



POLICY PAPER

# **THE GEOPOLITICS OF EMOTION:**

## **EMOTIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF NATO IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

Authors:  
Majda Halilović & Ron Roberts

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## SUMMARY

In summer 2023, the Atlantic Initiative conducted an extensive survey<sup>4</sup> and organized focus group discussions throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina to explore attitudes, knowledge, and perspectives related to NATO among the general populace. The participants, comprising men and women of various age groups, were randomly selected to engage in discussions about NATO, express their opinions, and explain the factors influencing their viewpoints. Although only one specific question in the survey addressed emotions, during the focus group discussions it became clear that emotional perspectives played a significant role in shaping perceptions and attitudes on political and security matters in the country, areas traditionally believed to be governed primarily by rational reasoning.

- 1 The title of this paper was inspired by Dominique Moïsi's work, *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World*
- 2 Majda Halilović (PhD) is Head of Research and Policy in the Atlantic Initiative, BiH.
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- 4 Halilovic, M. and Veljan, N. (2024) Attitudes towards NATO: A Survey Report; Summary of Key Findings. Available at: <https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Policy-Paper-Attitudes-towards-NATO-A-Survey-Report.pdf>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Before delving into the observed interplay between emotions and politics, it is essential to acknowledge that for many years, the social sciences neglected the role of emotions in politics, despite their evident impact. Several factors may explain this. During the Cold War, the influence of organisations such as the Rand Corporation promoted a perspective on international relations which was rooted in Game Theory. In this framework, emotions such as suspiciousness and distrust were contained within a semblance of rationality and hard wired into strategic options centred around the projection of hostile intent from opposing “players”. With that premise, subsequent decision making was treated as inherently rational.

However, the contemporary shift towards emotions increasingly supplanting individual reason and rationality in popular discourses, can be considered as part of an increasing trend toward what also been termed psychological governance, where a major goal of business and government has been to manage the emotions of populations on a large scale – exemplified in nudge theory.<sup>5</sup> This trend can be considered within a broader remit in which emotions have become progressively intertwined with the functioning of contemporary capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The increasing strategic importance of emotions in corporate and political management has given rise to a growing body of literature exploring not only how emotions influence political perceptions and behaviour, but how domestic and international players seek to strategically harness or manipulate emotions to advance their political goals.

The growing strategic importance of emotions has crossed over into public life, where the pressures of modern living have given rise, on the one hand, to increased awareness of the need for mental health literacy and on the other to increasing instances of emotional outbursts by

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5 Nudge theory is a concept in behavioral economics, political theory, and psychology, proposing positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions to influence behavior and decision-making. The theory was popularized by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in their book *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. See Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein (2012) *Nudge*. Penguin.

6 Eva Illouz (2007). *Cold Intimacies. The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity.

figures in the public eye including leading politicians. So significant has this transition been that displays of fist fights in parliaments, and profane language on television screens has become commonplace, coupled with the use of overt threats and aggression in public discourse, including in the most advanced democracies. It is to be noted that occasions in which politicians have exhibited highly emotional responses, irrationality, and instability have not been confined to responses to tragic incidents. Instances encompass electoral defeats and taking offense at objections to one's political positions, amongst others, that is, routine events in electoral politics. Political speeches have on many occasions also become saturated with emotional content. Analysis of everyday expressions of emotions in politics enables us to understand which emotions and feelings are prevalent, how they circulate and the degree of legitimacy which is conferred upon them by the public and media.

Advances in the sociological study of emotions, on both sides of the Atlantic, in tandem, with expanding research in political neuroscience and a greater focus by social and political psychologists on the emotional aspects of political thought, opinion, and behaviour, all show decisive movement away from the influences of behaviourism and cognitivism. The traditional division between emotion and reason in the study of politics, once treated as purely psychological phenomena are now increasingly outdated, with an emerging focus on the sociology of emotions now firmly established.<sup>7</sup> One of the concerns within this paradigm is to map and understand what may be called 'communities of feeling.' This too concerns this report.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Demertzis (2013) Introduction: Theorizing the Emotions–Politics Nexus, in Nicolas Demertzis (Ed) *Emotions in Politics: The Affect Dimension in Political Tension*. Palgrave Macmillan. Hampshire

## 2. METHOD

As previously noted, while only one specific question in the Atlantic Initiative survey addressed feelings, the focus group discussions revealed their significant influence in shaping perceptions and attitudes toward political and security matters—areas traditionally assumed to be governed primarily by rational reasoning. The qualitative aspect of the research comprised 11 focus groups, each consisting of eight participants, conducted in Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Brčko, East Sarajevo, Mostar, Prijedor, Sarajevo, Široki Brijeg, Trebinje, Tuzla, and Zenica. The selection of these localities provided for a statistically representative cross-section of the major ethnic communities in BiH, as well as other relevant demographic data.

### 3. THEORY AND INTERPRETATIVE CONTEXT

Given the intertwining of reason and emotion – now recognised in neuroscience<sup>8</sup> as a biological fact - it should not be surprising that in the present study, many participants were found to lack well-informed and knowledgeable arguments about NATO while simultaneously holding strong opinions. The prevalence of emotions in their responses has likely played a significant role in shaping their perspectives, even in the absence of comprehensive knowledge about the subject matter. Several theoretical ideas from contemporary social psychology may help us to form a clearer picture of what drives these attitudes. Before we consider the results in depth, we will briefly outline some of these key theoretical ideas, the first of which is ‘threat framing’.

#### 3.1 Threat Framing

‘Threat framing’ refers to how something or someone is subject to representations and communications as a threat. It operates in situations where issues of danger, risk, or hazard have been identified by a prospective audience. One useful definition of frames posits them as “conceptual structures or sets of beliefs that organize political thought, policies, and discourse.”<sup>9</sup> The concept has been utilised across a range of security and crisis studies. However, although these fields discuss threats in terms of how they are perceived and their potential consequences, they often fail to interrogate the concept itself. Crisis studies consider threat perception essential for a crisis, while security studies define “security” as the absence of threat but leave the notion of “threat” itself undefined. Thus, framing theory focuses on problem definition and how meanings are created, though it overlooks the actual substantive meanings of “threat.”

Constructivist and rationalist approaches contribute to understanding threat framing; constructivists emphasize the role of socialization in framing, while rationalists emphasise the political impact of conscious strategic choices. Studies combining these approaches have shown

8 Antonio Damasio (1994) *Descartes's Error: Emotion, reason, and the human brain*. Grosset Putnam.

9 Van Dijk (2001, p.360) ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’, in Deborah Schiffrin–Deborah Tannen–Heidi E. Hamilton (Eds.) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, pp. 352–371. Oxford. Blackwell.

that different frames can affect cooperation or conflict and that antagonistic threat frames tend to lead to securitization or militarization. Institutionalized threat frames gain significance, especially when associated with policy control. However, in a post-truth era, in which what counts as evidence is becoming increasingly contested, the link between evidence and frame saliency weakens, leading to more unpredictable framing in politics.<sup>10</sup>

A striking example of how political framing has functioned in the international arena concerns collective memories in the region of the NATO interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo. These have been strategically employed by the contemporary Serbian leadership to reinforce the concept of collective suffering inflicted by NATO on the Serb nation and to advance an intrinsically antagonistic narrative which has persisted long after the interventions and their direct consequences. This state framing of collective memory, which has served to evoke a collective, emotional sense of victimhood, helps to explain the longevity of the narrative and how it has subsequently functioned to bind the population together. Notwithstanding the fact that other less dominant narratives also exist in Serbia, it can be argued that strengthening this narrative might serve the purpose of diverting attention from the atrocities and genocide - confirmed by successive verdicts in international courts - perpetrated by the Slobodan Milosevic regime in the 1990s, and hence to deny agency and responsibility for this events by the contemporary leadership. Whilst agency and control over these specific events in the past is denied - agency is simultaneously affirmed by control over the narrative concerning the past. Thus, in the eyes of the perpetrators they are simultaneously weak in their lack of control over external framing of events and strong in their control over their own domestic, alternative framing. However, the intended goals go beyond the simple control over the domestic narrative; there is a geopolitical agenda at play, with Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina seeking to establish leverage in the international arena by showcasing close ties with Russia. Simultaneously however, both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are already reaping benefits from NATO partnerships in myriad ways.

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10 Johan Erikson (2020) Threat Framing <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1647> Published online: 28th February.

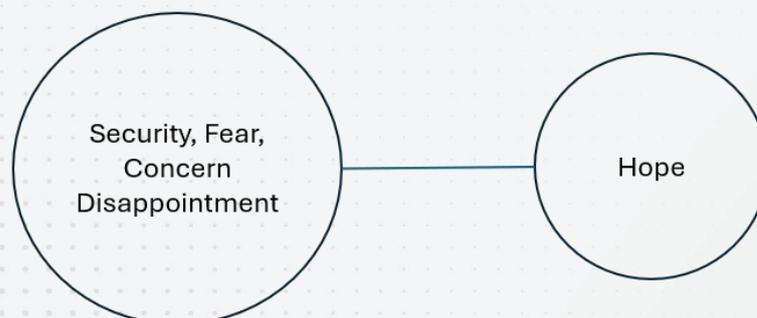
## 4. FINDINGS

### A. Bosnian Emotional Landscape

Based on the focus group discussions, the overall political and emotional landscape in Bosnia – covering both NATO, and the actions of political parties situated on the ethno-nationalist spectrum - can be characterised as polarised between insecurity and hope, although heavily skewed toward the expression of negative emotions. The insecure end of this polarity was dominated by issues of ‘security’, ‘concern’, ‘fear’ and ‘disappointment’ all of which pervaded responses to the survey and the focus groups. Expressions of ‘hope’ and to a lesser degree ‘relief’ stood in contrast to a prevailing mood of fear and insecurity (Figure. 1).

**Figure. 1**

*Emotional Dimensions of Bosnian Political Life*



We will consider both emotional anchor points in turn, beginning with an examination of respondents’ views about the overall political context, which helped to shape the general air of pessimism.

## 4.1 Negative Political and Social Context

### *Disappointment*

Participants across all focus groups expressed universal concern about the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, irrespective of the entity in which they lived or their ethnicity. They readily conveyed their dissatisfaction with how the political system functioned, its ingrained adversarial nature and the ways in which politicians conducted themselves. As one participant explained:

*“The only thing I would add is personal disappointment after every election, it’s the same people who just change political parties, only looking at how many mandates there will be in a certain seat. They look after their personal interests, they don’t care about the citizens of the Federation, nor the Republika Srpska, these are people who have been just rotating for twenty-five years in different political parties. They are the same figures, on television, the internet, and in newspapers, on posters. The most interesting thing is when certain TV stations bring back what they said during certain political campaigns, those are such stories, nonsense. How these people don’t remember what they said in front of so many people, and none of it has been fulfilled.” (Female, Banja Luka)*

Her reference to apparent failures of memory on the part of the audience alludes both to the ephemeral nature of much contemporary news, which is not designed to be remembered, and to the strategies which audiences adopt in assessing its relevance. If for example a regular framing of news is that politicians lie – then little significance may be attached to specific items of information.

*“This is our regular state, chaos, unrest, some want to secede while others seem to prevent it. We’ve been living like Groundhog Day for thirty years. The figures change, get rich, people leave, whoever has, I don’t know what it takes, courage, whether it takes more courage to leave or to stay. I think those of us who have stayed are heroes in this situation.” (Male, Banja Luka)*

In Bijeljina (RS) one of the participants described a situation where those in power manipulate and divide the people to maintain control of the agenda. Despite promises and apparent efforts to change, the powerful remain entrenched, divorced from the populace who feel trapped in a cycle of opposition, unable to expect meaningful cooperation or progress until there is a significant change in the highest levels of government.

Unsurprisingly, these feelings of a disconnect between political elites and citizens paved the way to feelings of insecurity and fear.

### *Fear and Insecurity*

One participant commented, starkly, “we are constantly living in a state of fear.” Another expressed it at greater length:

*“Workers socialize and work, joke around and converse. But only politicians create such problems among the citizens that there is a certain fear. There is fear, especially when it comes to Brčko. Everyone is thinking in Brčko, what will happen to us. Nobody is certain, everyone is in fear, there is no real freedom there. If you were to say that I am free, I am not always tense, I am afraid of what will happen.” (Male, Brčko)*

This view that politicians were responsible for stoking fear was not an isolated one.

*“I think that these politicians who have been in power for decades are spreading nationalism and hatred... I think the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is endangering peace. Divided people, poisoning people, one against the other, if I may express it that way. I still think that despite the war being over after so many years, we are still heavily poisoned with nationalism from all sides.” (Female, Mostar)*

*“It is terrible that we as citizens live in constant fear of local or regional political figures in Banja Luka or Sarajevo. (Male, Bijeljina)*

This fear could be accompanied by a degree of cognitive dissonance, as some participants expressed support for politicians who they also acknowledged were seeking to deliberately cultivate fear among citizens.

Interestingly, in Republika Srpska, when participants were asked whether they were afraid of war breaking out, the immediate response was in the negative, but their apprehension and anxiety subsequently emerged as the discussion developed. People used phrases like: “History repeats itself” or commented that “extremism is a means to perpetuate tension within Bosnian society.”

Questions of security and insecurity however were set in a wide context by participants. The following extracts illustrate the importance of paying attention to the nuanced personal meanings which were attached to bipolar constructs such as security-insecurity.

*“Regarding this security situation, I believe that we, the citizens of Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, are truly secure. What instils insecurity in us are the instigative policies of our politicians, who, lacking anything smarter or more meaningful, resort only to inciting conflicts, constantly recycling the same stories. When you leave your house and talk to anyone, people are only concerned with securing their jobs, workplaces, paying bills, and providing for their children.” (Female, Banja Luka)*

The same respondent went on to link the creation of this political insecurity to the constant recycling of narratives which had their origin in the wars and conflicts of the past.

*We simply don't have time to deal with the nonsense from twenty, thirty, fifty years ago that keeps getting recycled, and the same old stories keep getting replayed over and over again."*

A similar perspective was voiced by another respondent, who attempted to distinguish between what he saw as the objective reality of security and the insecurity manufactured by politicians, which threatened to destabilise it.

*"I would add regarding security that Bosnia and Herzegovina itself is safe; the only instability instilled in the people comes from politicians. It's evident that this is a tool they use to manipulate the populace, constantly stirring up nervousness and intolerance. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina have had enough of war animosity and political problems. So, I believe that the people leading this country are the ones creating the greatest insecurity." (Male, Banja Luka)*

Others made it clear that the concept of security extended beyond consideration of the international situation or the strategies employed by politicians for political gain. In the extracts below, participants situated their understanding of security in the realms of the psychological 'security' of the population and the dependability of paid work - an issue which was perceived to affect people of all ages.

*"In my surroundings, a lot of young people have left, and even those in their middle age are now deciding to leave. I understand those young people, but I'm surprised by those people in their forties and fifties who are now deciding to take such a step, probably due to economic and security reasons. By security, I mean material situation as well. For me, security means having a secure job, it's not just about safety." (Female, Banja Luka)*

This intersection of psychological insecurity, employment insecurity and national insecurity, reveals the multi-layered nature of the affective dimension in national life, something which needs to be appreciated by policy makers as both an individual and a social phenomenon.

## 4.2 Reason and Non-Violence

### *Hope*

Efforts to assess security in objective terms however, also demonstrated that hopeful perspectives, derived from a rational appraisal that a return of war is unlikely, were also possible.

One male participant expressed this as a judgement based on his belief that the demonstrable suffering which most of the population had already endured, would preclude it.

*“Personally, I don’t believe there’s a threat of war because I don’t know who would go to war in this country. All three peoples that were involved in the war, and even those who weren’t, we were all affected by it. I don’t know who among us would go to war again. Personally, I wouldn’t. I’m old enough to have been through that, and I believe there’s a very small group of people, extremists, who would listen to or be swayed by what politicians say, by their incitement. Personally, I don’t think there are enough people who would go to war again in this region because we’ve all been wounded. Twenty, thirty years is a long time, but not so long that we’ve forgotten.” (Male, Prijedor)*

This was a view which was echoed by other participants. Female participant from Banja Luka was even clearer in her appeal to a more hopeful future as a legacy of collective memory.

*We’ve all been through it. I come from a multi-ethnic environment that couldn’t cope with all of that, so maybe at one point people thought, ‘What if we have purely national states? We’ll live nicer, better, more prosperous, there will be abundance.’ In the end, when we were left with nothing, having preserved our lives, and after twenty-five years seeing that these cleaner, so-called national states didn’t bring any better prosperity, it’s certain that we lived better before ‘91, including myself. Now, I’d like to see who would step up. We’ve all been through it already, either we remember or we were direct participants “ (Female, Banja Luka)*

Her account raises the extremely important question of in whose hands this construction and recollection of a collective narratives rests, and whether nationalist oriented political figures could seek to steer it in a less healthy direction. There were also expressions of hope which were grounded, not in any psychological or political legacy of the war, but on purely economic grounds.

*“I would say that we are not interesting. What makes us interesting to foreigners is our cheap labour market. We are in Europe geographically, yet we have the cheapest labour force, which can be interesting to them. And I agree that all of this is inflated without any real impact on the ordinary person in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” (Male, Banja Luka)*

Between this polarity of reasoned pessimism and reasoned hope, could also be found a form of rational equivocation.

*“I would just add briefly regarding the notion that there won’t be a war here. Knowing that history repeats itself and that it is the mother of knowledge, I see only two options for us. If a world war were to start, it would likely begin here, that’s option one, and we will suffer the most. Option two is if the third world war starts somewhere else, then we will fare the best. No one would want to waste expensive weapons to bomb us here.” (Male, Banja Luka)*

This equivocation seemed to depend on an appraisal that the country simultaneous held both great strategic significance and little. Another participant added their own flavour of

equivocation, contrasting the objective international situation as they saw it with the machinations of local politicians, who may have their own agenda for fomenting fear.

*“I think politicians often use that to retain or gain new voters, to scare them with those things, for those purposes. Objectively, I think they are all otherwise under strong control of international factors. And even they sometimes probably allow those outbursts, but in practice, they mostly fulfill those obligations and behave according to what Schmidt<sup>11</sup> and those above him want to achieve here. In that sense, it’s only peace that is threatened by the top political leaders who simply want to maintain their positions in the same way as they have for the past two or three decades.” (Male, Bijeljina)*

This latter comment raises the possibility of whether what we are seeing in some of these views is a process of rationalisation, to minimise the fear of violence, so that a personally favoured outcome is stressed in the face of conflicting or contradictory information. Thus the suggestion can be made that participants are experiencing cognitive dissonance. On one hand, they profess that there is no threat to peace or political extremism, whilst on the other hand, they are clearly aware of living in a social environment in which violence is promoted and tolerated.

## **B. Media and Politicians**

What is evident, both objectively and from the participants’ remarks, is that they are faced with the not inconsiderable challenge of processing vast quantities of conflicting information from numerous sources and in addition, distinguishing between serious, factual reporting and sensationalized news. Several participants expressed the ensuing difficulty in terms of an interaction between the media – both mainstream and social – and individual character, with a greater danger of undue influence upon those who are not skilled in evaluating what they are exposed to.

*“People have become contradictory to themselves because they have too many different influences from various sides, too much information circulates, and then people don’t know what to believe in and whom to believe in, thereby creating more opinions. One day I’m leaving the country, the next day I’m staying, the third day I’m leaving again, the fourth I’m contemplating, so I think social media and all media influence and change people’s opinions, especially those who are prone and naive to let someone manipulate their thoughts” (Female, Banja Luka)*

In the next extract, the percentage of vulnerable news consumers is estimated to be very high.

*“Ninety percent of us believe, especially now, in the current times, they believe in the Internet, media, and what they put out. It’s one hundred percent like that, that’s their opinion. Consequently, this information spreads further, and people believe in what they hear and see. I think that greatly contributes to feeling of anxiety.” (Female, Bijeljina)*

<sup>11</sup> Christian Schmidt has been serving as the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina since August 2021.

One woman went as far as to suggest that without television or news consumption, she would think everything in the county was fine. As it was, because of her clear distrust, she was unsure as to what was actually happening.

*“Regarding the security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, if I didn’t have a television, a mobile phone, or access to the media, I would believe that everything is fine. However, the media to which we pay attention, which we read and watch, I believe they actually scare us. They provide us with overloaded news that we actually believe in. So, I don’t even know what to say about it exactly, whether it’s reality, whether it actually happens, or if it’s something imaginary.” (Female, Brčko).*

This scepticism toward the media was perhaps most strongly expressed by a male in Brčko, who believed that the situation was a good deal more positive than the media were prepared to let on.

*“I believe any rhetoric they use serves to keep the masses under a veil of fear. In reality, they don’t want any unrest here because that would force them to form coalitions and who knows what else. So, I think that currently, at a higher level, peace is not as threatened as they portray it through the media and everything else. Because actually, in everyday life, we don’t feel it that much, except when we’re bombarded with those kinds of information and half-truths, so to speak.” (Male, Brčko)*

This implicitly calls attention to the interest of who owns and controls the media. In Brčko, the discussion around media coverage of NATO-related topics in Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed varying degrees of trust in the domestic media, with some noting a sense of division and bias among different outlets. Whilst some participants relied on traditional TV news, others turned to online platforms such as YouTube where a greater variety of perspectives, including from international sources, could be accessed. Concerns about media polarization and financial influence from different interest groups were also raised. It is to be noted that one of the participants acknowledged following the British far-right conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson, a commentator known for his critical stance on NATO and Western policies.

Many focus groups participants expressed feelings of disillusionment or felt they had been manipulated by politicians and political parties. In Bijeljina, one person remarked,

*“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 ideology.”*

In fact, pessimism about the role of politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina was identified by some as a factor that discourages people from engaging in politics or believing in change.

In Banja Luka, discussion highlighted the issue of political parties in Republika Srpska being inclined towards pro-Russian policies, while those in the Federation of BiH leant towards pro-European or pro-American stances. While the conflicting views which comprise a major part of the

media ecosystem are ultimately geopolitical in nature and stem from the division of the country following the Dayton agreement, they highlight the importance of critical evaluation of information sources in an age dominated by digital media sources where misinformation is widespread. This broader geopolitical framing of media output brings us to the question of how NATO was perceived, discussed, and represented.

### C. Feelings about NATO

Views toward NATO could be summarised under three broad affective headings: confusion, suspicion, and detachment/reflection, the latter of which took on either a positive, optimistic slant or else entertained the idea of neutrality.

#### *Confusion*

A considerable range of views were aired with respect to the NATO alliance – with different views on occasion expressed by the same person. Consider the following extracts from participants in Banja Luka, in Republika Srpska.

*“If NATO stays true to its goals—promoting peace, democratic governance, and the like—then it’s okay to be a member. But I believe there’s another agenda behind it all.” (Female, Banja Luka)*

*“NATO has its positives, like opening us up to Europe and providing a sense of safety, in quotation marks. But there are negatives too. For example, I can’t forget the bombing of Serbia; I was in Belgrade that year, and it still affects me. It reminds me of who was responsible, and that shapes my negative opinion. I even find myself contradicting my own views; I can’t say I have a 100% definitive stance.” (Female, Banja Luka)*

*“I’m not against NATO, but I’m a bit skeptical when it’s mentioned as a guarantee of stopping war or ensuring there won’t be another one here. There are many more things that concern ordinary people than NATO. Give us the chance to live better lives, and we’ll probably make more informed and concrete decisions.” (Male, Banja Luka)*

We see in these remarks not only evident confusion and uncertainty about how to frame NATO, which in part can be tied to earlier reflections on media narratives, but also an explicit linking of this uncertainty to personal experience and worry about economic security and well-being. Similar reservations were expressed in Biljeljina, also in Republika Srpska, with concern regarding the potential implications of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s NATO membership frequently expressed and opposition to NATO’s role in the war in Ukraine.

Participants raised questions about potential military obligations, loss of sovereignty, and potential conflicts arising from NATO’s wider actions. One person expressed opposition to NATO membership because of his deep scepticism towards the organization’s intentions and actions

and his doubts about NATO's role as a guarantor of peace and security. For a few, there was a sense of feeling disconnected or indifferent from the issue.

### *Fear and Suspicion*

These comments are of great significance for policy makers as they signpost potential avenues by which to address people's concerns. In addition to these sentiments however, there was also outright distrust and suspicion. In Bijeljina participants spoke about items in the news regarding low-flying planes, and whether these constituted a security threat, a violation of sovereignty or acts of strategic intimidation. Only one participant noted that the flights were a regular feature of the NATO mandate, agreed to by authorities with no need for distrust. The overwhelming sense in Republika Srpska however was one of distrust. This distrust extended to viewing NATO, not as an instrument of security but a political vehicle for expansion.

*"What would NATO have with us, except perhaps a live force? We have nothing to offer NATO. NATO probably sees an opportunity with us to gain access to some countries it wouldn't otherwise have the chance to approach. I'm not interested in the NATO pact, but it could only be some political direction, as we are a country in transition, so we might get closer to a certain goal." (Female, Banja Luka)*

This expansionist perspective on NATO was expressed by another participant from the same area, albeit tempered by a view of local history which was extremely pessimistic and a wish for something different.

*"Exactly, a country in transition through which one can easily reach everywhere. That's why we need them, and they need us because we are the way we are, destroyed every forty years. In any case, we should look where it's better for us, closer to everyone, nicer for everyone." (Female, Banja Luka)*

The following comments by one participant from East Sarajevo, inadvertently make clear that this distrust of NATO is not grounded in any rational appraisal but in harboring a belief, which has been "taught," that NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina would be "wrong."

*"I'm not very well informed, but I'm definitely against joining the NATO organization because I believe it has caused a lot of suffering and pain to my people in the past. Not only to mine, but generally to our neighbours as well. That alliance has never meant well for us, nor will it ever. ...They also harmed our neighbors because they somehow contaminated them with those bombs. I am definitely against Bosnia and Herzegovina joining NATO. The people should decide, not politicians, and I believe more people are against joining the NATO alliance. I am young. Thankfully, I haven't experienced it, but I've been taught in such a way, and I definitely feel that joining it is wrong." (Male, East Sarajevo)*

Another participant expressed their aversion to NATO membership in terms of an unambiguous identity threat “If we are to enter NATO, the Republika Srpska will cease to exist.” Such sentiments reflect the hostility expressed through public information notices and advertising in Republika Srpska (see Figure. 2)

**Figure. 2**

*Billboard in Republika Srpska with a double entendre slogan that can either be read as “I would not want to join NATO” or “No BiH in NATO”.*



However, the dissemination of antagonistic views toward NATO is not confined to purely public spaces and overtly political bodies, as the following comments make clear. Both schools and families also play a role in the socialisation and cultural reproduction of hostility.

*We mentioned NATO in school, but in general terms. I believe that the family is where the NATO organization and what it stands for were mostly discussed.” (Male, East Sarajevo)*

*“I wouldn’t say there were any seminars. As for Republika Srpska, I don’t believe they contributed to forming any opinions. It all started at home.” (Male, East Sarajevo)*

*“We only briefly mentioned NATO alliance in school, as far as I remember. I wouldn’t research about it until it becomes relevant because it wouldn’t even occur to me. Only if I touch upon the topic at home, then I would discuss it, otherwise not.” (Male, East Sarajevo)*

*Reflection/Optimism*

These negative views were to a degree balanced by what might be bracketed as more informed thinking about NATO, in which participants sought to weight up Bosnia and Herzegovina's current relationship with NATO, how well this served the country's present and future needs and how views toward membership may change over time.

Below, one participant, discusses what obligations membership would entail.

*"I believe that every person should have some interest in the topic of NATO membership because it will affect each of us. As I've read, membership fees will have to be paid for NATO, and a certain percentage of GDP should be invested in the military every year. That GDP could be invested in other things, but now we have an obligation for this. Additionally, troops would have to be sent for NATO military operations; we would have to fight for their interests." (Male, Banja Luka)*

In the eyes of another participant, in terms of its functioning and operational organisation, the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina were, to all intents and purposes, already a fully aligned member of the alliance.

*"I have friends who have been in today's army for years. NATO standards have been applied in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian army for twenty years, so we have de facto been a member of NATO for years. We have a chain of command, battalions; it's not at all like it was in the former country. The NATO system has been applied and implemented in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian army; we are only not a NATO country on paper." (Male, Banja Luka)*

That this is not recognised, he put down to the actions of politicians.

*"If politicians didn't tell this story and emphasize the other side, it serves for some political points. If NATO is important, when you look at the map of Europe and the world and when you look at NATO countries, I think it's illusory to think that Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia will remain outside NATO." (Male, Banja Luka)*

Despite the antics of politicians then, this view that the tide of opinion would turn, was expressed by others.

*"I think we younger folks don't have a fully formed opinion yet. I say this from my own experience as someone who hasn't been involved in these topics, but I believe that over time, more young people will be in favor of joining NATO. That's just my personal opinion because I see the situation changing. As you mentioned earlier, there are people in Republika Srpska who are in favor of joining NATO. I think some lack of information affects people's opinions; they hear from their grandparents that NATO membership is not necessary, but when they inquire more about the topic, their opinions change." (Female, Banja Luka)*

We see in Serbia, an example of a more optimistic framing which seeks to bridge the divide between reason and emotion, a border where different geopolitical interests line up on either side. Dragan Janjić sets out the dilemma:

*“Let me remind that, in recent past, Serbia already went through a tough experience that included conflicting interests of the biggest world powers. The bombing to which it was exposed in 1999 was carried out with loud protest from Russia and China, but it was eventually brought to an end as Belgrade accepted a set of conditions. Russian missiles and aviation existed only in media reports that raised the fighting spirit of the nation, but not in reality. The bombing is taken as pretext for the negative attitude towards NATO, but these are emotions too. There are only a few countries in Europe that avoided bombing one another, but their interests are now pointing towards each other.”<sup>12</sup>*

For some in the Federation of BiH, the war in Ukraine was incorporated into this positive narrative.

*“The war in Ukraine has led to NATO unity that didn’t exist before. Now there’s real unity in NATO because Russia expected there wouldn’t be any, and that they could easily overpower Ukraine with their force and army. However, they didn’t overpower. Ukraine defended itself. Ukraine will liberate its territories. How much will it cost, how many casualties there will be? We know it will be a lot, for those of us who have survived so much. But they will survive. So, NATO has been very positive and surprising because there has been unity and a stance that action should be taken collectively.” (Male, Sarajevo).*

#### *Reflection/Neutrality*

In the current febrile atmosphere, some reflected on the seemingly unavoidable, binary choice offered– of whether to embrace Western or Eastern interests – by questioning the viability of the kind of non-alignment practised by the former Yugoslavia. Whilst not rejected outright, there was no uncritical acceptance of a geopolitical nostalgia.

*“Yugoslavia was strong enough to afford neutrality. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, I’m not sure how the situation stands because there are enormous pressures from various sides to align with someone. Now we need to see who offers more because I’m not sure how this neutral stance will end up.”(Female, Banja Luka)*

*“Well, I would just say that nothing has to be done, there’s no need to lean to the left or the right; it’s just a question of what life will look like here if we don’t go either left or right. Tito managed it once during the Cold War, not aligning with the West or the East, but we see how that ended up. It’s very easy, given the current situations, that in the end, we won’t align with anyone, and it will stay that way, leaving us very underdeveloped.” (Male, Banja Luka)*

12 Dragan Janjić (2017) Serbia between NATO and Russia - Reality against emotions <https://demostat.rs/en/vesti/dijalog/serbia-between-nato-and-russia-reality-against-emotions/175> Demostat, Beograd 18. August.

## D. Foreign Influence

As with NATO, there were marked differences of opinion when it came to the influence of outside countries and entities. The survey pointed to the US, Serbia, and Russia as the most prominent adverse foreign influences, yet European cultural influence also came in for criticism, particularly regarding the acceptance and promotion of LGBT rights. The comments below show how some participants, in their opinion, questioned the 'moral' climate that was being engendered.

*"I believe Eurovision has evolved into a platform for promoting what some perceive as an immoral agenda. Many European countries, like the UK, Germany, and Italy, are increasingly vocal advocates for the LGBT population...While I haven't closely followed Eurovision for quite some time, anecdotal evidence suggests that such promotion is on the rise. It seems to be portrayed across Europe as a positive development. In my view, this trend contributes to the declining population across Europe, particularly in our country where numbers are already low. I find it concerning that foreign nations are endorsing such values. (Male, East Sarajevo)*

*"Some of the traditional cultures are seemingly being marginalized due to what some perceive as immoral and, I would confidently say, disturbing influences." (Male, Bijeljina)*

*"With harmful influence, we had the 'pride' (Bosnian Pride Parade) organization, and it has a somewhat harmful influence on Bosnia and Herzegovina where they try to get their place in the Assembly, to get their ministers, to push that LGBT propaganda to our children and so on. That's one aspect." (Male, Mostar)*

This perceived danger to the moral order was seen by some as a simple consequence of power, the way of the world, in which the 'strong' seek to impose their way of life on the 'weak'.

*"That's just how the world works. Strong countries have their interests that they want to achieve, and then they try in various ways to influence that. What personally bothers me the most, which has been very present in recent years...(is) that children in some countries cannot immediately declare which gender they are but have to wait some time when they themselves say what they want to be...That's the ugliest influence that can be, it's so unnatural." (Male, Bijeljina)*

Who or what was in general regarded as a 'malign' influence paralleled the geopolitical views of the participants. The accompanying fear and suspicion which went with these views, can thus be seen as rooted in distinct identity threats. In Sarajevo, the perceived threatening power was Russia.

*“I know a concrete example regarding Russia where Russian citizens come to our countries and those Russian citizens who are connected to Putin, to establish their companies here and to do something. Maybe even illegal, but maybe it’s not illegal, and that introduces fear among our citizens.” (Female, Sarajevo)*

*“Well, just observing the Russian ambassador and his speech makes it evident. I believe this is a primary cause of instability and unrest here, especially amidst the ongoing situation and war in Ukraine. His stance, openly supporting the war and urging us to do the same, exemplifies how such dynamics operate.” (Male, Sarajevo).*

A short distance away, in East Sarajevo, a part of Republika Srpska, the designated menace was the West, with the threat once again cast in explicitly moral terms.

*“In my personal opinion, all the evil comes from the West and America. We see what’s happening in all countries, not just in ours, but in all the others where they’ve done what they’ve done. So, I believe there’s a lot of negative influence coming, and we would live better if foreigners didn’t determine our destiny....” (Male, East Sarajevo)*

*“I would like us from Republika Srpska to turn more towards the East, towards Russia. Let’s spiritually and morally unite with our fraternal people, Serbia, Russia, Montenegro. At least some spiritual connection. Of course, with our other neighbours as well, with Croats, Bosniaks, let’s build coexistence and simply function normally.” (Female, East Sarajevo)*

The wish to ‘spiritually align’ with Bosnia’s eastern neighbours whilst building co-existence with Croats and Bosniaks locally present a formidable practical challenge to those of like mind to the informant above, though it does at least acknowledge the need to accommodate the views of those who do not share the same sense of ‘fraternity’.

That said, anchoring geopolitical preferences in ideas of ‘morality’ and ‘nature’ presents significant challenges for policymakers who favor Euro-Atlantic integration and seek to counter such views with factual information and reasoned arguments. This construction of identity, morality, and nature suggests a set of interconnected constructs that occupy a dominant position in shaping how the world is perceived, influencing core aspects of personality, self-image, and identity. Change in any one of these aspects is likely to be perceived as threatening to the others.

In general, in comparison to participants from other ethnic groups, Serb participants in the focus groups were more likely to express negative views towards the international community. The following quote presents this in terms of a classic ‘them and us’ fantasy scenario - a self-serving international project of little benefit set in opposition to a unified Serbian people.

*“Everyone has their own pawns and their organizations that are under their wing, trying to carve out something here for their own benefit. They often portray themselves as significant contributors to our cause, but in reality, their assistance doesn’t substantially benefit us. So, essentially, everyone here is alike.” (Male, Brčko).*

Interestingly, we found that participants mentioned the NATO intervention in Serbia less often in the course of this research in comparison to the work undertaken 11 years ago, when it was frequently mentioned and in more emotionally charged arguments. This is consistent with work which shows the declining power of collective memory for politically significant events over time.<sup>13</sup>

13 James W. Pennebaker, Daria Paez & Bernard Rimé (Eds.) *Collective memory of political events*. New Jersey. Lawrence Erlbaum.

## 5. REASON, IDENTITY AND MEMORY: SUMMARY STATEMENT WITH RECOMMENDATIONS

The above presentation of focus group material foregrounds several key issues.

1. **Distrust in media presentation of news** and the belief that vested interests seek to impose self-serving political agendas on the public.
2. **The political culture in Bosnia**, where, along with the news media, politicians and assorted interest groups are viewed with distrust for pursuing an agenda in which the cultivation of fear and framing of stories in nationalist terms is paramount.
3. **The role of identity, place, and collective memory in shaping the presentation and appraisal of information and its emotional reception.** Perspectives in the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska tended to be quite different. Groups from Mostar and Sarajevo for example, held considerably more positive views toward NATO and the interpretation of the war in Ukraine. In Republika Srpska, in contrast, the role of NATO regarding the war in Ukraine was viewed negatively.  
 In the survey<sup>14</sup> when asked how they feel about NATO respondents who identified as Bosnians, Bosniaks, and Croats stressed “security” more than any other feeling, whereas Serbs answered “concern” at the highest rate. Similarly, “hope” and “relief” were more likely to be expressed by Bosnians and Bosniaks, “pleasure” by Croats, and “fear”, “anger”, and “disappointment” by Serbs. It is important to note however that these expressions were not unanimous. There were Serbs for example expressing positive opinions of NATO who answered that NATO membership made them feel “hope” and/or “security.”
4. **The anchoring of both news and politics in geopolitical interests.** When it came to both NATO and questions of foreign influence, participants tended to interpret events in terms of salient frames that were rooted in identity and perceived threats to identity. For instance, several people commented on what they saw as the significance of the

14 Atlantic Initiative (2023)

“LGBTQ agenda” or shifting gender norms. However, there is also a geopolitical agenda at work, with Serbia and Republika Srpska seeking to establish leverage in the international arena by showcasing close ties with Russia. This agenda shapes public provision and reception of information, and news framing. NATO must work to systematically counter the further cementing of such discourses among the ethnic Serb populace.

5. **The management of identity threats.** The evidence strongly points to the powerful role of emotion and memory in Bosnian political life. These are linked to narratives tied to ethnic and national identity. To counter prevailing trends policy makers could seek to convey feelings of hope and security which can be decoupled from questions of identity and geopolitical intent and to convey perspectives on NATO membership.
6. **Women tended to be much more anti-NATO than men.** This was found in both focus groups and the survey part of the research. From the focus groups, we learned that for some women, their concerns about NATO membership were that this could lead to further militarization of the state, or that it would force Bosnians “*to fight for someone else’s interests.*” In other words, these women correlated NATO with potential insecurity and conflict. They also framed security and militarization. Women in our research were more concerned than men about the potential consequences of NATO actions on their families and communities, believing this would affect the safety of their loved ones or simply disrupt daily life as they know it. It is important to note that extreme ethno-nationalist groups, which habitually adopt an anti-NATO stance (among others), have been targeting their messaging at women in the region.

It can be argued that these findings are an entry point for further research that explores these gendered differences in more depth to better understand why women are more likely than men to hold negative views of NATO. Gender-specific factors, historical context, and individual experiences likely come together in complex ways to shape these perspectives.

7. **A significant pragmatism exists among participants.** The participants, who are also voters, including individuals with strong emotional reservations against NATO, demonstrated the capacity to rationally assess the potential benefits of membership in the alliance. What is true for the citizens who expressed their views here, may also extend to political figures, including those within the opposition. Arguably then, the scope for political actors to consider a more favourable stance on NATO may be greater than has been imagined. In this context is also worth recalling that the most outspoken anti-NATO figures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, were up until a few years ago quite positive in their attitudes towards the alliance. To wit our research suggests taking a bolder stance on NATO integration could be seen as a courageous step that has the potential to resonate with citizens who are moveable or undecided on this issue.

## 6. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, in our research we see a marriage between psychological, emotional, and political perspectives and physical place. On both sides of this divide there is uncertainty and room for change. This needs to be managed with considerable care as the space for change carries major implications for identity. Those people who express deviation from accepted narratives, particularly those who may be well regarded by their peers, may be strategically placed to build bridges, and develop alternatives to prevailing narratives.

Emotional attitudes, rather than any rational appraisal of information, are the strongest predictors of positive and negative views. This suggests that when discussing NATO, both reason and emotion are important reference points from which to consider future options. It is essential to explore strategies for mitigating negative emotions and enhancing positive ones. Emotions are inherent and vital to human functioning and contribute to our ability to imagine both desired and feared outcomes and form a basis from which reason can operate to pursue desired ends. Although imaginative and emotional thinking may be unreliable, it is an influential, collective political force that necessitates that we engage with it.

Consideration of views toward NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires understanding, interpreting, and managing emotional content. We need to comprehend not only how to effectively communicate feelings of hope and security - which are the antidote to the generation of fear and despair by politicians and media but also how to effectively process fear and uncertainty which will likely be based on an individual's and group's perceived past. This is no light undertaking and may require building forums for public discussion and education outside of mainstream institutions where content can be managed creatively and safely.

It is notable though that even people who expressed emotionally charged negative views of NATO, or said they are disillusioned when it comes to NATO and the political West in general, were sometimes easily swayed when confronted with the arguments of another participant who was more informed about the subject or about geopolitical trends and could present the

benefits of NATO in a knowledgeable but dispassionate way. The principal researcher has been in focus groups where at least half the participants toned down their opposition to Bosnian NATO membership over the course of the discussion, because someone else was ready to engage with them in a respectful and informed manner. In some respects, the current research, can be considered as a piece of action research,<sup>15</sup> and viewed as a vehicle for social change in the country. How frequently and on what scale such activities need to be undertaken is a matter for further deliberation and empirical work.

The above suggests the possibility that a well-organized and strategic political campaign coupled with events organised on the ground could have a substantial impact. If political leaders were to take the initiative to engage with the public, present compelling arguments in favor of NATO, and demonstrate a willingness to address their concerns or misconceptions, significant change could be possible. Ultimately, adopting a pro-NATO stance or, at the very least, a position that is less antagonistic towards NATO would require political leaders in Republika Srpska to meaningfully assess the evolving sentiments of their constituents, acknowledge the potential benefits of NATO membership, and be willing to take a calculated risk. This could be seen as forward-thinking and may garner support from voters who recognize the benefits of aligning with NATO's democratic values and the alliance's contribution to regional stability.

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15 See Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion & Keith Morrison (2017). Action research. In L. Cohen, L. Manion & K. Morrison (Eds.) *Research Methods in Education* (pp. 440-456). London. Routledge.

