



ATTITUDES TOWARDS NATO: A SURVEY REPORT

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of research conducted by the Atlantic Initiative, in partnership with the Prizma Public Opinion Research Agency, to understand public sentiment in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) on the topics of NATO and foreign influence. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, researchers sought to gain insight into the views of respondents on NATO generally, on the prospect of Bosnian membership in the Alliance, and the degree to which different states exert influence in BiH. Data gathered through a combination of Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), focus groups, and individual interviews provides both quantitative analysis and qualitative depth.

One key finding is that there is considerable support for NATO accession, which was favoured by 69.1% of respondents in our survey. This was most pronounced in the Federation of BiH (FBiH), where an overwhelming 90.1% of respondents expressed support for integration; though, a majority (56.0%) of respondents in the Brčko District (BD) and one-third (32.6%) of respondents in the Republika Srpska (RS) also took this position. These figures reflect the nuance of public opinion in BiH, which is shaped by a complex mixture of domestic sociopolitical dynamics and external geopolitical factors. Thus, this research touched on that broader geopolitical context as well, exploring the role of Russia in facilitating the secessionist activities of political elites in the RS and ascertaining how the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has impacted political discourse in BiH.

By illuminating the perspectives of Bosnian citizens, this report is intended to inform Euro-Atlantic integration strategies, as well as measures to mitigate the impact of harmful foreign influences. It showcases the diversity of opinions within BiH and discusses the mix of internal and external pressures that shape public sentiment, and as such, can help guide a targeted approach to more localized efforts. It is clear from the research that many Bosnians lack information about Euro-Atlantic integration but are open to learning more, and further that many view the issue through a pragmatic lens, first and foremost.

1. SETTING THE CONTEXT

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the period spanning March to April 2023 was marked by a complex sociopolitical climate, which set the context for research undertaken by Atlantic Initiative to ascertain the views of Bosnians on NATO and on various foreign influences. While such sociopolitical complexities are often a reality and a challenge in BiH, this particular period came on the heels of very significant political developments that followed the October 2022 elections – beginning with the decision of the High Representative (HR) to impose amendments to the country’s electoral law and Constitution on the night of the election itself, which much of the public saw as a concession by the international community to the demands of Bosnian Croat ethnonationalists and their HDZ BiH party. When the state-level Council of Ministers was formed in January 2023, it included representatives from both the HDZ BiH and the key Serb ethnonationalist party the SNSD, as well as from a coalition known as the Troika, comprising a diverse set of right, liberal, and left parties that secured the Council’s Bosniak-designated positions.

Yet, it would still be several more months before a government was formed at the entity level in the Federation of BiH (FBiH), after the largest Bosniak ethnonationalist party, the SDA, managed to indirectly block its formation by exploiting the new amendments imposed by the HR. The political scene was thus further complicated when the HR intervened again towards the end of our research period, and temporarily suspended the Constitution of the FBiH to enable the formation of the entity’s government without the consent of the Bosniak vice president (a member of the SDA), deepening political polarization within the FBiH. And notably, when the FBiH government was finally formed at the end of April, the SDA was not at its head for the first time in nearly a decade despite winning the largest proportion of seats in the election; an outcome that aptly if somewhat perplexingly reflects the convolutions of Bosnian politics.

Simultaneously, though the country’s other entity, Republika Srpska (RS), formed a government with relatively little controversy, accusations of electoral fraud were rampant. This only

exacerbated the already polarized discourse in BiH, as the entity's opposition candidate for president, Jelena Trivić of the PDP, accused longtime leading Bosnian Serb politician Milorad Dodik of vote rigging. In the end, this did not alter the electoral outcome in any way, but it did illuminate the contentiousness of these elections.

At the state level, the issue of NATO membership was entirely sidestepped in the process of forming the Council of Ministers, and a broad reluctance to engage with this question (as well as other controversial subjects) highlights the geopolitical challenge facing BiH as it navigates its way between Euro-Atlantic aspirations and the influence of external malign actors like Russia. Indeed, in response to the candidate status granted to BiH in December 2022 by the European Union (EU), which was intended to motivate reform, Moscow has made thinly veiled threats against pro-NATO political actors in BiH. For example, Russian diplomat Alexander Botsoan-Kharchenko referred to EU candidacy as a “very dangerous thing” for BiH, arguing that the country is only stable because the RS – the leaders of which have firmly aligned the entity with both Serbia and Russia and against NATO – has a considerable degree of autonomy.¹ Moreover, RS President Milorad Dodik has openly contemplated alternative alliances such as BRICS, meeting with Putin in both June and September 2022, and in May 2023, and significantly increasing bilateral trade between the RS and Russia in recent years.² This underscores the strategic positioning of BiH, straddling Western integrationist aspirations and Eastern geopolitical interests, and the geostrategic tug-of-war being fought over the country's future orientation.

Of course, these developments and tensions are not occurring in a vacuum, and the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine has had impacts inside BiH, where Russian support for the secessionist activities of ethnonationalists in the RS has grown. This support is believed to be part of a broader geopolitical strategy deployed by Moscow following a meeting between Dodik and Putin in December 2021, just months before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Dodik, who initially called for Bosnian neutrality as Bosnian Croat and Bosniak leaders condemned the invasion, shifted quickly towards endorsing Putin's actions outright, claiming the West had failed for years to “react to the extermination of the Russian population in Ukraine.... and Russia was forced to retaliate.”³ And, in direct opposition to the EU – which suspended Kremlin-backed outlets like *RT* and *Sputnik* in the wake of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, largely to limit the flow of disinformation – Dodik's RS apparently has plans to introduce the Serbian-language *RT Balkan* outlet to the Bosnian market in 2024.⁴ The evolution of Dodik's positions and decision making just since February 2022 highlights the degree to which external pressures and influences

1 See: “Russian ambassador says Bosnia's EU candidate status is a ‘dangerous thing,’” *N1*, 30 December 2022, <https://n1info.ba/english/news/russian-ambassador-says-bosnias-eu-candidate-status-is-a-dangerous-thing/>.

2 See: Dusan Stojanovic, “Putin meets Bosnian Serb separatist leader, praises Serbia,” *Associated Press*, 20 September 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-serbia-milorad-dodik-european-union-795a26a1d3b9eaeecf780e9e905cab89>; and “Russia's Putin meets Bosnian Serb leader Dodik, hails rise in trade,” *Reuters*, 23 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-meets-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-hails-rise-trade-2023-05-23/>.

3 See: Stojanovic, “Putin meets Bosnian Serb separatist leader, praises Serbia.”

4 See: Amina Bijelonica Muminovic, Inda Swanke, and Amer Jahic, “Expansion of Kremlin-backed Media in Bosnia Is a Concern, Analysts Say,” *VOA*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/expansion-of-kremlin-backed-media-in-bosnia-is-a-concern-analysts-say/7486222.html>.

shape the domestic sociopolitical landscape in BiH.

It is this context that served as the backdrop to our research on perceptions of NATO and foreign influences in BiH. Hence, this complex tapestry of internal political dynamics and external geopolitical pressures, and the interplay between local governance structures and broader international orientations are inevitably reflected in the results. For, even more than others, this period in BiH from the October 2022 elections through the formation of the FBiH government in late April was shaped as much by internal tensions as it was by global geopolitical narratives.

This summary of key findings organizes the survey results into sections on: attitudes and opinions towards NATO and NATO accession, trust in media representations of NATO, and perceptions of foreign influence in BiH. These results are preceded by a description of the Methodology (next) and are followed by a Conclusion and Recommendations for further activities and research.

2. METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a survey that was administered from March to April 2023, in collaboration with the Prizma Public Opinion Research Agency. It also incorporates insights drawn from focus groups and interviews conducted across BiH by the Atlantic Initiative research team. This comprehensive mixed method approach (qualitative and quantitative) was used to gain a nuanced understanding of public opinion in BiH regarding the country's relationship with NATO and other international actors.

The quantitative element of this research employed the Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) method, to facilitate engagement with a diverse sample of 1,004 respondents. A stratified sampling approach was used, based on the 2013 census, to ensure that our sample was representative of the broader population and diverse perspectives and experiences. This quantitative research data forms the statistical foundation of the study, and facilitates the generalization of findings to the wider population. It is instrumental to identifying patterns, trends, and relationships, and offers a solid basis by which conclusions can be drawn and future research informed.

In parallel, the qualitative dimension of this research involved 11 focus groups, each with 8 participants, held in Banjaluka, Bijeljina, Brčko, East Sarajevo, Mostar, Prijedor, Sarajevo, Široki Brijeg, Trebinje, Tuzla, and Zenica. This ensured geographical diversity and captured a range of opinions. The research also benefited from 30 unstructured interviews with key stakeholders, including politicians, decision-makers at all levels of government, and professionals from the security sector, adding further depth to the findings. Interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic and discourse analysis, which complemented the survey findings and supported a holistic interpretation of the data.

The primary objectives of this report are to:

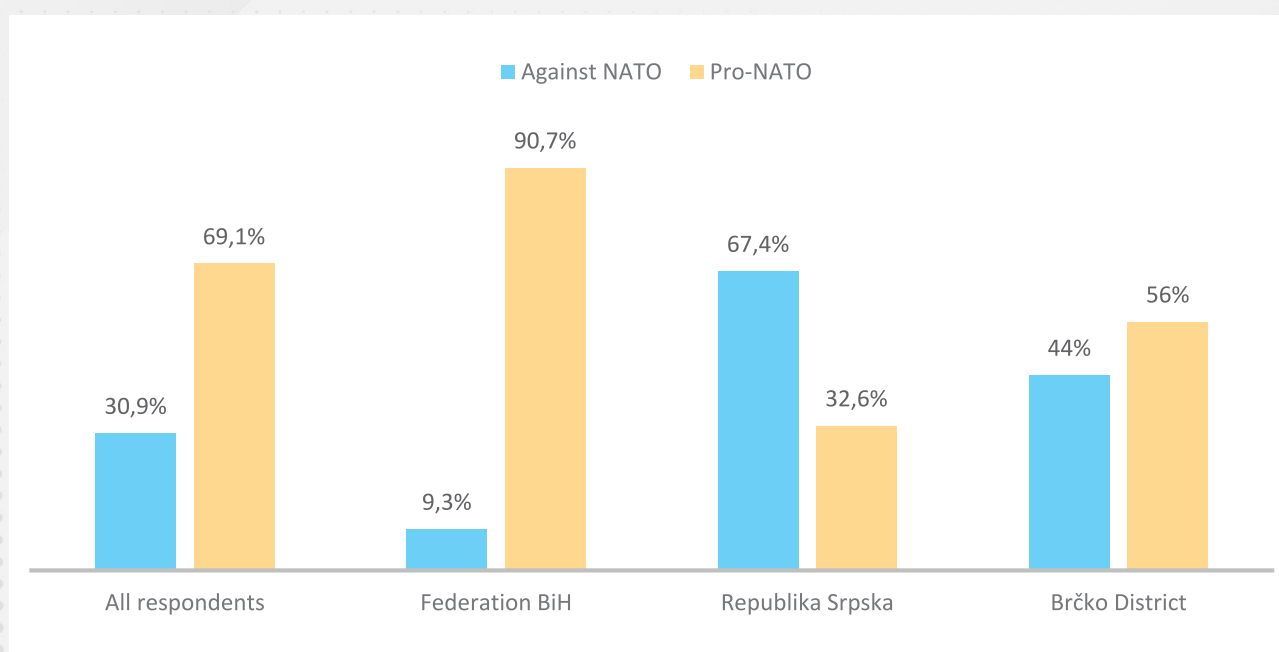
1. increase awareness among the international community of the attitudes, opinions, and sentiments of Bosnians vis-à-vis NATO;
2. share information that can help shape effective strategies to promote Euro-Atlantic integration among citizens of BiH; and
3. explore potential strategies that may be used by NATO to counteract foreign malign influence in BiH and to foster resilience against violent extremism among Bosnians.

Finally, it is important to note that respondents in this research were asked about their ethnic/national identity as part of sociodemographic data collection. This was done in such a way as to allow for self-identification, without predefined answers, which gave participants the freedom to express their identity in their own terms. As a result, 16.9% of respondents chose to identify as “Bosnians” and not as a member of one of the country’s three constituent ethnic groups – Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. This choice by some respondents to identify with the state itself rather than with an ethnic group indicates that a segment of the population embraces a civic identity defined primarily through their Bosnian citizenship, and not through an ethnic lens.

3. ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS OF BOSNIAN CITIZENS TOWARDS NATO AND NATO ACCESSION FOR BIH

Asked to state whether they support Bosnian accession to NATO, a majority of respondents (69.1%) are in support. An overwhelming 90.7% of respondents from the FBiH expressed this position, along with 32.6% of respondents from the RS and 56% of those from the BD (see Figure 1). Support for full NATO membership for BiH was especially high among respondents who identified as Bosniak (94.3%) and Bosnian (90.1%), with Croats not too far behind (at 80.8%). A notable 24% of Serb respondents also favour accession, closely mirroring the rate of support for NATO more generally among Serbs. This data demonstrates that recognition of NATO's importance to regional security and political stability is more widespread in BiH than may be presumed.

Figure 1. Support for Bosnian accession to NATO, in BiH overall and by entity/district



On the question of Bosnian accession to NATO, disparities emerged between the entities and among regions, though there was almost no difference in support for accession based on whether respondents lived in rural or urban settings (see Table 1). In the FBiH, respondents expressed the most support for accession in the cantons of Posavina (100%), Podrinje (100%), Sarajevo (95.9%), and Tuzla (94%), and while support for accession was lower in the cantons of Una-Sana (81.7%), Hercegovina (80.3%), and West Herzegovina (64.5%), these rates were considerably higher than support in any part of the RS, or in the Brčko District (57.9%). Indeed, in the RS, the regions with the highest support for accession were Bijeljina (45%), Doboj (44.2%), and Pale (31.7%), whereas less than a quarter of respondents expressed support in Banja Luka (23.5%) and Trebinje (20%).

Table 1. Level of support for NATO accession

	Rural	Urban
Strongly Support	42.7	42.2
Somewhat Support	26.3	25.8
TOTAL Support	69.0	68.0
Somewhat Against	11.1	13.5
Strongly Against	18.8	18.2
TOTAL Against	29.9	31.7
Don't Know	1.0	0.2

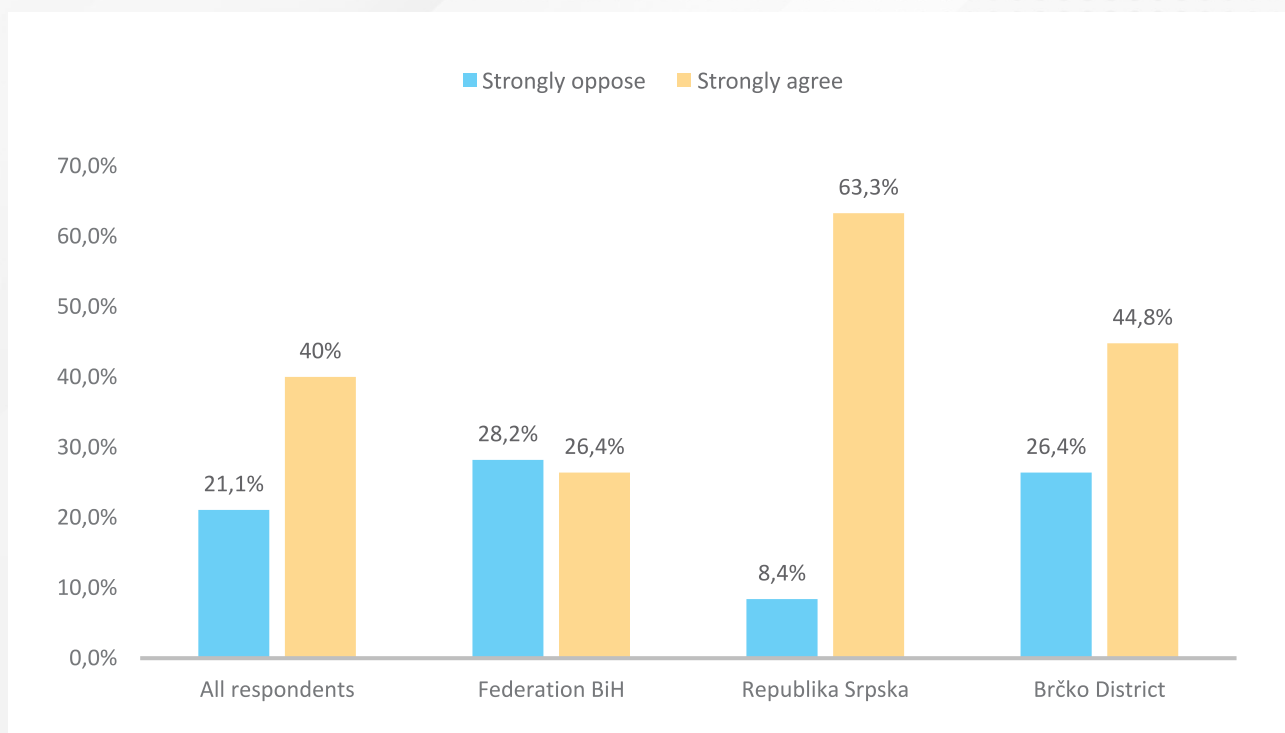
Given these variations in support for accession across BiH, it is worth mentioning prior research conducted by the Atlantic Initiative that found a link between higher support for NATO accession with higher levels of inter-ethnic cooperation and lower levels of social distance in a community or region.⁵ This correlation suggests that social cohesion and inter-ethnic harmony may play a role in shaping public attitudes towards international alliances and security frameworks. Gaining a greater understanding of this interplay between domestic social relations and foreign policy orientations is thus crucial for policymakers and researchers alike.

Nevertheless, there is some level of support in BiH for a policy of neutrality vis-à-vis participation in military alliances, especially among respondents in the RS, but also in the BD. In the FBiH, respondents who expressed opposition to neutrality far outnumbered those in favour; however, there was some parity between those who felt strongly about either position (see Figure 2). These variations reflect the political narratives and historical experiences that define many of the distinctions between the two Bosnian entities. For instance, in the RS, the pronounced inclination of respondents towards neutrality is undoubtedly influenced by the legislative declaration on neutrality adopted by the Serbian parliament in 2007, and the broader narrative of neutrality that emanates from Belgrade. Our research also found that this position is

⁵ See: Majda Halilović and Nejra Veljan, *Exploring ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2019).

deeply rooted in the collective memory and experiences of people in the RS, particularly NATO bombings during the 1992–1995 war. In contrast, the strong opposition to neutrality expressed by respondents in the FBiH is based on their perception of NATO membership as a security guarantee against aggression.

Figure 2. Strong support for or opposition to Bosnian neutrality, in BiH overall and by entity/district



On another hand, asked to state their opinion of NATO on a scale from very negative to very positive, nearly two-thirds of respondents (62.3%) said it was somewhat (38.8%) or very positive (23.5%), while roughly one-third (34.8%) stated it was somewhat (16.7%) or very negative (18.1%). A very small number (1.7%) of respondents indicated that they were unsure of their opinion on NATO. The survey also gathered information about the reasons for these opinions. Of respondents who had a positive view of NATO, almost half (49.2%) cited security as their reason for this view. Positive opinions were also due to the belief that accession will be better for BiH in a general sense (10.2%), that it will equate to assistance in case of armed conflict (7.6%), and that it will help secure the peace (4.4%). Negative opinions of respondents towards NATO were linked to the 1990s-era bombings of Serbia or the RS (21.5%), the view that accession would be bad policy (20.5%), a lack of confidence in NATO (15.1%), and a distrust linked to interference by the Alliance in the 1992–1995 war (12.8%).

Respondents who identified as Bosnian viewed NATO most positively, with 82.7% indicating they held a somewhat or very positive opinion, followed closely by Bosniaks (85%). This was also true for about two-thirds of Croat respondents (62.6%). But among Serbs, less than a quarter of respondents held a positive view of NATO (23.5%); reflecting similar results in a survey

on attitudes towards NATO conducted by the Atlantic Initiative in 2011 (though, using a different methodology). Nevertheless, a rather substantial minority of Serbs hold positive views of NATO, which warrants further exploration.

An analysis through a gendered lens reveals that male respondents expressed more extreme views of NATO, meaning they were more likely to answer both “very positive” and “very negative”. And a cross-tabulation by age shows that, with the exception of respondents in the youngest age group (18–24), a majority of respondents of all ages held a generally positive opinion of NATO, especially those between 25 and 34 years old. Interestingly, students, many of whom fall into the 18–24 age group, held the most negative views of the Alliance.

Table 2. Views of NATO, by entity

	Federation of BiH	Republika Srpska	Brčko District
Very Positive	33.8	5.8	23.5
Positive	48.3	22.4	38.7
TOTAL Positive	82.1	28.2	62.2
Negative	9.8	29.3	16.7
Very Negative	5.8	38.7	18.1
Don't Know	2.4	2.5	1.8

Though it is clear that views of NATO are most positive in the FBiH, it is not insignificant that nearly two-thirds of respondents in the Brčko District (BD) expressed positive opinions of the Alliance, nor that more than a quarter of respondents in the RS did the same (see Table 2). Considering the political climate in the RS, this number is a sizeable minority. And, as Figure 1 shows, these opinions of NATO are reliable predictors of the views of respondents regarding accession to the Alliance.

By comparing these results to previous findings on public sentiment in BiH towards NATO, from 15 years ago, a nuanced picture of shifting opinions emerges, shaped by geopolitical dynamics and internal socio-political transformations. For example, these latest survey results suggest a slight decrease in overall positive sentiment towards NATO when weighed against the data collected 15 years ago, but this apparent decline in general enthusiasm for the Alliance has not equated to a significant increase in negative views. In other words, staunchly negative opinions of NATO have not risen considerably, indicating a somewhat stable, if mixed, perception of the Alliance in BiH.

That said, some variations in the views of NATO expressed by respondents from within the same ethnic groups over time should be highlighted. For instance, positive views of NATO among Serbs have risen since reaching a historic low of just 10% in 2018, under the influence of a more assertive Russia (which was emboldened by the 2014 annexation of Crimea), as well as stronger

anti-Western rhetoric in the RS.⁶ The increase in support measured in this latest survey may be partly linked to the aggression against Ukraine, which has prompted a unified response from the West and has exposed the failure of Russia's rapid military campaign, revealing to some Serbs that "all powerful Russia" is not as formidable as they believed. Serbs have long been sceptical of NATO on account of historical grievances and their geopolitical orientation, but positive opinions of NATO among Serb respondents are up 6.5%. This may signal that perspectives are slowly changing among Serbs, perhaps because they are thinking pragmatically about regional stability. It is interesting, too, that among Bosniaks, who have consistently demonstrated strong support for NATO as a guarantor of security and a stabilizing force in BiH, negative sentiment was slightly higher in this recent survey. While an overwhelming majority of Bosniaks maintain their favourable view of NATO, this may indicate that some are beginning to question the value of the Alliance or do not trust that accession will ever come to fruition for BiH. At the same time, Croats have grown more positive towards NATO, likely due to the perceived security and economic benefits of membership.

A comparative analysis of data from surveys carried out in just the last 5 years also reveals mixed results and some fluctuations in public support for NATO accession; but generally, support has grown in this time. Polls conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2018 and 2022 found, for example, that overall support for accession dropped in these years, from 56.0% to 51.0%.⁷ Yet, a survey conducted by Ipsos in 2021, with a larger sample size, found that 66.0% of all respondents supported NATO accession.⁸ In any case, Bosniaks and Croats have consistently expressed high levels of support for membership in the Alliance, while a majority of Serbs have not. For instance, in 2018, the IRI found that support among Bosniaks was at 84.0% and among Croats at 75.0% but was at that record low of 10.0% among Serbs. And in 2021, Ipsos measured support among Bosniaks at 90.0%, among Croats at 92.0%, and among Serbs at 12.0%. The rise in support recorded among Serbs in this recent survey suggests that developments in Serbia's relations with NATO may play a role in shifting perspectives, especially within the RS, as public sentiment responds to geopolitical and regional developments.

The fact that a strong majority of respondents in BiH supported NATO membership across all of these surveys, even in the years when Serb support was so low, underscores the degree to which the Alliance is viewed as strategically valuable to the region. And, importantly, any fluctuations in the findings of these surveys or variations in the sentiment of Bosnians of different ethnic identities do not indicate that support for NATO is weakening. While perspectives on the Alliance may shift and evolve in BiH, support for NATO as a key player in regional security is consistently strong, underlining the complex yet critical role NATO plays in the Balkans.

6 Center for Insights in Survey Research, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Understanding Perceptions of Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence, March 29, 2018 - April 12, 2018," International Republican Institute.

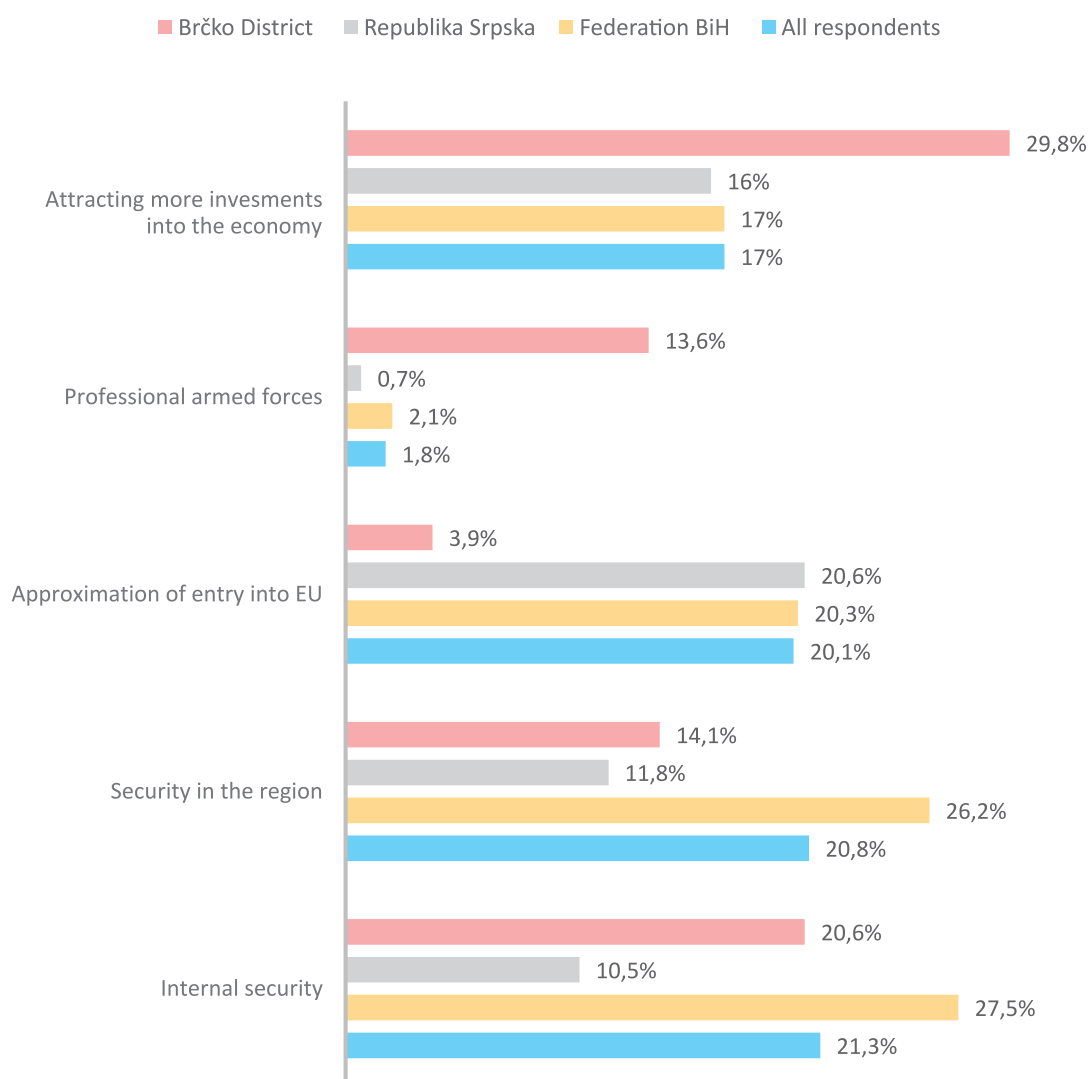
7 Ibid.; Center for Insights in Survey Research, "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey," International Republican Institute, 2022.

8 National Democratic Institute, "What Matters to Bosnia and Herzegovina's Citizens?" Public Opinion Poll, December 2021.

3.1. Perceived benefits of and concerns over NATO membership

Our recent survey sought not only to gauge general perspectives on NATO, but to dig into what Bosnians view as the potential advantages to membership, as well as any related concerns. This produced some notable findings (see Figure 3). For instance, while Serbs in BiH largely oppose NATO accession, many exhibit strong inclinations towards EU membership, and in our survey, one-fifth of respondents from the RS said that the degree to which NATO accession approximates EU accession would make NATO membership a benefit to BiH. This suggests that some Serbs perceive NATO membership as a potential pathway or even a prerequisite to EU accession; and further that the allure of EU membership, with its promises of economic support and infrastructural development, may offer an entry point to fostering greater support for NATO accession among Serbs.

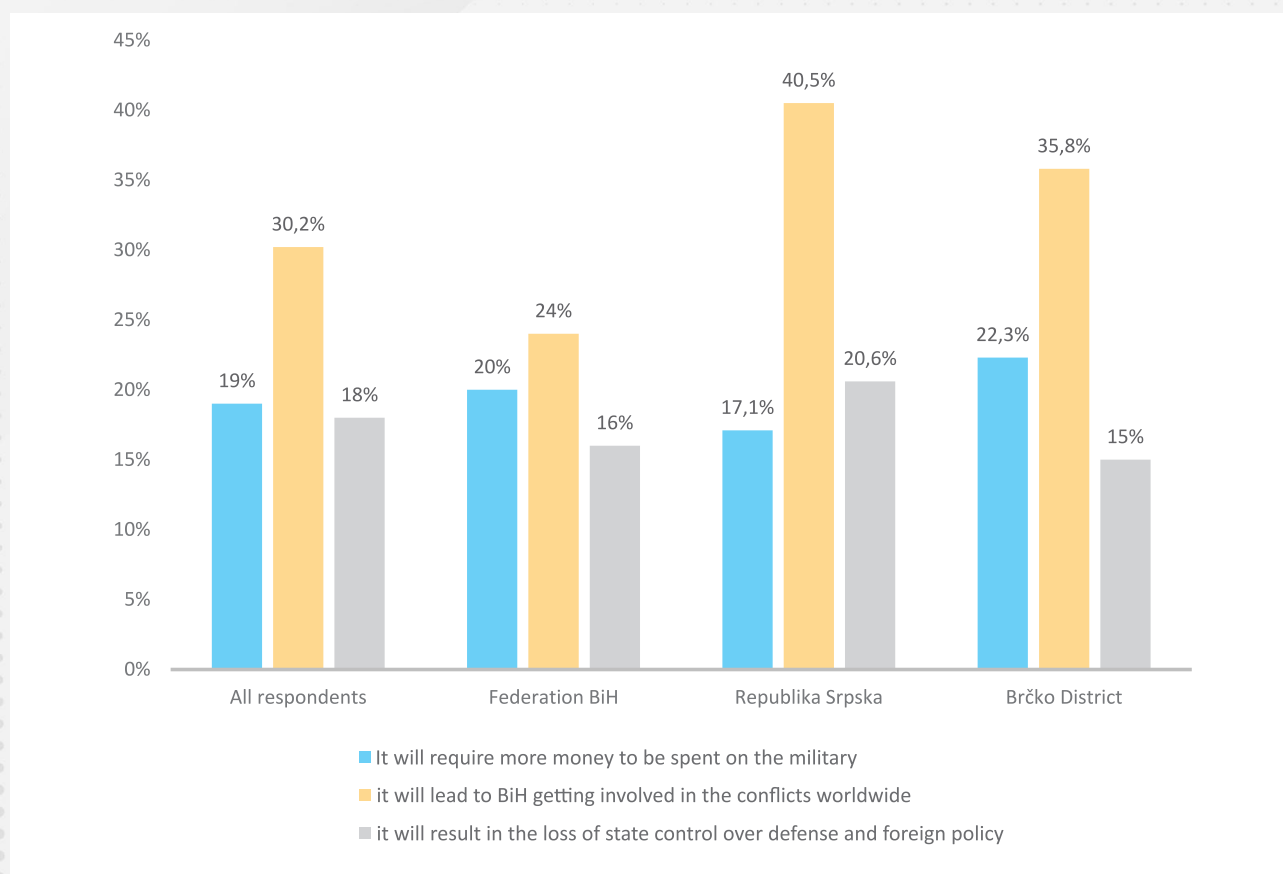
Figure 3. Perceived benefits of NATO membership, in BiH overall and by entity/district



In the FBiH, respondents underscored the significance of NATO to both internal and regional security when asked about the benefits of membership. Respondents who identified as Bosniak and Bosnian were especially apt to express the view that NATO accession is a way to counter the internal strife that has threatened security within Bosnian borders and the instability of the wider Western Balkans. Meaning, they perceive NATO as a means of mitigating internal conflicts and a crucial framework for defence and deterrence against external threats. Croat respondents tended to highlight the economic advantages of NATO membership, envisioning enhanced trade partnerships, increased foreign direct investments, and access to technologically advanced markets. This was the emphasis of respondents in the BD as well, who pointed first to the economic benefits of accession and second to the internal security benefits this would bring.

The most significant concern about NATO membership among respondents in our survey was the potential that BiH will become involved in conflicts worldwide (see Figure 4). Some, but fewer, also expressed concerns about increased military spending and a loss of state control over defence and foreign policy. This perception that NATO membership will draw BiH into conflict likely stems, at least to some extent, from a lack of understanding of how NATO operates, and the misconception that participation by individual member countries in a NATO military action equates to the involvement of the entire Alliance. This speaks to the need to better educate Bosnians about the role and mission of NATO. Indeed, 52.1% of respondents in our survey said they are not at all or are poorly informed about NATO.

Figure 4. Concerns about NATO membership, in BiH overall and by entity/district

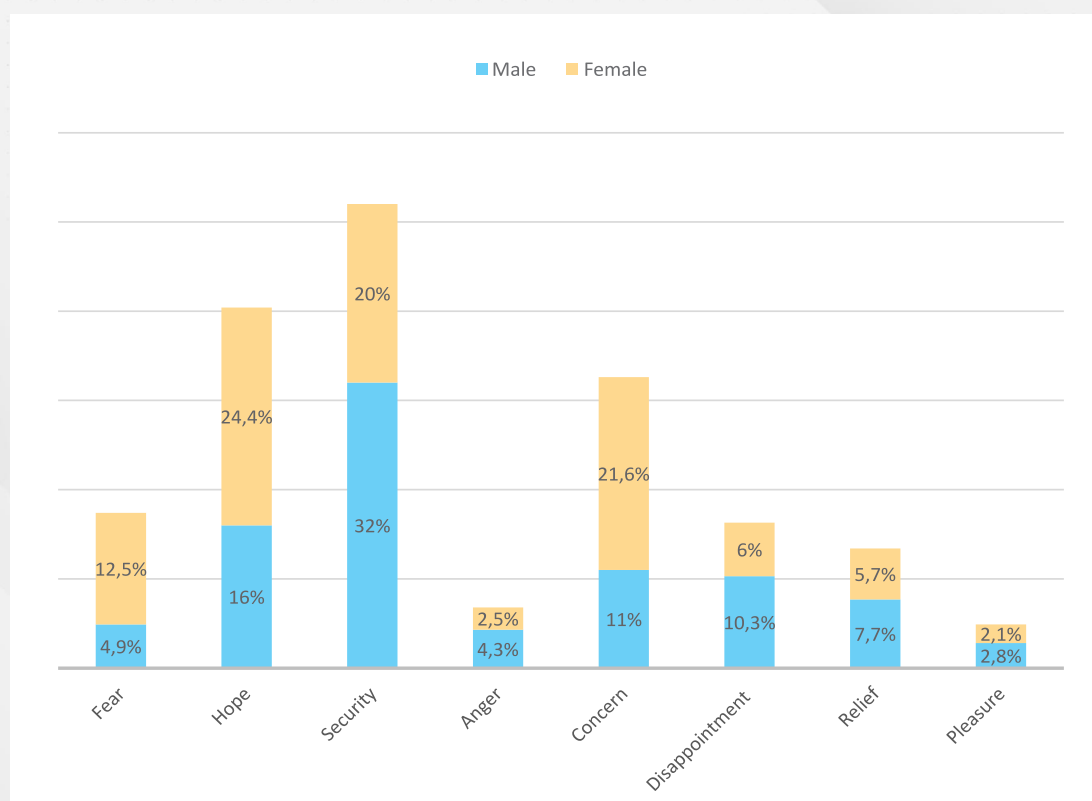


Such a significant lack of knowledge about the Alliance is especially notable given the fact that an open-ended question was asked of respondents whose opinion of NATO has changed over time, regarding what has most influenced this change, and analysis of the coded responses indicates that a significant proportion of respondents across the country answered the “bad politics of the NATO alliance.” This suggests a strong negative sentiment toward the policies and actions of NATO; but, considering the degree to which respondents acknowledged having little to no information about the Alliance, it is reasonable to assume that some if not many Bosnians are forming their opinions of NATO, at least in part, on misperceptions.

3.2. The feelings of respondents regarding the potential entry of BiH into NATO

When asked to share a word that best describes how they *feel* about the entry of BiH into NATO, a quarter of all respondents said they felt “security” (26.0%). Respondents also replied with “hope” (20.2%), “concern” (16.4%), and “fear” (8.8%). As Figure 5 shows, there were some noteworthy distinctions in the answers of respondents, by gender. For instance, males identified the feeling of “security” at a much higher rate (32.0%) than any other and answered “anger” (4.3%) and “disappointment” (10.3%) at approximately double the rate of female respondents. At the same time, the most common response among females was “hope” (24.4%), but this was nearly matched by “concern” (21.6%). And, female respondents were far more likely to answer “fear” (12.5%) than their male counterparts (4.9%).

Figure 5. Feelings respondents associated with the potential entry of BiH into NATO, by gender



Analysing answers to this question by the age of respondents reveals that the feeling most commonly cited by the 18–24 age group was “concern”, while all other age groups most frequently said “security”. This high level of concern about NATO membership for BiH among younger respondents was followed by “fear”, “anger”, and “disappointment,” and “disappointment” was also the feeling most cited by those who identified as students, many of whom are likely to fall into this same age group. It is certainly worth exploring further why these sentiments are so high among youth in BiH.

If we apply an ethnic/national lens to this data, respondents who identified as Bosnians, Bosniaks, and Croats named “security” more than any other feeling, whereas Serbs answered “concern” at the highest rate. There was a clear throughline here, as “hope” and “relief” were also more likely to be expressed by Bosnians and Bosniaks, “pleasure” by Croats, and “fear”, “anger”, and “disappointment” by Serbs. Respondents in both rural and urban settings answered “security” to this question, but “fear” and “concern” were cited at higher rates by those in rural communities, with “hope” named more often by city dwellers.

A cross-tabulation of these findings reveals a clear relationship between the emotions respondents attached to NATO membership and their views of NATO/support for Bosnian accession to NATO. In other words, Serbs who expressed positive opinions of NATO also answered that NATO membership made them feel “hope” and/or “security”, rather than “fear”, “anger”, “concern”, or “disappointment”. Similarly, among Bosniaks who held negative views of NATO, the feelings they associated with NATO membership were “concern” and “disappointment”; and among respondents who identified as Bosnian and expressed negative opinions of NATO, the feelings they cited most commonly were “fear” and “disappointment”. This underscores the importance of acknowledging both the rational and emotional when communicating about NATO. Emotions are intrinsic to human decision making and play a central role shaping both our aspirations and apprehensions. Moreover, imaginative and emotional (even “magical”) thinking serves as a potent political force that influences collectives. Hence, effectively communicating feelings of hope and security is paramount to countering political narratives that emphasize grievance and instability. Indeed, many individuals rely on their emotions as the most accessible, trustworthy, and immediate source of truth, particularly if they lack understanding or information.⁹

For example, during focus groups in the RS, participants often expressed opinions informed by emotion. For many Serbs, emotions linked to NATO are driven by historical experiences, either personal or collective, as reflected in the comments of one focus group participant who recognized that “*I don’t have enough information,*” but nevertheless said, “*I think NATO is not good for us because of what they did to my people in the past.*” There were others who voiced existential fears about the RS in the context of NATO membership, and thus about their identity as Bosnian Serbs, such as one participant who remarked that, “*if we are to enter NATO, the Republika Srpska will cease to exist.*”

⁹ For more on this, see: Paula S. Tompkins, “The Dynamic Interplay of Emotion and Reason in Moral Imagination,” *Listening: Journal of Communication Ethics, Religion, and Culture* 54, no. 2 (2019): 86–94.

Other people expressed a sense of futility or distrust vis-à-vis NATO integration, arguing for instance that *“nothing will change for us even if we become a member, because we don’t have enough power,”* or *“NATO will dictate the terms if they come here.”* These comments point to a lack of understanding about the nature of the partnership between BiH and NATO. And in some people, this lack of understanding feeds suspicion about the true intent of NATO, as was the case for a female participant in one focus group who said, *“If we adhere to what NATO promotes – peace, democratic governance, and the like – then it’s okay to be a member of NATO, if it stays true to its goals. However, I think there is something else in the background behind all of this.”* Still, where information is lacking, there is also the potential to move people towards rational analysis with new knowledge, and researchers observed this occurring in a focus group in Banja Luka; where one participant was well-informed about the benefits of NATO and, through engagement with several others who initially held negative views of the Alliance, changed their perspectives so that they were far more supportive of integration for BiH. This was a powerful demonstration of how emotional engagement combined with new information can shape new perceptions.

It is clear through our analysis of these focus groups, as well as the survey results and interview data, that some Bosnians are simply uneducated or miseducated about NATO, and are open to learning about how the Alliance may offer practical advantages, to the country as a whole and to individual citizens. If well-informed focus group participants are able to effectively shift the views of their peers, as researchers witnessed, the possible impact of a well-organized and strategic outreach campaign is significant. And if political leaders took up the initiative to engage with the public on this topic, presenting compelling arguments in favour of NATO integration and addressing concerns or misconceptions head-on, the transformative potential would be even greater.

The question remains whether there is any political space in the RS for the adoption of pro-NATO policy, however, or at least one that is less antagonistic to the accession process. Our research shows that quite a few political actors in the RS may be willing to admit pro-NATO positions off the record but would never repeat them publicly. That said, the research findings reveal a considerable pragmatism among respondents, and indicate that even those who hold strong emotional reservations against NATO have the capacity to rationally assess the potential benefits of membership. For example, participants cited benefits to the economy, such as the potential to attract investments; and these benefits sometimes swayed individuals who had expressed firmly negative opinions of NATO or disillusionment with the political West.

This pragmatism surely extends to political figures as well, which presents a potential opportunity to move Bosnian political actors towards a more favourable stance on NATO. Thus, it is worth noting that the political opposition often faces challenges if it diverges from the prevailing anti-NATO narrative, which has led many to choose the path of least resistance. Yet, this “safer” option has yielded no substantial gains for opposition actors, and our research suggests that taking a bolder stance on NATO integration could be seen as a courageous step by supporters of membership and could move citizens who are undecided on this issue.

Ultimately, for political leaders in the RS, adopting a pro-NATO or even less-anti-NATO stance will require them to meaningfully assess the evolving sentiments of their constituents, acknowledge the potential benefits of NATO membership, and be willing to take a calculated risk. But, for those who are willing to take this leap and can communicate their position effectively, such an evolution in thinking may garner support from voters who, as they look to the future, recognize the benefits of aligning with NATO as a matter of securing democratic values and regional stability. While it may be challenging for political leaders to break from the current narrative, this research suggests that they have an opportunity to offer a fresh perspective on NATO integration, and one that aligns more closely with the pragmatic interests of the region and its citizens.

4 TRUST IN MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF NATO

Respondents in our survey get most of their information about NATO from television, but also from news websites and social media platforms. It was much more rare that they cited friends, colleagues, and family members as a source of this information. Among Croat respondents, however, both social media and family members were slightly more pronounced as sources of information and news. And it seems that television is a somewhat more significant source of information among Bosniaks than respondents from other groups.

Generally speaking, respondents across BiH did not express considerable trust in the media or its depiction of NATO. Still, as Table 3 shows, those who identified as Bosniak tended to have the highest levels of trust in the news provided by domestic media on this topic, with over half (53.6%) answering that they “somewhat” or “completely” trust the media to provide them reliable information about the Alliance. In contrast, Serbs trusted domestic media the least in this sense, with less than one-third of Serb respondents (31.6%) expressing any degree of trust.

Table 3. Trust in media representations of NATO and NATO membership, by ethnic identity

	Bosnian	Bosniak	Serb	Croat
Do not trust at all	21.6	19.3	34.2	30.7
Somewhat distrust	14.8	9.2	10.9	11.8
Neither trust nor distrust	22.2	17.6	23.3	22.8
Somewhat Trust	34.6	44.1	29.4	32.3
Completely Trust	5.6	9.5	2.2	1.6
Don't Know	1.2	0.3	0.0	0.8

There were also a significant number of respondents in each identity group who said they did not trust or distrust the media, which could signal that they lack the tools to determine whether

media is trustworthy or not. This underscores the importance of media literacy, which empowers individuals to critically assess the content they consume and the broader socio-political and economic contexts in which that content is produced and disseminated, through the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. Media literacy thus serves as a vital tool for navigating the complexities of media bias, propaganda, and misinformation, all of which can significantly influence public opinion and attitudes towards sensitive issues such as NATO membership. When citizens are equipped with the skills of media literacy, they are better prepared to question and critically evaluate the motivations behind the information presented to them, and therefore to discern between objective reporting and subjective narratives. In multiethnic societies like that of BiH, where quite a few outlets cater to the biases of specific groups, media literacy can help bridge divides by encouraging a more nuanced understanding of different perspectives. This can improve social cohesion by prioritizing dialogue and mutual understanding over division and discord.

Given the broad lack of trust in media that these survey findings indicate, researchers looked more closely at levels of trust by the location of respondents. This produced some interesting results, as the dominant ethnic/identity group in a canton or region was not necessarily a clear indicator of levels of trust in that location. For instance, the greatest levels of trust were recorded in the FBiH cantons of Posavina (60.0%) and Una-Sana (56.5%), which are dominated by Croats and Bosniaks, respectively, but results in the Trebinje region in the RS were nearly comparable (55%) despite its very large Serb population. Conversely, among the greatest levels of distrust were found in the Bosniak-dominated canton of Bosnian-Podrinje (60.0%) and the Croat-majority Canton 10 (57.2%). Distrust was also very high in the Brčko District (61.9%), which features one of the most ethnically balanced populations in BiH. These findings are a reminder of the importance of localization, down to the municipal level, in the development of messaging about NATO, so that it speaks to the unique needs of individual communities and makes no presumptions based on demographics.

Table 4. Trust in media representations of NATO and NATO membership, by location

Canton/region/district	Do not trust at all	Somewhat distrust	Neither	Somewhat trust	Trust Completely
Una-Sana	24.6	5.8	13.0	42.0	14.5
Posavina	20.0	0.0	20.0	60.0	0.0
Tuzla	23.7	8.4	23.7	38.2	5.3
Zenica-Doboj	22.0	5.0	22.0	45.0	6.0
Bosnian-Podrinje	20.0	40.0	20.0	10.0	10.0
Central-Bosnia	22.9	14.3	18.6	41.4	1.4
Herzegovina-Neretva	15.0	20.0	16.7	41.7	6.7
West Herzegovina	41.4	3.4	31.0	20.7	0.0

Canton/region/ district	Do not trust at all	Somewhat distrust	Neither	Somewhat trust	Trust Completely
Sarajevo	15.6	13.1	27.0	40.2	3.3
Canton 10	52.4	4.8	23.8	19.0	0.0
Banja Luka	31.3	11.9	21.9	33.1	1.9
Doboj	41.0	14.8	16.4	21.3	6.6
Bijeljina	35.8	7.4	9.9	32.1	14.8
Pale	20.0	12.5	37.5	27.5	2.5
Trebinje	25.0	5.0	15.0	55.0	0.0
Brčko District	38.1	23.8	9.5	23.8	4.8

With its extensive organizational capacity and global reach, NATO has the potential to spearhead not only highly effective messaging campaigns but also highly successful media literacy initiatives. But it must accurately assess the nature of the problem in every context and design programming that integrates strategic communications. For example, in some cases, the challenge may be less a struggle between trust and distrust than between fact and fiction, where individuals have embraced subversive content or conspiracy theories simply because they diverge from the prevailing consensus. This often reflects an anti-establishment populism – the narratives of which are increasingly directed at casting doubt on the legitimacy and intentions of institutions like NATO, mainstreaming unfounded assertions into political spaces.¹⁰ Moreover, in BiH, trust in media content about NATO and in NATO itself must be viewed in the context of the trust Bosnian citizens have (or do not have) more generally in the media and in institutions. The IRI found in a 2022 poll, for instance, that nearly half of respondents (51.0%) distrusted the media, but that significantly higher numbers distrusted every state level political and justice institution in the country, from the courts to political parties.¹¹ Though daunting, this distrust is not intransigent, as results from IRI polling reveal, seeing as the level of distrust in media among Bosnians was actually considerably higher in 2020 (68.0%). This increase in trust in media over two years may be due, at least in part, to the fact that the media served as a crucial channel for obtaining information about the COVID-19 pandemic during that period, and also began in this time to report more frequently on corruption scandals.

10 See: Thomas Plant, "How NATO Can Reinvent Media Literacy," *Diplomatic Courier*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.diplomatic-courier.com/posts/how-nato-can-reinvent-media-literacy>.

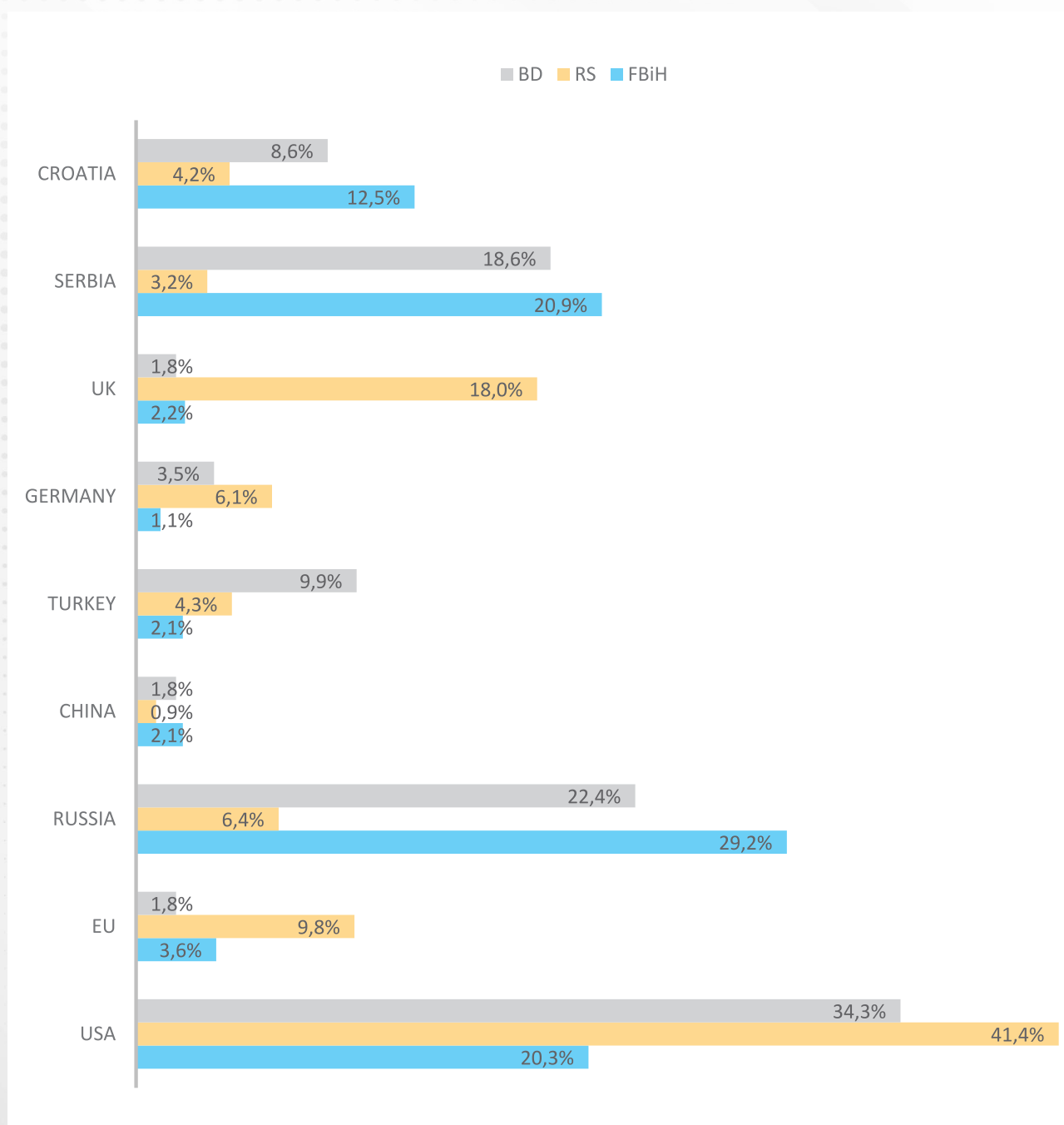
11 Center for Insights in Survey Research, "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey."

5. PERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

The prevailing opinion among respondents in our survey was that BiH is unquestionably exposed to malign foreign influences, in the form of countries and organizations. This view was especially prevalent among respondents aged 35 and up. Bosniaks reported the greatest level of concern (57.8%) that foreign influence is widespread in BiH, and Croats reported at the highest rate (16.0%) that no such influence is present in the country at all. There were also some clear trends by identity group as far as which states are seen as a threat, with Bosniaks and Bosnians naming Serbia, Russia, and Croatia as the most malign; Serbs naming the US, UK, EU, and Germany; and Croats answering the US in very high numbers, followed by Russia and to a much lesser extent Serbia.

Among respondents as an aggregate, the US, Serbia, and Russia were singled out as the states most harmfully engaged in BiH, at present. An analysis by entity/district (see Figure 6) found that respondents in the RS overwhelmingly cited the US as the most malign influence in the country, at over double the rate (41.4%) of any other, with the UK named by just 18.0% of respondents in the entity. In the BD, the US was also identified as the most malign influence, by just over one-third (34.3%) of respondents, and Russia by just under one-quarter (22.4%) of respondents. Respondents in the FBiH expressed the greatest concern about Russia, with 29.2% identifying it as the most malign influence, but one-fifth of these respondents also answered that the US (20.3%) and Serbia (20.9%) represent malign threats. Given this data, it is interesting that many participants in focus groups were unable to articulate how this malign influence is manifested; although, some Serb participants described HR Christian Schmidt and foreign judges in the Constitutional Court of BiH as the instruments of this influence in BiH.

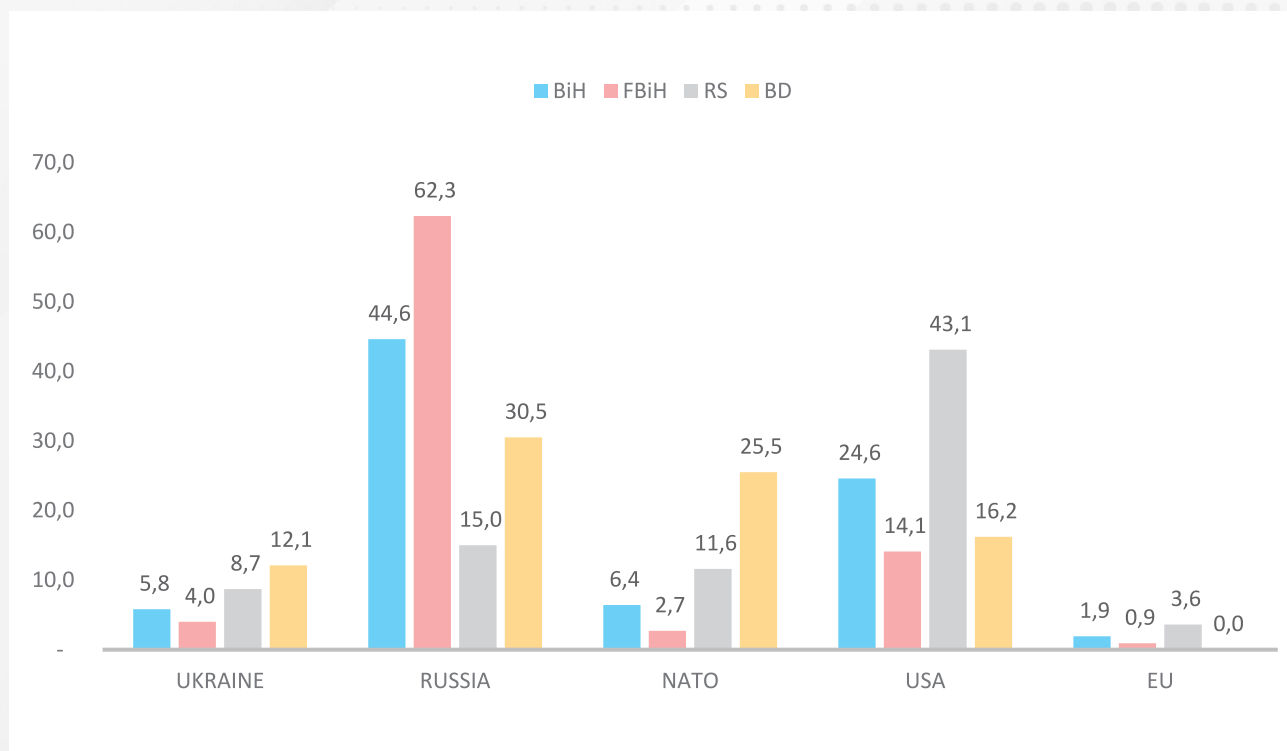
Figure 6. States identified by respondents as responsible for spreading malign influence in BiH, by entity/district



Notably, in the RS, nearly the same rate of respondents who named the US as the most malign influence in BiH also attributed responsibility for the war in Ukraine to the US (see Figure 7). There was no such correlation on these questions in the FBiH or the BD, however. In fact, while less than one-third of respondents in the FBiH named Russia as the most malign influence, nearly two-thirds (62.3%) identified it as responsible for the aggression in Ukraine. And, despite citing the US was the most malign influence in BiH, respondents in the BD laid relatively little blame at America's feet for the war in Ukraine, instead answering that both Russia and NATO were more responsible for the conflict.

In BiH overall, Russia was identified by far as the party most responsible, with 44.6% of respondents giving this answer, and the US was named at a much higher rate (24.6%) than NATO (6.4%). Nevertheless, respondents were also asked if the war in Ukraine had changed their opinion of NATO, and among those who indicated that it had, most said it had negatively affected their view of the Alliance. This was most notable among Serbs, almost all of whom (97.0%) reported this to be the case.

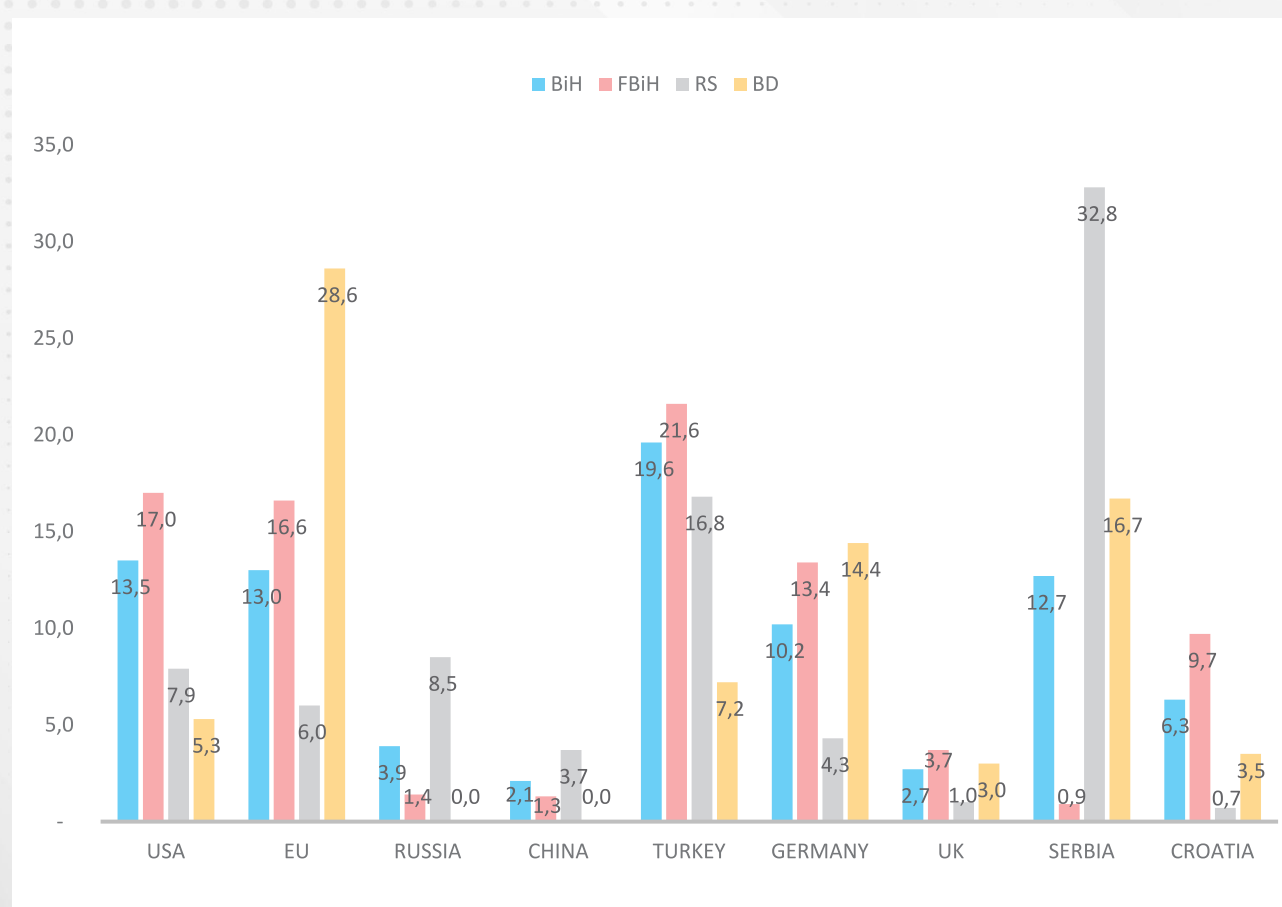
Figure 7. States identified by respondents as responsible for the war in Ukraine, in BiH overall and by entity/district



To further interrogate the complex dynamics surrounding the conflict in Ukraine and its broader geopolitical implications, we sought to gather the perspectives of respondents in BiH on what led up to the conflict, asking them if years of actions by the West to counter Russia had culminated in a war against Russia through Ukraine (i.e., a proxy war), or if Russia had launched an aggression in Ukraine for its own purposes. Responses to this question were nuanced, but in the RS, many respondents described the conflict as a project of the West, reflecting the prevalent political narrative in the entity that frames Western powers as the antagonists of anodyne Russia. In the FBiH, views on the nature of the war in Ukraine were more divided, though a significant proportion of respondents attributed it to Russian aggression. It is important to note, however, that a large minority of respondents across all of BiH (35.0% in the RS, 37.7% in the FBiH, and 28.6% in the BD) answered “neither of those” when offered these two explanations of the war in Ukraine, which suggests they may view it as less black-and-white than whether the conflict is a proxy war or an outright aggression.

The survey also asked respondents to identify the strongest ally to BiH (see Figure 8). As an aggregate, respondents named Turkey at the highest rate (19.6%), followed by the US (13.5%) and the EU (13.0%); a pattern that was also reflected in responses collected within the FBiH. In the RS, it is not surprising that Serbia was identified as the strongest ally to BiH by nearly two-thirds (32.8%) of respondents, essentially double the rate who named Turkey (16.8%), which was double the rate who answered Russia (8.5%) or the US (7.9%). And in the BD, the most common response to this question was the EU, with over one-quarter (28.6%) of respondents answering this way, and far fewer identifying Turkey (7.2%) or the US (5.3%) than in the entities.

Figure 8. States identified by respondents as the strongest ally to BiH, in BiH overall and by entity/district



These results simply confirm the complexity of any geopolitical question that has implications for the security of BiH. Indeed, this research found that even among respondents who oppose NATO integration, nearly one in four (39.7%) either agree with or do not oppose the idea that NATO should be a strategic partner of BiH, if the choice is between NATO, Russia, and China. That said, over half of these respondents disagreed entirely with a partnership of this sort between NATO and BiH, reflecting once again the pervasiveness with which opposition to NATO emerges largely from the RS, where this narrative is helping some countries gain a foothold to expand their influence across all of BiH, but especially in the entity.

The results gathered by IRI in their 2022 survey are worth reflecting on in this context, for comparison.¹² In that survey, far more Serbs (45%) identified the US as the most serious political threat to BiH than Russia or China (6% each). And interestingly, while Croat respondents cited Russia (48%) as the most serious threat, they ranked the US on par (33%) with Turkey (32%) and China (31%) in that regard. Meanwhile, a strong majority (60%) of Bosniaks cited Russia as the biggest threat to BiH, at nearly twice the rate (32%) they named second-place China. In our survey, Bosniaks still pointed to Russia as a threat but expressed very little concern about China. Croat respondents also moved away from identifying China as a threat in our survey, instead citing the US and Russia as the greatest threats to BiH; a view that is likely influenced by the rhetoric of Croatian president Zoran Milanović, whose highly critical opinions of both NATO and Western political powers are covered extensively in domestic and regional media.

12 Center for Insights in Survey Research, “2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey.”

6. CONCLUSION

By incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods, and using data gathered through a survey, focus groups, and interviews, this study offers important insights into the views of Bosnians on NATO and accession to the Alliance for BiH, as well as their perceptions of foreign malign influences in the country. It not only captures general sentiments towards NATO, which a majority of respondents viewed positively, but also unpacks the sociopolitical layers that inform their responses. This kind of analysis is essential for policymakers and strategic communicators, as it provides a data-driven basis from which policies and programming can be crafted, to effectively enhance public understanding and support for NATO. This is particularly crucial when foreign malign influences are so pervasive in BiH, and when trust in institutions is so low.

Across BiH, citizens are deeply disappointed with politics and with political elites, and many focus groups participants expressed feelings of disillusionment or said they had been manipulated by politicians and political parties. In Bijeljina, one person remarked that, *“we as citizens live in constant fear of local or regional political figures in Banja Luka or Sarajevo. If I’m a person who doesn’t want to sell my vote, I’m susceptible to certain forms of blackmail to make me vote for a particular [party].”* Some participants acknowledged that they have become so pessimistic about politics in BiH that they are inclined to disengage and have trouble believing change is possible in the country. This sense of widespread cynicism in BiH only raises the significance of this research, which extends beyond mere statistics to serve as a strategic tool that can help policymakers navigate an intricate web of public opinion and international relations.

To that end, this study explores how demographic identifiers intersect with and shape the diverse views of NATO held by Bosnians. These can guide targeted efforts, for example by highlighting possible entry points with Bosnian Serbs, some of whom view NATO positively or appear open to new information about the Alliance. Such efforts can foster broader support for integration in BiH and the region. Therefore, these findings should not only contribute to informing the foreign policy discourse in BiH but also future research endeavours and messaging

campaigns aimed at promoting the benefits of NATO and countering misinformation. Indeed, in other research conducted by the Atlantic Initiative in recent years, we have found that the reality on the ground has not always matched the political discourse. High-level discussions of the relationship between BiH and NATO tend to get tangled up in politics, and participants in these discussions often act as though they speak for all of their constituents or even all Bosnians, despite the clearly nuanced views held by citizens across the country on this issue.

In fact, our research findings essentially counter the notion that Bosnians are fully “for NATO” or fully “against NATO” and confirm that this is a question viewed with a considerable degree of nuance across the country. We anticipate that these findings on their own will contribute significantly to discussions of NATO in BiH and to the activities NATO and its strategic partners in the region. The diversity of perspectives and sentiments Bosnian citizens hold regarding NATO generally, accession to the Alliance, and foreign malign influences is illuminated by this research in a way that is meant to accentuate the need to meet this range of views through a targeted and contextualized approach in BiH. Several further analyses derived from these findings are forthcoming and will offer even deeper insights.

Importantly, this research revealed that many people in BiH have formed opinions about NATO absent factual knowledge of the Alliance, or on the basis of emotion. This is not necessarily surprising, but it does highlight the importance of ensuring that citizens are provided with the information they need to form evidence-based views of security policies and the future direction of BiH. Of course, it is common for people to view the world through subjective lenses, including when it comes to security, which is why an environment perceived by some as objectively secure can feel to others as though it is not. And notably, this disparity in perceptions of the “reality... and feeling” of security occurs not only at the individual level but also at the national level.¹³

The question, particularly in the context of discrepancies between the reality and feeling of security among national policymakers, as Stoetman has noted, is “how the mismatch between these realities and perceptions of security can be explained”; and she suggests that an important causative factor is the “cognitive biases that are held by elites.”¹⁴ Yet, in BiH, political elites not only hold these biases but actively encourage and reinforce them among their constituents. For instance, Bosnian Serb leaders regularly and strategically deploy memories of the NATO interventions in BiH, Serbia, and Kosovo to emphasize the collective suffering inflicted by NATO on Serbs across the region. This narrative is meant to evoke a sense of collective victimhood and the emotions of grievance.

In light of this, a key takeaway from our research is that even respondents who expressed emotionally-charged negative opinions of NATO, or disillusionment with the political West more generally, were sometimes easily moved from this position when confronted by the facts, often

13 Adája Stoetman, “Perceptions of security: How our brains can fool us,” Strategic Monitor 2019-2020, HCSS and the Clingendael Institute, 4 December 2019.

14 Ibid.

delivered by another participant who was more educated on the subject and could present the benefits of NATO in a knowledgeable but dispassionate way. Researchers found in some focus groups that the views of at least half the participants moderated over the course of the discussion towards greater positivity. This was clearly linked to the willingness of participants with more information to engage in a way that was respectful with lower-information cohorts.

A factor that is often overlooked as determinative in the context of perspectives on NATO is gender, but our research revealed that it should be considered more carefully, as female respondents tended to harbour more negative sentiments towards the Alliance than males. Indeed, women also reported being less informed about NATO, and viewed the prospect of membership with more concern. In focus groups, we discovered that the opposition of some women to NATO integration stems from their fears about a subsequent heightened militarization in BiH and the notion that Bosnian forces would be compelled to fight for external interests. Fundamentally, these women associate NATO membership with potential instability and conflict, and they view the Alliance not as a collective security mechanism but as an external entity capable of disrupting the internal dynamics of BiH.

The pivotal role that gender itself plays in shaping these perceptions of security and militarization among women should not be ignored. Women respondents in our study expressed significantly more apprehension than men regarding the potential impacts of NATO operations on their families and communities, for instance, anticipating threats to the safety of their loved ones and disruptions to their daily lives. And it should be acknowledged, too, that in BiH, fears and scepticism about the Alliance may be influenced by the narratives of ethnonationalist extremists, many of which are intentionally crafted to target women across the region and seek to delegitimize NATO. Countering this and building a genuinely gender-responsive security sector in BiH will require ongoing efforts to increase the representation of women in decision-making positions within the sector and to implement gender-sensitive policies and practices.

Security sector reform through a gendered lens has the potential to move many Bosnians towards a more collective and more human understanding of security, which may facilitate their greater acceptance of NATO integration. It is clear from this research that there is room for public debate about NATO, and that even people who oppose the Alliance or Bosnian membership in it are capable of participating in rational and constructive conversations on the matter, as demonstrated in focus groups. Moreover, the high percentage of respondents in our research who indicated that they do not hold firmly established views on NATO suggests that this public debate should be strategically focused. Engagement of this sort may entail collaboration with media, as well as with democratic institutions, and should be aimed at effectively cutting through misinformation and establishing a lasting connection with communities where citizens possess less information or exhibit more resistance to the prospect of NATO membership.

Having said that, what the research also shows, and frankly what the political reality demands, is that the severance of EU and NATO integration be rethought. This division of the Euro and

the Atlantic, at both the discursive and political levels, has led to a neglect of NATO integration in public discourse. As noted earlier, this has been “the path of least resistance” for some political actors in BiH, who spend little social capital engaging on the issue of EU accession, but would rather avoid the polarizing question of NATO accession. This political climate is the result of many factors, not the least of which has been the withdrawal of Bosnian political actors who constructively advocated for NATO integration, which opened space for an anti-NATO narrative to take hold. This often goes hand-in-hand with an anti-US narrative, as NATO is commonly equated with the US. And, in focus groups, it was clear that even a significant number of respondents who expressed pro-Western views and support for NATO no longer perceive the US, or the political West, as models of democracy, human rights, and freedom. Instead, these respondents tended to view Western countries through an economic lens. Therefore, any communication strategy to promote NATO integration should not only emphasize common security interests but common democratic values like human rights and rule of law. It must further consider and ensure the rights and participation of women by incorporating their meaningful inclusion into all aspects of integration.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the Atlantic Initiative team has developed the following recommendations for policymakers, intended to facilitate a NATO integration process that is more effective, nuanced, and inclusive, and potentially gains broader support among the Bosnian public:

1. Develop a cohesive communication strategy to promote NATO integration for BiH that accounts for current perceptions of the Alliance and the various divisions and disconnects within public discourse.
2. Encourage and facilitate rational and open dialogue on the question of NATO membership among citizens with differing views, utilizing platforms that allow for constructive conversation, whether public forums or debates, or live social media engagement, to bridge gaps in understanding.
3. Tailor messaging efforts towards Bosnians who lack sufficient knowledge of NATO and its work in BiH, providing them balanced information that educates them about the benefits and responsibilities of NATO membership and discusses how these align with national interests.
4. Formulate a unified narrative shared by the international community and pro-Western political leaders in BiH to jointly promote the Alliance by emphasizing the complementary nature of NATO and EU integrations. This narrative should highlight that NATO's focus on governance, institutional integrity, and defense reform aligns with EU accession criteria, for example. Organizing public debates to highlight this synergy and demonstrate how NATO membership can be a crucial step towards EU integration may help overcome resistance to both processes, which can combine to address both security needs and economic aspirations.
5. Develop targeted campaigns to counter anti-NATO narratives by presenting facts about the role of NATO and its contributions to peace and security, and by debunking common myths and misconceptions. These narratives should consider the emotional drivers that

inform the views of many Bosnians citizens, as they did respondents in this research.

6. Incorporate messaging that emphasizes democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law as core principles of NATO membership and highlights examples of NATO's role in upholding these values, both historically and in current operations.
7. Feature personal stories and examples that illustrate the benefits of NATO integration to the lives of individuals and to local communities, which will humanize this debate and make the benefits of NATO more tangible and relatable.
8. Engage with influencers, opinion leaders, and respected figures from various sectors (academia, culture, business, etc.) who can articulate the benefits of NATO integration in a manner that resonates with different segments of society.
9. Conduct regular research to gauge public opinion, in order to track and understand evolving perceptions of NATO, and use this to adjust communication strategies, address new concerns, and capitalize on changing attitudes.
10. Encourage links among pro-NATO civil society organization and media outlets in the FBiH, RS, and BD, to fill gaps in the media landscape that have resulted from censorship in the RS, where regime-controlled media dominates and portrays NATO in a wholly negative light. This has left citizens of the entity with pro-Western views essentially abandoned in a jungle of media misinformation that should motivate the Euro-Atlantic community to launch projects that enable grassroots pro-Western initiatives to thrive at the local level.



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