional communication strategies in Southeast Europe. These strategies must navigate the complexities of linguistic diversity, multiculturalism, and ethnic tensions that characterize the region. For example, in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, institutional communication is shaped by constitutional mandates that require the use of multiple languages to cater to national minorities. This linguistic inclusivity ensures representation but also complicates the delivery of messages, often leading to challenges in message clarity and audience engagement. These regional socio-political factors reflect the broader challenge faced by institutions: striking a balance between inclusivity and efficiency in communication while maintaining credibility and public trust. While this ensures inclusivity, it complicates communication processes, underscoring the need for institutions to strike a balance between inclusivity, clarity, and efficiency. These findings align with Mead's (1934) concept of role-taking, which posits that institutions must adopt the perspectives of diverse publics to foster mutual understanding and trust. The research also sheds light on the role of leadership in communication

effectiveness. Leadership amplifies communicators' perceived authority and legitimacy, enhancing their ability to effectively engage the public and media. This aligns with Fligstein's notion of social skills, where strategic actors leverage their positions to shape interactions and influence outcomes within social fields.

The findings from the focus groups and coding table demonstrate that institutional frameworks shape communication strategies and language use by embedding structured norms and protocols into public engagement processes. While these frameworks enhance credibility and trust, they also present challenges in adapting to the diverse needs of the target public. Institutions that strike a balance between stability and flexibility–through skilled communicators, inclusive strategies, and adaptable communication rules–are better positioned to influence public opinion effectively. By integrating theoretical constructs such as Beckert's (2010) social fields and Bourdieu's relational dynamics, this study highlights the centrality of communication as a strategic tool within institutional frameworks. The results underscore the need for Southeast European institutions to adopt more adaptive and inclusive approaches to communication, ensuring they remain effective in shaping public opinion within dynamic and diverse social contexts.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, reliance on qualitative data from focus groups may not capture the full diversity of experiences across Southeastern Europe, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the focus on formal actors may overlook the role of informal or grassroots organizations in shaping public opinion. Third, synchronous online focus groups, while facilitating cross-country participation, may have constrained the depth of interaction compared to in-person settings. Future research should incorporate mixed-method approaches, including surveys and social network analysis, to explore the interplay between formal and informal communication frameworks and investigate longitudinal impacts on public trust and institutional communication strategies.

The reliance on synchronous online focus groups, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, might have influenced participant interaction and the data collection process. Although the online format facilitated inclusivity and cross-country participation, it may have limited the depth of discussions compared to in-person focus groups. Future research could consider hybrid models that combine in-person and virtual methods to strike a balance between accessibility and data richness.

In conclusion, this study highlights the pivotal role of language, communication rules, and information value in shaping public opinion and institutional engagement throughout Southeast Europe. While the findings highlight the tension between formalized institutional practices and the evolving demands of public interaction, they also emphasize the need for adaptability and inclusivity in communication strategies. Future research should explore how these dynamics evolve over time and across diverse demographic groups, particularly youth and minority populations. Comparative studies in other regions could further identify universal and context-specific elements of institutional communication frameworks, advancing the broader understanding of public engagement processes.

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Ethics declaration: This study involved adult professionals participating in focus groups in their professional capacity. No vulnerable populations, minors, or sensitive personal data were involved. Topics discussed did not include health, political affiliation, religion, sexuality, or trauma. Participation was voluntary and based on written informed consent. Data were anonymized during transcription and analysis, securely stored, and used solely for research purposes. In accordance with institutional and national regulations, formal ethics committee approval was not required for this low-risk qualitative research design.

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