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Neumann, Martin; Srblijinovi#, Armano; Markus Schatten

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„Trust me, I know what I'm doing!“ Competence Fields as a Means of Establishing Political Leadership

Martin Neumann

Institute for Information Systems in
Business and Public Administration,
University of Koblenz-Landau
Koblenz, Germany

Armano Srblijinović¹

Institute for Research and
Development of Defence Systems
Ministry of Defence of the Republic
of Croatia

Markus Schatten

Artificial Intelligence Laboratory
Faculty of Organization and Informatics
University of Zagreb
Croatia

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Abstract

Competence fields are conceptualised as an alternative to the median-voter approach to the relationship between political leaders and constituencies. The notion of competence fields assumes that prospective political leaders need be regarded as competent in order to convince constituencies of their leadership abilities. It is argued that competence is a constructivist concept – political actors invoke claims of competence, backed by more or less strong, contextually dependent reasons in speech acts, by means of which they attempt to convince the audience of their leadership abilities. It is also argued that the construction of competence becomes particularly problematic in times of crisis, when pressures from the social context onto the prospective leaders make their claims of competence generally less convincing. Leaders are then expected to resort to all sorts of rhetorical devices and draw public attention to those competence fields in which minimal costs are to be incurred in order to establish themselves as competent in front of the constituencies. An example of an agent-based model of ethnicity as one such competence field is provided. It is argued that competence fields can be further investigated by a combination of traditional social-scientific methods and various methods and techniques from the fields of information retrieval and computer modelling, which can be particularly helpful in providing empirical evidence of competence fields.

Keywords: competence fields, political leadership, public perception, social construction, speech acts

¹The ordering of the authors follows alphabetical order and does not indicate any priorities.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Armano Srblijinović, Senior Advisor
Affiliation: Institute for Research and Development of Defence Systems, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia
Address: Ilica 256, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia, phone: + 385 1 37 86 662, fax: + 385 1 37 84 878.
e-mail: armano.srblijinovic@kc.t-com.hr

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1. Introduction

Problems of political leadership have recently not only arisen considerable scientific interest, but also found their way into the European Commission's research priorities (European Commission, 2013). The roles of political leadership in recognising, acknowledging, facing, and overcoming the current deep social and economic crisis in Europe have already been, and are yet to become, subjected to critical scrutiny, and the ways how political leaders diagnose problems, prescribe solutions, and mobilize followers should be analysed (European Commission, 2013, p. 15).

This work focuses on the relationship between leaders and followers, or, in our terminology, between leaders and constituencies.² We are particularly interested in discursive procedures through which leaders secure electoral support of the constituencies.

We largely discard the traditional median-voter approach to the relationship between political leaders and constituencies in favour of a more dynamic approach, bringing into the centre of analytical attention the so-called competence fields. Instead of passively mirroring the preferences of the median voter, we see leaders as active communicative agents, whose speech acts are primarily directed toward convincing the constituencies of their leadership abilities.

Such discursive construction of competence becomes, however, particularly problematic in times of crisis. As Mastropaolo (2012, p. 217) notes: "Post-modern politics credits itself with being managerial and problem-solving, but this reputation is not particularly easy-to-wear". It is particularly difficult, for example, for the leaders of a country on the verge of bankruptcy to submit convincing proofs of their competence. Hence we argue that in times of crisis leaders will resort to various rhetorical maneuvers in attempts to compensate for this structural deficiency. They will also try to shift the attention of constituencies toward those competence fields in which they could more "cheaply" establish themselves as competent.

Ethnicity can be regarded as one such field and we provide an example of how it can be investigated with the help of an agent-based simulation model. A socio-historical context of inter-ethnic tensions, like the one of former Yugoslavia, provides a multitude of "ethnic clues" that can be easily "picked up" by prospective political leaders, in their attempts to establish a field where they could prove competence with minimal expenditure of resources. In times of crisis, difficulties in establishing competence in the fields of economic prosperity, social justice, and the like, increase the pressures on prospective leaders to "play the ethnic card".

While the first part of the article discusses mainly theoretical background and implications of the notion of competence fields, in section 6 we consider how this notion can be empirically grounded. We call for a combined application of both traditional social-scientific methods (interviews, discourse and contents analysis, participants observation), and the novel methods from the fields of information retrieval and computer modelling (natural language processing, social web and opinion mining, sentiment analysis, speech recognition, social network analysis, agent-based modelling and simulation), that have been enabled by the advances in computing technology.

2. The notion of competence fields

The classical approach to the relationship between political leaders and constituencies proceeds by way of the so-called median voter theorem, stating that on a scale from the left- to the right-wing political

² We avoid the term "followers" because of its connotations of passivity. As we shall see shortly, "followers" are also agents in political processes, so we prefer "constituencies" as a term that better reflects the intrinsic agency of the "followers".

opportunities, the most successful political agenda is the one preferred by the median voter (Downs, 1957), i.e. the voter who occupies the median position on the scale. Downs has shown that, in a two party system, a party that best represents the median voter will receive the majority of votes and win the election. Hence the median voter theorem predicts a tendency of political parties to move toward the middle of the political attitudes' range.

There are, however, certain limitations to the median voter theorem, such as the assumption of a one-dimensional, fixed preference scale. This limitation can be overcome with the notion of competence (Mueller, 1989). This notion assumes that prospective political leaders need be regarded as competent in order to convince a political audience of their leadership abilities (Mueller, 1989). For example, political actors offering competence in defence and security might be regarded as important by many people, while those offering competence in Voodoo activities might have problems to convince a sufficient number of followers (at least in the Western world). Competence is thus related to certain issues of public interest and there may be a multiplicity of competence fields. In particular, the concept of competence fields allows to overcome the assumption of a unimodal distribution over a one-dimensional scale. For instance, a political party might be perceived as highly competent with regard to economic issues but less competent with regard to security, or domestic issues and cultural politics.

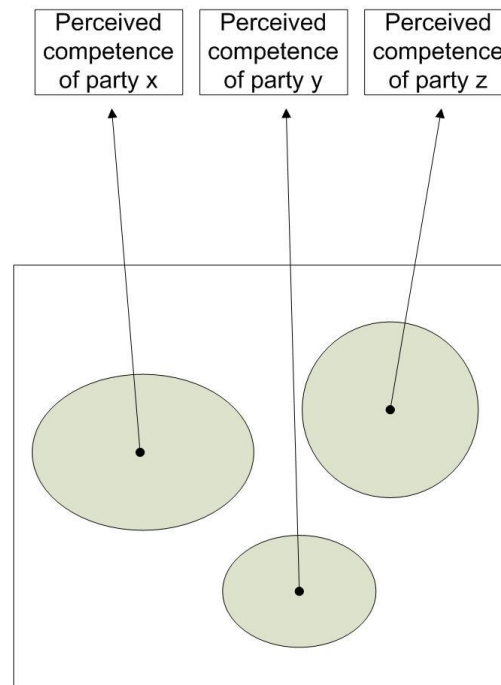


Figure 1.
Schematic representation of competence fields

In **Figure 1**, the rectangle indicates the space of political problems and the circles indicate the competence of hypothetical parties in certain fields. Note that the graph illustrates competence as

perceived by a single actor. Such individual perceptions of competence need to be aggregated over the entire population.

It is also important to note that competence is a constructivist concept: what is essential is *perceived* competence, and not some “objectively” measurable indicators. For instance, it might be reasonably questioned whether a policy of “law and order enforcement” is truly effective. Nevertheless, political actors may still be perceived as competent if they advocate harsh “law and order enforcement” measures.

Perceived competence can be measured by votes. Thus, the notion of competence is related to the issue of legitimacy: if power is not based on pure coercion, political leaders or power structures need to be regarded as competent in order to gain legitimacy. Elections provide such legitimacy because the results can be regarded as evidence that the winner is perceived as the most competent candidate. At least two dimensions are involved in such a “proof”: first, what kind of agenda is generally seen as addressing the most urgent societal problems (e.g. economic progress, freedom, or equality). Second, what sort of agenda is perceived as the most efficient for solving these problems. However, the current crisis shows that political leaders are often no longer regarded as competent to solve societal problems.

Perceived competence is always only relative with regard to other competitors. Presumably, grotesque election candidates advocating bizarre agendas and offering absurd promises do not gain votes because of their competence, but due to general loss of trust in the competence of their competitors; i.e. protest voting can be interpreted as a signal against other candidates rather than in favour of the candidate voted for (Neumann and Srblijinović, 2013a).

Once constructed, competence fields become a sort of an “unregistered trademark” by which a political leader or a party can be widely recognisable. One can think of Mahatma Gandhi, for example, as being competent in politics of independence by non-violent means, or of Vaclav Havel as being competent in defence of human rights, or of Adolf Hitler as being “competent” in racism and anti-semitism.

Competence fields are more “dynamic” than the median-voter approach since it is assumed that, with time, the agency of leaders can influence the attitudes of constituencies, and *vice versa*, the agency of constituencies can influence the attitudes of leaders. In other words, preferences of constituencies (and leaders) are not fixed, as assumed by the median voter theorem, but continually changing through a complex interplay of the agency of both leaders and constituencies. Leaders are trying to convince constituencies of the competence of the former, but the impression of competence is generally difficult to instill in times of crisis. Constituencies may rejoinder that leaders are not competent any more than constituencies themselves. Note that such a reply carries in itself the potential for the former members of constituencies to become future leaders. This is in contrast with classical models, such as the one assumed by the median voter theorem, where political actors passively mirror the preferences of the median voter and the median voter happily sees his or her preferences satisfied. Such models are inherently static and it is difficult to see how any sort of social change could occur under such conditions.

3. Intersubjective construction of competence fields

A claim to competence on the part of a political actor is a speech act (Austin, 1976) which is usually uttered in front of an audience. The aim of the political actor setting forth the claim is to convince the audience of his or her competence in a certain competence field (i.e. security, economy, social justice, etc.). Having in mind such an aim, the speaker usually backs up the claim with certain “strong reasons” (Boudon, 2001) expounding on why the audience should find the claim convincing. For example, the so-called

"securitisation moves" usually present some valuable material or immaterial object as being under serious threat in order to justify more or less extreme measures intended to protect the valuable object from the presumed danger (Buzan, 1995; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998).

It has been emphasised that contextual conditions affect the chances that a securitisation move will be successful. While in principle it remains open which topic will become the subject of a securitisation move, these moves are nevertheless not completely arbitrary (Williams, 2003; Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008). The resonance of the audience depends on how the subject of the move is historically, institutionally or discursively "sedimented" (Williams, 2003). These contextual "sediments" are in large part consequences of past speech acts.

All this holds for the claims to competence more generally. Indeed, the "strength" of strong reasons arises from the expectation "that the other man should feel and think in the same way" (Boudon, 2001, p. 10), and this compelling feeling depends, in turn, on a shared socio-historical context³ within which the speaker and the audience have been situated. If the speaker and the audience share the same contextual "sediments", the chances are greater that the speaker will strike "the right cord" within the audience and that the claim to competence and the concomitant strong reasons will be received with approval.

The notions of competences and competence fields are "dynamic" since we assume that the distribution of perceptions of competences in any moment of time is the – always necessarily temporary – result of an ongoing struggle in which various political actors attempt to communicatively establish their competence in front of electoral audiences. Such attempts include not only proofs of competence in particular fields, but also struggles to draw public attention to certain fields of competence (e.g. economy, ethnicity, gender issues, abortion, etc.) in the first place. The attempts are always embedded in historical, institutional, discursive and other contextual "sediments", which limit the total number of available options, but do not determine completely which option will prevail. In other words, there is still enough maneuvering space for actors' agency. Hence, "[a] speech act is interesting exactly because it holds the insurrecting potential to break the ordinary, to establish meaning that is not already within the context – it reworks or produces a context by the performative success of the act" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, n. 5, p. 46).

However, since successful political leaders are those who are successful in convincing the audience of their competence, selection pressures from the social context toward certain kinds of shrewd political communication are to be expected. First, it is to be expected that prospective political leaders will attempt to draw public attention of the constituencies to those competence fields in which, under given contextual conditions, minimal costs are to be incurred by the leaders in order to establish themselves as competent in front of the constituencies. Second, it is to be expected that the agendas belonging to such competence fields incurring the least costs for the prospective leaders, will be advertised as "the most efficient" for solving all sorts of societal problems. For example, in a socio-historical context of high inter-ethnic tensions, ethnicity will most probably present the field of competence in which prospective leaders could prove their competence with minimal expenditure of resources. Moreover, various ethnically motivated agendas will likely be advertised as "the most efficient" for solving all sorts of societal problems. As we shall elaborate in a short time, we expect selection pressures from the social context onto the prospective leaders to be particularly strong in times of crisis.

³ Following an explication of the meaning of "context" set forth by social psychologists, we assume that "[c]ontext is the general and continuing multilayered and interwoven set of material realities, social structures, patterns of social relations, and shared belief systems that surround any given situation" (Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004, p. 103).

4. Competence fields in times of crisis

The instrumental logic used by electoral candidates in the attempts to convince constituencies to vote for them can be succinctly stated in the call: "Follow us and you will also be better off!" Such a call, however, may only be convincing in the context of relative economic prosperity, i.e. when the standard of living is on the rise, when large segments of the population become better off, and so on. Under the conditions of general prosperity, there are indeed strong reasons to regard leaders as competent enough to deserve their positions of leadership and the accompanying benefits.

However, in times of economic crisis such instrumental arguments obviously lose their force – most of the people are not better off anymore. As resources become severely constrained, and as people increasingly become aware of limits on resources, as well as of dwindling opportunities to pursue their immediate interests, instrumental reasons lose credibility. It is to be expected that a greater weight will now be assigned to more axiologically oriented arguments, such as "the universalistic rule of merit": "Those and only those who contribute more need to be more generously rewarded."⁴

It becomes, however, increasingly demanding for leaders to show that they indeed contribute more, i.e. to justify their competences in terms of the contribution to the general prosperity. As the whole economic system is crumbling, it looks like the leaders also contribute more to the crumbling. The context has changed, and those who could previously be regarded as contributing most to prosperity, now are seen as contributing most to the downturn. Those who could previously be perceived as legitimate leaders, now become increasingly perceived as mere "elites", i.e. as some ones who do not really deserve their positions, but are occupying them due to other, less legitimate competences. This is what can be observed in many European countries affected by serious economic crisis. The competences of leaders become increasingly questionable.

Leaders, faced with a dwindling budget and a threat to lose their established positions, struggle to retain what is now increasingly regarded as their "privileges". The old call to constituencies to follow the current leaders in order to prosper cannot be any longer proclaimed in a self-assured "Trust me, I know what I'm doing!"-style.⁵ As axiological arguments become increasingly popular among the constituencies, leaders now also have a stronger incentive to demonstrate their competence in the axiological domain, which is not easily reconcilable with the need to preserve their acquired benefits. Leaders may therefore become increasingly tempted to "cheat", i.e. to pretend they pursue universal values while, in fact, seeking to further their self-interest. In other words, leaders may become tempted to feign axiological rationality in order to preserve their positions.

⁴ According to Boudon, and following Weber, rationality can be instrumental, as when people aim to choose the best means to satisfy a given goal, typically maximisation of one's interest, or axiological, when people behave "in a way congruent with principles they consider worth following" (Boudon, 2001, p. 42). Both types of rationality can be subsumed under what Boudon calls the "cognitivist model", according to which social actors should be considered rational as long as "they have strong reasons for believing what they believe, for doing what they do, etc." (Boudon, 2001, p. 67). These "strong reasons" can be derived from cost/benefit considerations of various courses of action, in which case the cognitivist model reduces to instrumental rationality as its special case, or they can be derived from the actor's conviction that some course of action is good, fair, legitimate or in some other way "valuable", in which case the model yields axiological rationality as its special case.

⁵ It is possible for leaders to argue, in a somewhat messianic tone, that they are, in fact, ingenious, but the uneducated public is, unfortunately, not up to the task of recognising their great deeds. However, this strategy is unlikely to be perceived as grounded in strong reasons and therefore unlikely to receive wider support.

Following Risse's (2000) distinction between the logic of consequences, the logic of appropriateness, and the logic of arguing,⁶ we have posited certain types of logic to be more prominent in certain contexts than others (Neumann and Srbljinović, 2013b). In other words, we have assumed that actors' selection of a certain kind of "logical frame" is triggered by dynamically changing contextual conditions. This enabled us to hypothesise prevalence of certain types of logic in the contexts of economic prosperity and crisis, respectively (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Hypotheses about prevalent types of logic among leaders/constituencies in times of well-being/crisis

	Leaders	Constituencies
Well-being	Logic of appropriateness	Logic of appropriateness
Crisis	Logic of consequences with admixtures of logic of arguing (rhetorical action, strategic uses of argument)	Logic of arguing

In times of well-being we expect the logic of appropriateness to carry greatest significance among both leaders and constituencies. As the interests of everyone are satisfied at least to some extent, it is easily taken for granted that following leaders makes everyone better off. When the tide is rising and the wind is good, there is no need, for most people, to rock the boat. This is not to say that arguments based on instrumental or axiological premises will be entirely missing from public discussions in times of well-being, only that many, and perhaps, most people would not feel a compelling need to enter such discussions, being satisfied with things as they are. In fact, as both sides adhere to the logic of appropriateness, even asymmetries between leaders and constituencies may not be readily apparent as other cleavages may be more salient.

As times become harder, however, people can be expected to become more attentive to a more "activist" logic. It is our contention that for constituencies it would be the logic of arguing, while for leaders it would be the logic of consequences with some admixtures of the logic of arguing.

Constituencies, on one hand, become increasingly aware that following leaders does not bring much good any more. On the other hand, however, they are not powerful enough to adopt the logic of consequences and engage in direct strategic bargaining with leaders. In other words, average citizens are not powerful enough to articulate their own interests as "strong reasons". Moreover, at least some among them may become genuinely aware that available resources are limited to such an extent that the insistence on one's self-interest is simply pointless. Taking all these circumstances into account, the logic of arguing appears to be contextually most acceptable to constituencies.

⁶ Risse has, in fact, refined an older distinction between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness, proposed by March and Olsen (1989, 1998). In terms of the earlier discussion of Boudon's "cognitivist model" and "strong reasons", it can be said that the logic of consequences searches for strong reasons of an act or a belief primarily at its consequences for an actor or a believer, while the logic of arguing seeks "a reasoned consensus" (Risse, 2000, p. 9) among actors, based on mutual understanding rather than on self-centered calculations of success (Habermas, 1981). This corresponds to Boudon's axiological rationality. The logic of appropriateness, on the other hand, does not care much about reasons. Therefore, according to the "cognitivist model", action taken under a dominant influence of the logic of appropriateness could not be regarded as rational action. In terms of Weber's (1922 [1978]) typology of action types, it can be denoted as traditional action.

Leaders, confronted with a threat to their privileged positions, have incentives to use their positions of power and try to openly impose their interests in direct bargaining with constituencies. This is a strategy to restrict access to power and privilege to save the surplus for themselves. However, this entails significant risks of provoking the constituencies to resort to more drastic means of opposition, including revolutionary violence. In fact, though great uncertainty in the data has to be admitted, it has been found in empirical studies of civil war that the exclusion of major parts of the society from access to power increases the likelihood of violence (Wimmer, Cederman and Min, 2009). Therefore, pure logic of consequences seems to be an overly crude instrument to be used on the part of leaders.

Faced with growing axiologically rooted demands of constituencies, leaders are more likely to engage in what Risse (2000, p. 8, following Schimmelfennig, 1997) calls “rhetorical action”, or what Elster (1995) calls “strategic uses of argument”. Both terms imply that the actual logic employed lies somewhere in between the logic of consequences and the logic of arguing. The point is that arguing is not used by leaders as a means of arriving at a reasoned consensus, but primarily as a means of furthering self-interest. Self-interest is rhetorically presented as general interest, i.e. instrumental rationality is feigned as axiological.

Elster (1995, p. 246), providing an example of a strategic use of argument, speaks of a well-off advocate who breaks taxes for the well-off, and only for them, and supports such a decision with a universalist-style argument that this policy will have beneficial effects for all by a trickle-down effect. However, such a move has minimal chances to withstand counter-arguments, supposedly being raised by the logic of arguing, pointing to other possible policies that would have more direct beneficial effects for all, such as breaking taxes for all, without exceptions. In other words, as soon as impartial arguments are invoked, even if only rhetorically, it nevertheless becomes increasingly demanding to foist off partial interests under the guise of impartiality.⁷

Note also that the advocate’s proposal to break taxes for most, but not all, who are well-off, and for some of the worse-off as well, might be generally more acceptable than reducing taxes for the well-off only. Elster’s general point is that strategic arguments that deviate enough from the self-interest of the proponent, but not so much that nothing is gained, have better chances to become accepted than allegedly impartial arguments that fit too well with one’s self-interest. We can only add that when power differentials are significant, as in the case of leaders vs. constituencies, it becomes even easier for the more powerful side to perform various rhetorical manoeuvres under the guise of impartiality. The possible spectrum of strategic manoeuvres is very large, as there are numerous possible fields of competence and the leaders may in any time attempt to divert public attention from discussions of their competences to contribute to the general prosperity toward some other fields (e.g. ethnicity, abortion, same-sex marriage, etc.), in which competence claims can be more easily, i.e. “less costly”, established within the given context.

5. Example: Ethnicity as Competence Field

A simulation model has been developed to study dynamics of nationalist radicalisation. Model assumptions have been based on the empirical evidence of historical narratives of the much studied case of the former Yugoslavia (e.g. Bringa, 1995; Woodward, 1995; Silber and Little, 1997; Melcic, 1999; Wilmer, 2002;

⁷ Elster (1995, p. 257, emphasis in original) refers to “a *multiplier effect* of impartiality, by which the presence of some genuinely impartial actors may force or induce self-interested others to behave as if they, too, were swayed by such motives”. This becomes possible since even one’s rhetorical commitment to values opens the way for other (perhaps truly committed) actors to hold this actor accountable for complying to the proclaimed values (Neumann and Srblijinović, 2013c).

Gagnon, 2004; Sieber-Egger, 2011). The starting point of the conflict has been described as power struggle within the Yugoslavian Communist Party. Formerly communist politicians took advantage of ethnic sentiments, allowing them to command loyalty with the ethnic agenda. Nevertheless, the degree of ethnic mobilisation in the population initially remained small (Calic, 1995). However, very soon civilians were also becoming involved in the battles and even war crimes. Thus the empirical evidence suggests a theoretical mechanism of a recursive feedback relation between dynamics on the political level and socio-cultural dynamics at the population level as described in the previous sections.

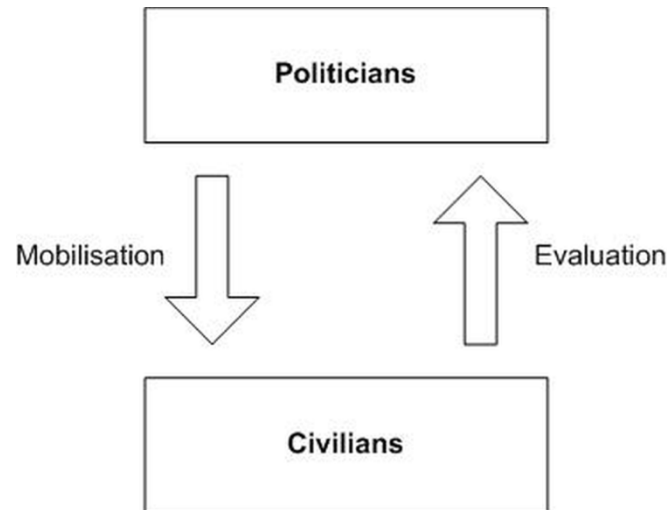


Figure 2.
Relation between political actors and political attitudes

The model is publicly available in the OpenABM archive: <http://www.openabm.org/model/4048/version/1/view>. For a detailed description of the model see Markisic, Neumann and Lotzmann (2012). The model assumptions target the change of neighbourhood relations. The empirical evidence suggested a two-level design of the model, namely to specify the mechanisms of the escalation dynamics of ethno-political conflicts as a recursive feedback between political actors and social identities at the population level. While a focus purely on the population level (e.g. Horowitz, 2001) masks the responsibility of political actors, explanations that focus purely on the political level (e.g. Gagnon, 2004) need to explain why certain politics had been successful. Integrating both accounts generates a self-organised feedback cycle between political actors and attitudes. The basic mechanism is the reinforcement of the population's value orientations through the agency of political actors. These orientations may generally be related to either civil values or national identities. On the one hand, politicians mobilise value orientations in the population to get public support. On the other hand, politicians appeal to the most popular value orientations in order to maximise the support. In abstract terms, the feedback relation can be described as a recursive function. Hence there is a positive feedback cycle, damped, however, by the fact that various politicians compete over different value orientations in the population. The model is calibrated at the population census of 1991 in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Whereas Serbia and Croatia had rather homogeneous populations, the population of Bosnia-Herzegovina was highly ethnically mixed.

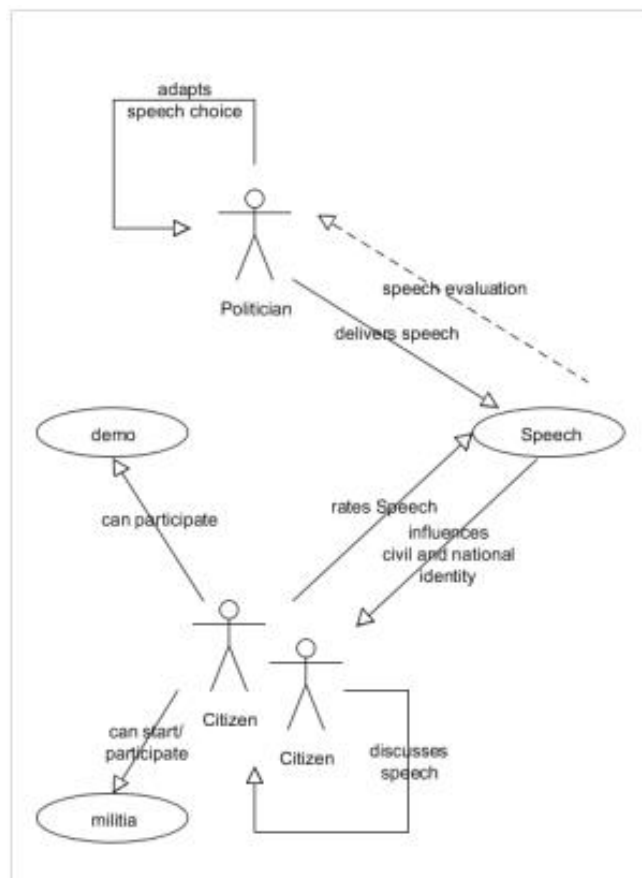


Figure 3.

Use case diagram of the model structure (adapted from Funke, 2012)

Simulation experiments have been undertaken with the assumption of complete ignorance about the empirical distribution of cognitive components, namely of the political attitudes of citizens and the political agendas of politicians. Initially both the political agendas and the value orientations of citizens are set randomly for all republics. This allows studying the pure effect of the feedback cycle.

Differences in simulation results are due to differential population distributions since all other features are the same for all republics. For the sake of simplicity of the argument, we concentrate on the change in value orientations of the population. This reflects the research question of how neighbourhood relations changed in the course of conflict escalation. In fact, all republics reach the stage of nationalist radicalisation during the simulation. However, dynamics reveals a crucial difference: while the simulated homogeneous population quickly becomes radicalised (figure 4), in heterogeneous populations radicalisation is slower. Only in the second half of the simulation a push towards nationalist radicalisation can be observed (Figure 5).

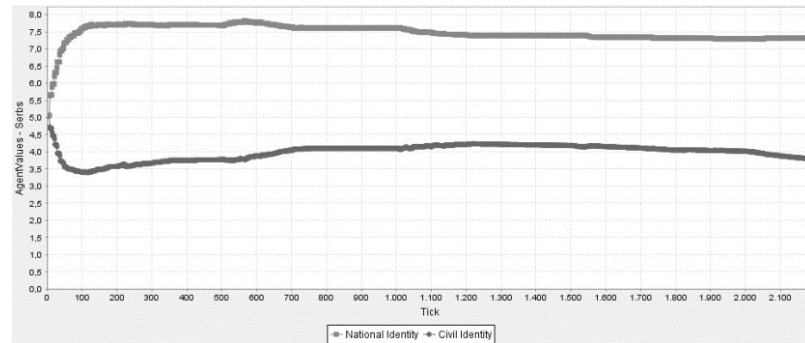


Figure 4.

Example of average value distribution in an ethnically homogeneous population

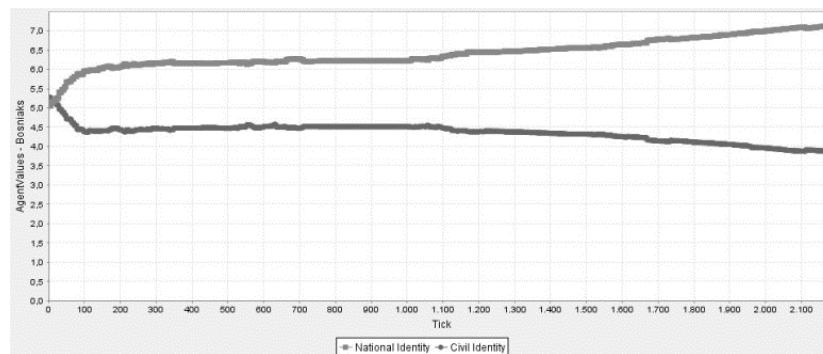


Figure 5.

Example of average value distribution in an ethnically heterogeneous population

Simulation reveals two stylised facts of the two basic general mechanisms of escalation dynamics. These stylised facts reveal the mechanisms which connect the explanans and the explanandum. The first mechanism concerns political processes, the second mechanisms concerns micro processes of neighbourhood relations. The inter-penetration of the processes reveals sequential ordering:

First, on the political level, visibility of political appeals plays the essential role for radicalisation, by stimulating counter-radicalisation in response to initial radicalisation. This is driven by the political level and accounts for the case of rather homogeneous populations and nations with common or closely related historical heritage such as Serbia and Croatia. Ethnically mixed populations, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, provide more resistance against political radicalisation prior to the outbreak of actual violence. Political radicalisation can be achieved more easily in ethnically homogeneous nations.

Second, refugees and rumours play the essential role for later radicalisation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Here, radicalisation is imported from outside and is driven predominantly by the population level. Dense networks increase the likelihood of the spreading of radicalisation.

In sum, the result is that more homogeneous populations were more likely to be subjected to radicalisation than heterogeneous ones. The mechanism is political radicalisation and counter-radicalisation, enfolding a positive feedback cycle. Ethnicity is a possible competence field in which political actors might become successful. Heterogeneous societies, in contrast, have more damping mechanisms to

prevent radicalisation. The attractiveness of ethnicity as competence field in heterogeneous societies is restricted to only minorities. With regard to the attractiveness to a wider audience, other competence fields seem to be more promising. It should be noted that these are theoretical results, not an explanation of any empirical case: much more factors come into play in reality. For instance, neither economic history nor Yugoslavia's communist legacy has been taken into account. Likewise the random initialisation of political attitudes is only a thought experiment. However, this focus on the theoretical investigation of social mechanisms (while model assumptions are based on qualitative empirical evidence) allows for a generalisation of the insights gained by the simulation experiments: the model provides an example of how the concept of competence fields can be utilised for applied research.

If there is a lesson for Europe, which is to be learned from the case of former Yugoslavia, it seems to be that focusing political struggles on inter-ethnic/international tensions in times of crisis can bring into question the very foundations of the larger supranational union of which these individual, relatively homogeneous ethnicities/nations are parts. In Europe the states constituting the Union are also constituted as nation-states, which provides an incentive for political entrepreneurs to appeal to the constitutional foundation of the nation. In other words, the "natural move" from the competence fields such as economic prosperity, social justice, democratic reforms of the supranational union, and the like – which are, admittedly, in times of crisis difficult and "unrewarding" for political leaders – toward the competence field of ethnicity/nationalism, can undermine the very foundations of the larger union.

1. How to investigate competence fields

It should be apparent from what has already been said that competence fields are multifaceted, dynamic phenomena. Like all political maneuvering, competence fields are always in flux, always changing contours, being shaped and reshaped by multiple speech acts "reworking and producing" contextual conditions that enable those speech acts to be uttered.

Such multifaceted, dynamic phenomena can best be investigated by a combined application of methods that are traditionally used in humanities and social sciences, as well as the novel methods that have more recently been enabled by the development of computing technology.

Processes of formation and development of competence fields can be investigated by more traditional social-scientific methods. Since the role of speech seems to be crucial for establishment of competence fields, qualitative methods seem to be particularly suited for investigating discursive aspects of the processes involved. Speeches of various political actors can be analysed by discourse analysis. Politicians can be interviewed so as to gain insights into their way of reasoning, "the logic" they are driven by, as well as their use of arguments ("rhetorical action", "strategic use of arguments", etc.). In particular, the hypotheses outlined in table 1 could be tested.

Various additional, more or less automated methods and techniques from the field of information retrieval including but not limited to natural language processing, social web & opinion mining, sentiment analysis, speech recognition can be used to provide further empirical evidence for competence fields and for testing hypotheses. Various sources available on social media that frequently contain digital speech acts of politicians (in form of text, audio and video material) but also user discussions, comments and most importantly opinions about them could be collected, analysed and used to produce statistical data about current public perceptions of competence.

Of special interest are news portals and specialised weblogs which often include interviews and reports on political events and even more often allow visitors to comment on these articles. The actual

articles (including potential audio and video material) could be used to automatically or semi-automatically construct competence fields in form of topic maps (see Ponjavić et al. 2010 for an example), tag clouds (Smith 2008), conceptual networks (Schatten 2013), or even folksonomies (Mika 2007). These conceptual maps which identify most important topics in a given series of texts, could be used to visualise the space of political problems (if applied to a statistically relevant collection of articles that contain speech acts) or the space of political problems as perceived by one political actor (a politician, a party, an interest group etc., if applied only on selected articles which cover these political actors).

These conceptual maps could then be further analysed to yield actual fields of competence as perceived by the readers of a given news outlet if compared with the given comments. Sentiment analysis or opinion mining which refers to the application of natural language processing, computational linguistics, and text analytics to identify and extract subjective information in source materials (Pang and Lee 2008) provides us with the necessary methodology to automatically extract how people feel about the competence as perceived by given political actor. In this way, the conceptual maps could be annotated with actual sentiment about competence as given by actual readers yielding therefore an empirical view of competence fields based on statistical analysis.

Besides speech as one key dimension, dynamism of competence fields, as another crucial facet,⁸ can also be productively investigated by a combination of the more and the less traditional methods. When considering dynamics of competence field formation, it must be stressed that this dynamics can be observed at several levels of social aggregation: the interpersonal, the inter-group (e.g. inter-ethnic, inter-party, inter-associational, etc.), the inter-spherical (e.g. public-to-political sphere dynamics and vice versa, political-to-economic sphere dynamics and vice versa, economic-to-public sphere dynamics and vice versa),⁹ and the inter-societal (i.e. supranational) level.

On the other hand information retrieval methods could apply here as well. For example, the previously mentioned competence fields could be analysed for their dynamics by adding a temporal perspective to topic maps. In this way one could animate the changes that occur in the perceived space of political problems, as well as the perceived competence fields of political actors. These analyses could be further detailed by analysing actors on various levels of detail (for example party, club, group, individual politician), based on geographical region, or even based on various traits of the actual public actors whose comments were analysed to provide the competence fields. Such temporal analytics would not only be valuable to science as an empirical source of knowledge, but could also find their way into the practice of political campaign monitoring and trend analysis.

More traditional methods, such as participant observation, can be used for tracing, for example, how certain ideas through interpersonal or inter-group contacts, micro-mechanisms of social influence, etc. get transferred from the civil society (public sphere) to the political arena. Research results thus obtained can, however, be used as (partial, at least) inputs into less traditional, and more technologically advanced analyses, such as social network analysis and agent-based simulation, by means of which those results can be incorporated into more comprehensive or more generalizable models and schemes.¹⁰

⁸ It can be argued, of course, that speech itself is a dynamic phenomenon.

⁹ Cohen and Arato (1992) advance the thesis that a thorough interpenetration among the three mentioned spheres is a fundamental precondition of a viable society.

¹⁰ In order to emphasise the agency (and not only the structural) dimension that can also be tackled with those approaches, Saunders-Newton (2006) subsumes various methodological approaches of sociophysics, multi-agent modelling, and social network analysis under the notion of *agency-based modelling*. He also calls for "a maturing transdiscipline that allows analysts and inquirers not only to consider increasingly complex phenomenology in a rigorous fashion, but also to pursue such inquiry in a more interdisciplinary fashion" (Saunders-Newton, 2006, p. 167).

Recent advances in network science allow us to model the dynamics of rumor spread across social networks (Doerr et al., 2012). Similar models could be applied to analyze how political problems and ideas are transferred from the political arena to the public, *vice versa* and internally inside both of these entities. Here again information retrieval techniques could be employed to collect data about social networks on one hand and actual ideas (concepts) on the other. Depending on the social systems to be analysed, networks could be found in various social applications (forums, weblogs, social networking sites, wikis, podcasting, etc.) as well as by analysing news content (e.g. if various political actors are mentioned in the same article about some event that could imply that they are socially connected), official sites (party/interest group/lobby member lists could provide us with social network data), official communication (sender and receiver of communication are actors in a communication network), etc. Actual ideas that spread through a network could be collected through mining techniques from news and media as explained above.

Agent-based simulation techniques could then be employed to create models based on empirical data in order to provide new theories about the dynamics of competence fields and of course yield prediction methods.

Another research question that comes to mind is the question of a link between competence fields and conspiracy theories. Whatever the way we look at conspiracy theories, either as particular, intentionally exploited, ideological constructs, or as a reasonable attempt to comprehend and position oneself in the increasingly complex and incomprehensible world (Blanuša, 2013), the question remains whether conspiracy theories can also be used as tools in struggles to establish competence fields, if anything, as a way to justify one's own only partial competence, or even complete incompetence, in certain, allegedly conspiracy-driven, fields.

2. Conclusion

We have offered a conceptualisation of competence fields as a means of establishing political leadership. We have argued that competence fields are socially constructed, and elucidated their construction by recourse to well-established theoretical frameworks, such as Boudon's, Buzan's, Risse's and Elster's. These frameworks have already been subjected to thorough theoretical discussions and elaborations. However, for most of them, empirical implications have not been, as yet, so carefully worked out.

Hence, the aim of our further research will be to make the notion of competence fields more concrete by identifying its empirical correlates. Such research agenda calls for a combined application of traditional social-scientific methods and various additional, more or less automated methods and techniques from the field of information retrieval and computer modelling. We have already offered a glimpse into such research by the example of an agent-based model of ethnicity as competence field which allows identifying mechanisms that drive social dynamics. Further results that will be obtained in synergy between the often complementary social-scientific and computational approaches could significantly improve our understanding of the emergence, development, and dissolution of competence fields, and provide sound empirical support to the conceptualisation of competence fields as a means of establishing political leadership.

Democracy is the bedrock of inclusive, innovative and reflective societies, while free speech and argumentative exchanges among citizens as moral and political equals are fundamental for democracy. In this spirit, by probing deeply into discursive processes of competence fields formation, this research should not only contribute to a better scientific understanding of political communication and political leadership, but also to the development of a more democratic, inclusive, innovative and reflective society.

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