

# AN EMOTIONALLY BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH TO NATO PUBLIC SUPPORT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Author:  
Virginie Andre

# AN EMOTIONALLY BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH TO NATO PUBLIC SUPPORT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

## **Author**

Virginie Andre

## **Editor**

Nejra Veljan

## **Publisher**

Atlantic Initiative

2025



Norwegian Embassy  
*Sarajevo*

The development of this Policy Paper was supported by the Norwegian Embassy to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The views and opinions expressed in this text are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the donors.

*“The emotional brain responds to an event more quickly than the thinking brain.”*

*Daniel Goleman*

*“Our potential for positive and negative emotions is the same, but intelligence is our special quality.”*

*Dalai Lama*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. WHY AN EMOTIONALLY BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH?</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2. ANTI-NATO DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND BIH</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3. MAPPING PUBLIC FEELING TOWARDS NATO IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE OF EMOTIONAL GOVERNANCE</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>5. GENDER SENSITIVE EMOTIONALLY BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>25</b>





## INTRODUCTION

This policy brief offers an emotionally based strategic communication (ESBC) framework to effectively inform and engage public opinion and strengthen support towards NATO in the Western Balkans, and more particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). It draws on the findings of two recent studies conducted by the Atlantic Initiative to examine which emotions are prevalent and relevant in informing and formulating effective NATO communication interventions in BiH.<sup>1</sup> Though fear and hope are not newly associated with NATO, the presence of such feelings as “residues of experience”<sup>2</sup> of past NATO interventions in the Western Balkans continues to affect Bosnian citizens’ perceptions, attitudes and belief formation towards NATO. While positive responses to NATO in BiH continue to be prominently associated with stability and democracy, a dangerous cocktail of pervasive Russian disinformation campaigns is fuelling a regional and local right-wing extremist milieu and amplifying anti-NATO sentiment in the region. Combined with a lack of media literacy, nationalist inflammatory political rhetoric, and the threat of a possible spillover of the Russia-Ukraine war,<sup>3</sup> such activity is feeding a sense of fear, particularly among Bosnian women who associate NATO with instability and conflict.<sup>4</sup> These responses are being used strategically by political elites and hostile actors to undermine BiH adhesion to NATO, and ultimately threaten peace and democracy. This policy brief will outline how EBSC can transform the current map of negative feelings towards NATO among Bosnian citizens into a more positive picture.

- 1 Halilović, M. and Veljan, N. (2024). *Attitudes Towards Nato: A Survey Report*. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative. Access at: <https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Policy-Paper-Attitudes-towards-NATO-A-Survey-Report.pdf>; Halilović, M. and Roberts, R. (2024). *The Geopolitics of Emotion: Emotional Perceptions of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative.
- 2 On the concept of emotions as residues of experiences, see Petersen, R.D. (2011). *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics).
- 3 On fear of the Ukrainian war spilling over into the Western Balkans, see EWB (2023). *Citizens of the Region Fear the Spillover of the Conflict in Ukraine to the Balkans*. Access at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/03/01/citizens-of-the-region-fear-the-spillover-of-the-conflict-in-ukraine-to-the-balkans/>
- 4 See Halilović and Roberts (2024)

## 1. WHY AN EMOTIONALLY BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH?

*“Emotion is not only [to be considered] as a problem to be overcome, but also as a solution that can help individuals and groups overcome problems.”<sup>5</sup>*

Konijn and Holt (2024) explain how in the early days of communication research, very little attention was given to emotions in the crafting of media messages and their reception, and they were often merely considered as ‘noise’.<sup>6</sup> Over time, the consideration of emotional effects has been progressively integrated into corporate and political (electoral) communication strategies given their persuasive power. Indeed, the cultivation of powerful responses such as fear and anger (the “politics of fear”) has given policy-makers agency and power to mobilise such feelings among target audiences and ultimately to achieve their political goals.<sup>7</sup> In a 2016 interview, Donald Trump clearly stated that, “Real power is – I don’t even want to use the word – fear.”<sup>8</sup> The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights also highlights how appealing to a different set of emotions can have a lasting impact and bring people together in supporting human rights and shared democratic values.<sup>9</sup> Dennison further contends that, “eliciting emotions is key to persuasion because attitudes have a cognitive and emotive component, with predictable physiological outcomes that make messages more resonant and impactful on behaviour, supporting policy objectives.”<sup>10</sup>

5 Mercer, J. (2005). ‘Rationality and Psychology in International Politics’, *International Organization*, 59(1), 77–106.

6 Konijn, E. A., & Holt, J. M. (2015). From Noise to Nucleus: Emotion as Key Construct in Processing Media Messages. In K. Döveling, C. von Scheve, & E. A. Konijn (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media* (2nd ed.), 37-59. London: Routledge.

7 Altheide, D. (2021). Emotions and the Politics of Fear: 9/11, Trump, and the Pandemic. In Döveling, K., & Konijn, E.A. (2021), 212-226; Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). Creating an Emotional Community: The Negotiation of Anger and Resistance to Donald Trump. In Graefer, A. (Ed.) *Media and the Politics of Offence*. Palgrave Macmillan.

8 Tackett, M. & Haberman, M. (2019, Feb 4). *Trump Once Said Power Was About Instilling Fear. In That Case, He Should Be Worried*, New York Times (international edition).

9 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2022). *10 Keys to Effectively Communicating Human Rights*. Access at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2022-10-keys-communicating-human-rights\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-10-keys-communicating-human-rights_en.pdf)

10 Dennison, J. (2024). Emotions: Functions and Significance for Attitudes, Behaviour, and Communication, *Migration Studies* 12(1), 1–20.



More recently, the affective dimension of communication has become even more salient in the face of a volatile information ecosystem plagued by mis- and disinformation, in which logic and rationality have a decreasing effect the more audiences are engaged at an emotional level.<sup>11</sup> Cognition often follows suit with our feelings, thus presenting the risk of emotional fallacy. The communications strategies of extremists and other malign actors rely on the weaponisation and exploitation of audience feeling through the use of narratives that not only resonate with individuals but also spark a psychological response,<sup>12</sup> thus triggering further emotional contagion.<sup>13</sup> Since the inception of mass media, violent extremists and malicious actors have recognised and harnessed the power of strategic communication;<sup>14</sup> they have leveraged mass media to create fear and division, used insights into their audience to understand how to exploit existing grievances, and harnessed technological advances such as the internet and social media to create direct connections with those they seek to influence and instrumentalise.

Emotions influence the way individuals and communities receive, interpret and respond to messages. Indeed they “allow us to better understand ourselves within the world around us and (...) our social world and each other.”<sup>15</sup> Feldman and Hart emphasise that, “emotions are particularly vital to persuasive strategic communication because activating them has been shown to override identity-based concerns, lead to deeper consideration of information, and lead people to engage in personal rather than political or ideological reasoning.”<sup>16</sup> Henceforth, it is important for governments and institutions to take stock of these phenomena in the public sphere, and understand the quality of the affective response – i.e. the nature, distribution and strength of the emotions involved<sup>17</sup> – to formulate effective strategic communications. Furthermore, Papacharissi’s notion of an “affective public”<sup>18</sup> considers “public emotions as a mobilising and connecting power that connect or disconnect people through sentiment or

- 11 Ecker, U.K.H., Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. et al. (2022). The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and its Resistance to Correction, *Nature Review Psychology*, 1, 13–29; Szakács, J. & Bognár, É. (2021). *The Impact of Disinformation Campaigns about Migrants and Minority Groups in the EU*. Brussels: Directorate General for External Policies of the Union; Bastick, Z. (2021). Would You Notice If Fake News Changed Your Behaviour? An Experiment on the Unconscious Effects of Disinformation, *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 116.
- 12 On emotions and violent extremism see: Waldek, L., Droogan, J. and Lumby, C. (2021). *Feeling Terrified?: The Emotions of Online Violent Extremism*. Cambridge University Press (Elements in Histories of Emotions and the Senses); Lavenne-Collet, N., Dissaux, N., Campelo, N., Villalon, C., Bronsard, G., Botbol, M., & Cohen, D. (2022). Sympathy-Empathy and the Radicalization of Young People. *Children*, 9(12); Tausch, N., Bode, S., & Halperin, E. (2024). Emotions in Violent Extremism. In M. Obaidi & J. Kunst (Eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Violent Extremism*, Cambridge University Press.
- 13 On the notion of emotional contagion see: Kramer, A. D., Guillory, J. E., & Hancock, J. T. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive- scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(24), 8788–8790; Ferrara, E., & Yang, Z. (2015). Measuring Emotional Contagion in Social Media. *PloS one*, 10(11); Ferrara, E. (2017). Contagion Dynamics of Extremist Propaganda in Social Networks. *Information Sciences*, 418(C), 1–12; Herrando, C., & Constantinides, E. (2021). Emotional Contagion: A Brief Overview and Future Directions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12; Lu, D., & Hong, D. (2022). Emotional Contagion: Research on the Influencing Factors of Social Media Users’ Negative Emotional Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.
- 14 Bockstette, C., & George C. (2008). *Jihadist Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques*. George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.
- 15 Barrett, L. F. and Russell, J. A. (2015) *The Psychological Construction of Emotion*. New York: Guilford Press; Barrett, L. F., Lewis, M. and Haviland-Jones, J. M. (2016). *Handbook of Emotions*. New York: Guilford Press.
- 16 Feldman, L. & Hart, P. (2017). Is There Any Hope? How Climate Change News Imagery and Text Influence Audience Emotions and Support for Climate Mitigation Policies. *Risk Analysis*, 38.
- 17 Richards, B. (2007). *Emotional Governance: Politics, Media and Terror*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 18 Papacharissi, Z. (2015). Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(3), 1–18.

affection”.<sup>19</sup> Halilović and Roberts contend that, “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”.<sup>20</sup> By engaging with the right emotions, government strategic communications can influence citizens and communities with the aim of building and sustaining more trusting, resilient, and cohesive societies.<sup>21</sup> Emotional governance develops a sophisticated understanding of collective feelings and their dynamics, which then allows governments to mitigate their damaging mobilisation by hostile actors, and to promote more life-affirming responses.<sup>22</sup> Feelings and experiences affect the ways societies and citizens engage with governments and institutions, and grasping these psychological contexts is extremely important to understanding the critical role of emotions<sup>23</sup> in influencing the behaviour and attitudes of citizens in the current threat environment. This requires governments and agencies to develop an institutional emotional intelligence<sup>24</sup> that informs their communication competence. In other words, institutions need the ability to recognise their own psychological effect via everyday politics, while at the same time considering collective public emotions; mapping and assessing their sources and meanings; learning from and integrating previous communications experiences; and finally promoting a culture of positive feeling and emotional regulation. An EBSC approach has the propensity to “transform negative-dominant emotional maps of targeted social groups into more positive ones.”<sup>25</sup>

EBSC has the capacity to reduce or transform conflict, challenge violent extremist narratives, counter disinformation that impacts communities, as well as influence and shape processes of social and political change.<sup>26</sup> It does so by informing, persuading and motivating behaviour.<sup>27</sup> As Dennison suggests, “emotional outcomes can be altered via narratives, frames, personal-based messages, facial expressions and body language, aesthetics, ordering (‘emotional flow’), intensities, and combinations.”<sup>28</sup>

19 Cited in Aboualghuda, I. (2021). Emotional Public Sphere: Sentiment Analysis of Audience Tweets after Shootings at Al-Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in New Zealand. *Journal of Mass Communication Research*.

20 Halilović and Roberts (2024). On the notion of everyday politics of emotions see: Beattie, A.R., Eroukhmanoff, C. and Head, N. (2019). Introduction: Interrogating the ‘Everyday’ Politics of Emotions in International Relations. *Journal of International Political Theory*, 15(2), 136-147.

21 Andre, V. (2024). *Democratic Public Communication and Public Trust Building in A Hybrid Threat Era*. Brussels: EU RAN PS.

22 Richards (2007).

23 Fredrickson, B.I., Tugade, M.M., Waugh, C.E., Larkin GR. (2003) What Good Are Positive Emotions In Crises? A Prospective Study of Resilience and Emotions Following the Terrorist Attacks on The United States on September 11th, 2001. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 365-76.

24 Emotional intelligence has been defined as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey and Mayer, 1990, p. 189). On emotional intelligence see Daniel Goleman’s seminal work: Goleman, D. (2007) *Emotional Intelligence* (10th ed.) New York: Bantam Books.

25 Cosić K, Srbljinović A, Popović S, Wiederhold BK, Wiederhold MD. (2012) Emotionally Based Strategic Communications and Societal Stress-related Disorders. *Cyberpsychology Behavior Social Network*, 15(11), 597-603.

26 Andre (2024); Cornish, P. & Yorke, C. (2011). *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*. London: Chatham House.

27 Dennison, J. (2024). Emotions: Functions and Significance for Attitudes, Behaviour, and Communication, *Migration Studies* 12(1), 1–20.

28 Ibid.



The affective dimension of communication, and how it influences the reception of NATO and NATO-related communications among Bosnian audiences, should not be underestimated. As Richards argues, “public emotions [are] often a major factor in determining the directions and outcomes of political processes, whatever the content and institutional locations of those processes”.<sup>29</sup> Hence NATO strategic communications must consider the region’s public temperament, as it will have implications for the effectiveness of its communications, aims and content as well as its consolidation in BiH and the Western Balkans. NATO must also support and foster public psychological resilience for emotional governance to be successful. Building strategic communications that promote a culture of positive emotional regulation in this way will not only reduce the influence of harmful collective feelings and support resilience in BiH and the Western Balkans, but will ultimately also foster public trust in NATO and strengthen societal cohesion.

---

29 Richards, B. (2018). The Emotional Public Sphere and Its Importance: Freedom of Speech as a Case Study — Commentary. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 2040 – 2051.

## 2. ANTI-NATO DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND BIH

In an information environment where governments and institutions are out-communicated by unscrupulous actors, media access and consumption have changed dramatically, and public trust is in decline and media literacy is low, the emotion-based manipulation of information by hostile actors in the Western Balkans is thriving. Bosnian citizens are increasingly exposed to problematic information (half-truths, distortions, deceptions, fakes etc), often having to process a mass of content from a diversity of sources characterised by tabloidisation,<sup>30</sup> thus leaving them vulnerable to nefarious emotional influence. NATO-related information is mostly accessed through television, but also from online media outlets and social media platforms,<sup>31</sup> with a significant number of media outlets often “catering to specific biases of specific groups”.<sup>32</sup> Kostadinovic warns against this phenomenon of a “media ghetto”<sup>33</sup> which acts like an echo chamber, reinforcing feelings, perceptions and ultimately attitudes.

Hostile disinformation in the Western Balkans appeals to pro-Russian sentiment while spreading anti-Western feeling, particularly against the European Union and NATO,<sup>34</sup> by tapping into residues of “old” resentments towards the West,<sup>35</sup> historical victimhood, ethnic tensions and fear. In their recent survey, Halilović and Veljan show that most negative attitudes towards NATO are either related to 1990s bombings of Serbia or its interference in the Bosnian war (1992–1995).<sup>36</sup> Spearheaded mainly by ethnonationalist and right-wing regional and domestic actors,<sup>37</sup> these emotive and harmful narratives are undermining NATO’s legitimacy in the

30 Halilović and Roberts (2024)

31 Halilović and Veljan (2024)

32 Halilović and Roberts (2024)

33 Kostadinovic, M. (2016). Language of Globalized Media as a Hate Generator in the Balkans. *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Pristini*. 46(3), 121-134.

34 Sunter, D. (2020). Disinformation in the Western Balkans. *NATO Review*, 21 December 2020. Access at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>

35 Xheneti, I. (2021). Disinformation in the Western Balkans and the Crucial Role of NATO/UE. *International Scientific Review*, 16.

36 Halilović and Veljan (2024), 15.

37 Sunter (2020). See also: Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A., Fridman, O., & Gjuzelov, B. (2021). *Mapping Fake News and Dis-*

region and slowly eroding public support towards BiH's ongoing partnership with and future membership of NATO. Often aligning with and feeding (extreme) right-wing nationalist rhetoric, toxic Russian disinformation propaganda relies on right-wing ethnonationalist sentiment to further its influence in the region. As Sunter explains:

*"[Russian media-sponsored Serbian language] disinformation demonises NATO and the United States, fuels ethnic tensions and presents the European Union as a dysfunctional, racist and anti-Serb organisation. It amplifies the threat perceptions of the Orthodox population as well as a culture of remembrance that portrays Russia and the Soviet Union as powerful protectors throughout history".<sup>38</sup>*

Such a narrative has made inroads into the Bosnian public sphere :

*"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 (...)".<sup>39</sup>*

Halilović and Roberts explain how these narratives of collective memory have been instrumental to the contemporary Serbian leadership in binding communities together through the persistent notion of a collective victimhood and suffering inflicted by NATO,<sup>40</sup> often pointing to NATO's 1999 Kosovo Air Campaign,<sup>41</sup> and shaping perceptions and behaviours in a way that undermines NATO legitimacy in the Western Balkans and BiH. The emotional residues of past experiences and cross-generational victimhood narratives persist, and continue to flourish and inform Bosnian citizens, old and young:

*"I'm not very well informed, but I'm definitely against joining the NATO organisation 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 neighbours 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."<sup>42</sup>*

---

*information in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them.* Brussels: European Union.

38 Sunter (2024)

39 Cited in Halilović and Roberts (2024)

40 Halilović and Roberts (2024)

41 For a short introduction to NATO's March 1999 Kosovo air campaign, see: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49602.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49602.htm)

42 Cited in Halilović and Roberts (2024).



According to Dennison, emotions are dependent on a “complex combination of one’s current circumstances and feelings, the nature of the stimuli, and one’s deep-seated values, narratives, worldview, and ‘self’”.<sup>43</sup>

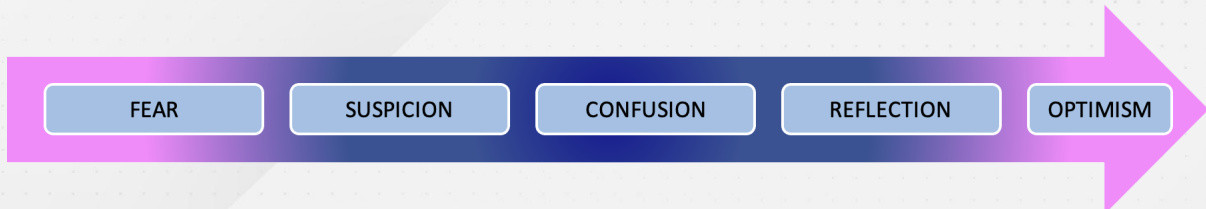
Taking into account a Bosnian media environment characterised (particularly online) by severe disinformation, significant levels of social media usage and high levels of institutional scepticism, the following section maps Bosnian public sentiment towards NATO to show how emotions such as fear and uncertainty are shaping and influencing perceptions of NATO.

---

43 Dennison (2024).

### 3. MAPPING PUBLIC FEELING TOWARDS NATO IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, public attitudes towards NATO have to a significant extent been based on misinformation and a severe lack of factual knowledge, and driven by emotion.<sup>44</sup> In their study, Halilović and Roberts found that overall public feeling towards NATO in BiH moves between fear and optimism, with a tendency towards negative expressions of confusion, distrust, suspicion and detachment. This is against a collective political and social backdrop characterised by feelings of disappointment, fear, insecurity, and hope.<sup>45</sup>



*Figure 1 Public Emotions Towards NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina*



*Figure 2 Collective Emotional Public Sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina*

44 Halilović and Veljan (2024), 33.

45 Halilović and Roberts (2024).

While some argue that **confusion** is not an emotion, and others contend that it is since “it is valenced, it has a distinct facial expression, and it has a distinct internal state”,<sup>46</sup> it is nevertheless closely linked to feelings of **fear and anxiety**. Emotional confusion towards NATO in BiH is associated with personal experiences of anxiety and uncertainty, specifically around the implications NATO membership would have in terms of the country’s military obligations, potential loss of sovereignty and the threat of war (coming from Ukraine). This notion of confusion is clearly apparent in the following statement by a female Bosnian citizen, where the sentiment is partially informed by the emotional residue from experiencing NATO’s 1999 bombings in the region, alongside optimism for a more secure Bosnia:

*“It’s a good thing about NATO that we are open to Europe and that (...) we are ‘safe’. As for negatives, I’m returning to the bombing of Serbia; I was present in Belgrade that year, and I can’t forget that. It brings me back to who did it, and that forms a negative opinion about them [NATO] for me. I even contradict myself with opinions (...).”*<sup>47</sup>

According to Plutchik’s general theory – more commonly known as Plutchik’s wheel of emotions (PWE) – feelings lead to physiological and behavioural reactions.<sup>48</sup> Plutchik identifies eight core emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger, and disgust, each with its own degree of intensity.

Basic emotions	PWE Physiological Triggers	Behavioural Reactions to Basic Emotions
Joy	Connect	Join, contact, meet, converse
Sadness	Withdraw	Turn inwards, avoid, be passive
Fear	Feel small	Retreat, submit, plead
Anger	Feel big	Confront, assert, impose, dismiss
Anticipation	Examine	Observe, consider, compare
Surprise	Jump back	Hurry, defend, react
Disgust	Reject	Remove, distance, separate
Trust	Embrace	Accept, support, celebrate

Table 1 Plutchik’s Basic Emotions, their Physiological Triggers and Behavioural Responses

By compounding these into primary, secondary and tertiary dyads (combinations of two core emotions), Plutchik identifies 24 emotional dyads and 32 emotions.

46 Hess U. (2003). Now You See it, Now You Don’t - The Confusing Case of Confusion as An Emotion: Commentary on Rozin and Cohen. *Emotion*, 3(1), 76–96

47 Cited in Halilović and Roberts (2024).

48 Plutchik, R. (1980). A General Psychoevolutionary Theory of Emotion, in Plutchik, R. and Kellerman, H. (Eds.) *Emotion: Theory, Research, and Experience* (Vol. 1: Theories of Emotion), 3–33. New York: Academic; Plutchik, R. (2001). The Nature of Emotions: Human Emotions Have Deep Evolutionary Roots, A Fact That May Explain Their Complexity and Provide Tools for Clinical Practice. *American Scientist*, 89(4), 344–350.

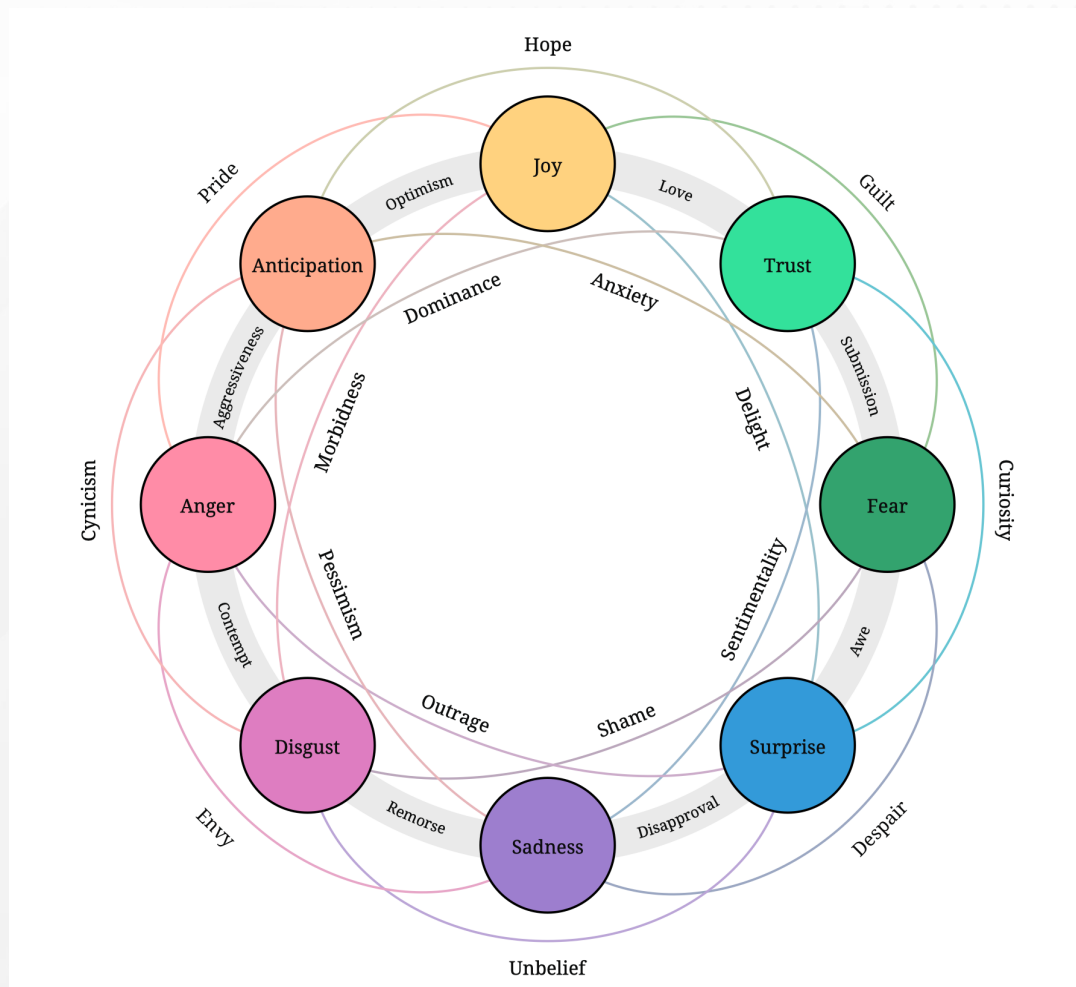


Figure 3 Plutchik's Emotional Dyads

As such we can consider **anxiety** (in relation to the aforementioned sense of confusion towards NATO) as a complex emotion that results from the dyad of anticipation and fear, and which leads to reactions of retreat and self-protection.

As suggested above, confusion emerges from the conflict between anxiety and optimism. Depending on its intensity, the feeling of optimism for a “safer Bosnia” could counterbalance the ‘retreat’ behavioural response to anxiety, ultimately leading to greater support for NATO membership. An EBSC approach that aimed to foster more support for NATO in the region would emphasise optimism in order to reduce the intensity of residues left by negative experiences and anxiety, while at the same time acknowledging those sensitivities.

NATO membership and interventions in BiH are often associated with feelings of **pessimism, distrust and disappointment**.<sup>49</sup> Scepticism is expressed over the sincerity of NATO’s role and intentions as a “guarantor of peace and security”.<sup>50</sup> There is an additional fear that NATO membership would potentially lead BiH into becoming involved in international conflicts.<sup>51</sup>

49 Halilović and Roberts

50 Ibid.

51 Halilović and Veljan, 19.



BiH Public Emotions in PWE	PWE Physiological Triggers
<b>Anxiety (anticipation + fear)</b>	Examine and feel small
<b>Pessimism (sadness + anticipation)</b>	Withdraw and examine
<b>Cynicism (disgust + anticipation)</b>	Rejection and examine
<b>Disappointment (surprise + sadness)</b>	Jump back and withdraw
<b>Optimism (anticipation + joy)</b>	Examine and connect
<b>Hope (anticipation + trust)</b>	Examine and embrace

Table 2 Interpretation of BiH Public Emotions Towards NATO through PWE

In Plutchik's wheel of emotions, the opposite of trust is **disgust**, which in BiH translates into a complex feeling of distrust or **cynicism** towards the "organisation's intentions and actions", as well as questioning and/or rejecting its motivation. NATO is viewed as a "political vehicle for expansion"<sup>52</sup> rather than an "instrument for security and stability":<sup>53</sup>

*"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. (...)"*<sup>54</sup>

In their study, Halilović and Roberts found that distrust and suspicion were particularly prevalent in Republika Srpska.<sup>55</sup> It is important to understand and carefully consider how feelings towards NATO in BiH follow certain ethnic dynamics. For instance, Bosnian Serbs have expressed long-standing scepticism towards NATO due to their historical grievances (residual experiences) and their geopolitical orientation.<sup>56</sup>

**Cynicism** combines emotions of disgust and anticipation, which trigger behavioural responses of rejection and examination. The societal response of distrust towards NATO aligns temperamentally and behaviourally with the drivers of disinformation and politically nationalist anti-NATO and anti-West narratives.

Not unlike distrust or cynicism, feelings of **pessimism** (in Plutchik's taxonomy, a dyad of sadness and anticipation) and disappointment (surprise and sadness) towards NATO in BiH can lead to defensive behavioural responses of withdrawal and passivity (rather than rejection). While public sentiment in BiH towards NATO appears to be generally located towards the slightly more negative end of the scale emotionally, there is a more positive feeling of **optimism** that is also found in narratives about safety and the future direction of the country.<sup>57</sup> NATO's stand

52 Halilović and Roberts

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Halilović and Veljan, 17.

57 Halilović and Roberts



against Russia's invasion of Ukraine has garnered greater optimism for some in Bosnia because it is perceived as a uniting, stabilising force:

*"NATO has been very positive and surprising in a positive sense because there has been unity and a stance that action should be taken collectively."*<sup>58</sup>

According to a recent survey conducted on attitudes towards NATO, respondents who expressed positive views perceive the organisation as a stabilising and conflict-deterrent force in the country and regionally, providing security and peace.<sup>59</sup> As mentioned before, optimism can be powerfully utilised in EBSC and, when coupled with hope, it can garner support. Indeed, depending on the order in which emotions are mobilised (emotional flow), their impact can be either enhanced or mitigated.<sup>60</sup>

For an effective EBSC approach to bolster NATO support in BiH, it is critical to carefully examine emotional expression in the public sphere and develop a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the quality of these emotions – i.e. the nature (basic emotions and dyads), distribution and strength of feelings in relation to NATO. While it is beyond the scope of this policy brief, consideration should also be given to how intersecting personal identities and genders shape public sentiments towards NATO.

### **Example of Effective Emotion Communication Tool: Cognitive Dissonance and Emotional Engagement**

Dennison explains how cognitive dissonance arises from the discomfort of believing two contrary things, which in turn leads to a process of having to confront the facts and the reconciliation of one's attitudes and beliefs. During the course of their research, Halilović and Veljan witnessed how emotional engagement combined with new information can create the necessary cognitive dissonance to shape new perceptions. They recounted how, during a workshop, one participant who was well-informed about the benefits of NATO was able, through engagement with several other participants who initially held negative views, to shift them towards far more supportive views on BiH integration into NATO. This is a powerful demonstration of how emotional communication can support a change in problematic beliefs.

58 Ibid.

59 Halilović and Veljan, 15.

60 Dennison (2024).

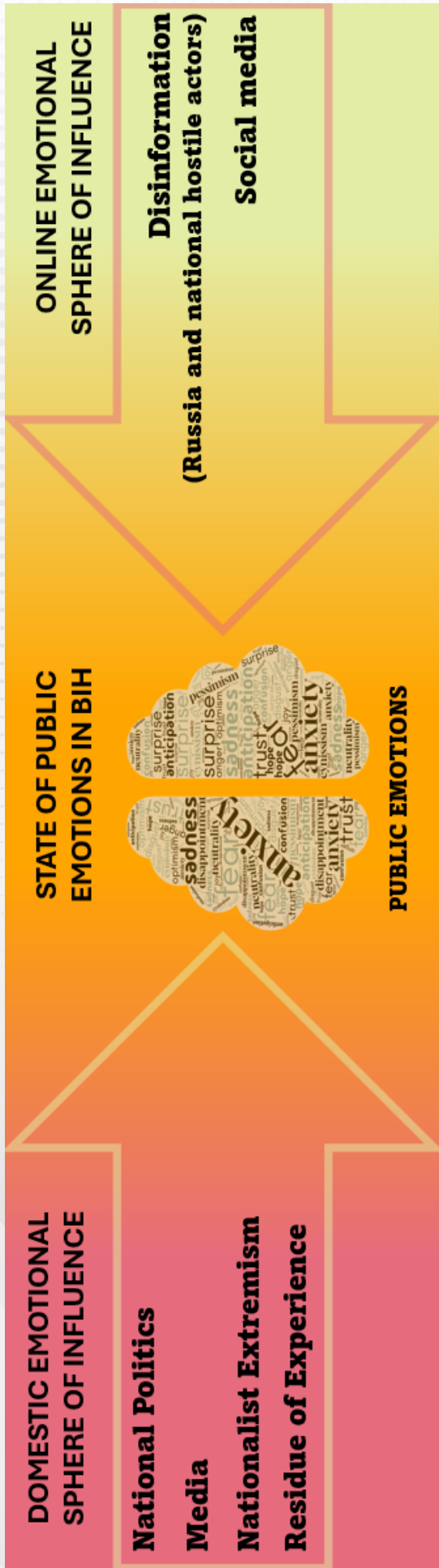


Figure 3 NATO Emotional Mapping and Spheres of Emotional Influence

## 4. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE OF EMOTIONAL GOVERNANCE

*"As-salaam Alaikum. Peace be upon you."*

*These were words spoken by a community who, in the face of hate and violence, **had every right to express anger but instead opened their doors for all of us to grieve with them.** And so we say to those who have lost the most, we may not have always had the words. We may have left flowers, performed the haka, sung songs or simply embraced. But even when we had no words, **we still heard yours, and they have left us humbled and they have left us united.***

*Over the past two weeks we have heard the stories of those impacted by this terrorist attack. **They were stories of bravery.** They were stories of those who were born here, grew up here, or who had made New Zealand their home. Who had sought refuge, or sought a better life for themselves or their families.*

*These stories, they now form part of our collective memories. **They will remain with us forever. They are us.***

*But with that memory comes a responsibility. A responsibility to be the place that we wish to be. **A place that is diverse, that is welcoming, that is kind and compassionate. Those values represent the very best of us.***

*But even the ugliest of viruses can exist in places they are not welcome. Racism exists, but it is not welcome here. An assault on the freedom of any one of us who practices their faith or religion, is not welcome here. **Violence, and extremism in all its forms, is not welcome here.** And over the last two weeks we have shown that, you have shown that, in your actions.*

***From the thousands at vigils to the 95 year old man who took four buses to attend a rally because he couldn't sleep from the sadness of seeing the hurt and suffering of others. Our challenge now is to make the very best of us, a daily reality.***

*Because we are not immune to the viruses of hate, of fear, of other. We never have been. **But we can be the nation that discovers the cure."***

- Excerpts from the speech by former New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern at the Christchurch memorial, 2019.

← ANGER AND  
SADNESS

← COMPASSION  
TRUST



← LOVE

← DISAPPROVAL

← COMPASSION  
SADNESS  
TRUST  
HOPE

← TRUST  
HOPE



A case of successful emotional governance can be seen in the New Zealand (NZ) Government's strategic communications response and subsequent public communication around the mass shootings in Christchurch in 2019. This demonstrated the potential of EBSC approaches in calming fear and anger (i.e. a dominantly negative collective emotional map) and promoting togetherness, leading to a unifying of social movements that had ripple effects across the globe. Indeed, a study of public comments on Twitter in the wake of the Christchurch attacks showed that the public sphere was emotionally heightened, with initial outpourings of anger and sadness being overwhelmingly surpassed by positive tweets expressing compassion and solidarity.<sup>61</sup> The #NewZealand hashtag was used to express both solidarity with New Zealand and gratitude for the Prime Minister's compassion and solidarity towards the victims.<sup>62</sup> This is indicative of then NZ PM Jacinda Ardern's successful emotional communication strategy in bringing citizens together at home and globally. As per the quote from Dennison previously, the use of narratives, personal-based messages, facial expressions, body language, emotional flow and combinations of these factors can alter emotional outcomes.<sup>63</sup>

While they constitute challenges, crises such as the Christchurch attack also present an opportunity to build the public reputation of, and trust in, governments, institutions and policymakers. At times of crisis people look to institutions to communicate and convey a message which addresses both their need for information and their emotional requirements.

---

61 Aboualhuda (2021).

62 Ibid.

63 Dennison (2024).

## 5. GENDER SENSITIVE EMOTIONALLY BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

When examining public emotions closely we see differences between men and women emerge, with Bosnian women expressing significantly more concern than men about the insecurity and instability that NATO membership would bring to their communities and families.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, they view NATO not as “a collective security mechanism but as an external entity capable of disrupting the internal dynamics”,<sup>65</sup> a view that is reinforced by ethnonationalist and right-wing narratives specifically targeting women in the Western Balkans. Women’s lack of support for NATO stems from their “fears about a subsequent heightened militarisation in BiH”<sup>66</sup> and “the notion that Bosnian forces would be compelled to fight for external interests”.<sup>67</sup>

Gender-targeted disinformation and propaganda are affecting women and girls in the region, influencing women’s collective emotional response and discouraging women from entering public and civic spheres, negatively affecting their equal participation in democracy. As Halilović and Veljan judiciously point out, countering this phenomenon will require “ongoing efforts to increase the representation of women in decision-making positions within the security sector and to implement gender-sensitive policies and practices”.<sup>68</sup> A decade ago, Mlinarević, Isaković and Rees made a similar observation by underlining how the absence of women in the Dayton Peace Agreement in 2015 undermined the recognition of women as agents of change in society.<sup>69</sup>

To be effective, an emotionally based strategic communication approach will have to recognise the ways in which men and women (and boys and girls) have differentiated emotional responses. As such it will need to examine gender-specific factors, including the legacy of conflict-related

64 Halilović and Veljan (2024).

65 Ibid., 34.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid. For a recent update on gender perspectives in the Balkans and NATO’s WPS agenda see: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_222406.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_222406.htm?selectedLocale=en).

69 Mlinarević, G., Isaković, N. P. and Rees, M. (2015). If Women are Left out of Peace Talks. *Forced Migration Review*, 50.



gender-based violence in the past (women and men will have been impacted differently by the various conflicts in the region).<sup>70</sup> Acknowledging the social norms and different individual experiences that shape women's negative feelings towards NATO compared to those of men will help to identify the best channels to use to reach women, men, girls and boys respectively.

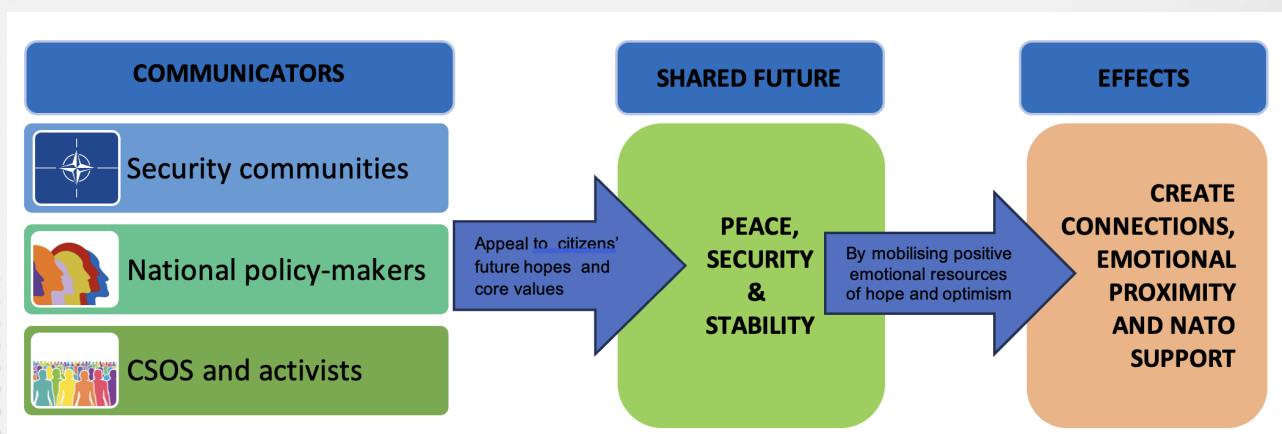
---

70 Haider, H. (2017). *Gender and Conflict in the Western Balkans*. K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

## CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy brief has shown how public emotions in BiH are informing and shaping the perceptions and attitudes of Bosnians towards NATO and Bosnia's prospective membership of the organisation. In an information environment where institutional stakeholders are being out-communicated and public trust and media literacy are low, the emotional manipulation of information by hostile actors across the region is thriving. While perceptions of NATO in the country remain positive, the traces of negative feelings towards the organisation are damaging its public support among Bosnian citizens. Harmful narratives are undermining NATO's legitimacy in the region and slowly eroding public support towards BiH's ongoing partnership with and future membership of NATO.

An emotional mapping reveals that attitudes towards NATO in BiH skew more towards the negative than positive, following ethnic and gender lines. A sense of public optimism towards NATO in BiH is counterbalanced by emotions such as confusion, distrust, anxiety, pessimism and cynicism (resulting from the combination of basic emotions such as fear and anger), set against a collective political and social backdrop characterised by feelings of disappointment, fear, insecurity, and hope. To foster and strengthen support towards NATO in the region, efforts should be focused on the generation of optimism and hope in order to reduce the intensity of emotions such as anxiety, while at the same time acknowledging those public sentiments.



Feelings of optimism and hope within the Bosnian public sphere are associated with notions of peace, security and stability; more problematic emotional expressions are related to insecurity, violence and instability. Hence, to develop a collective expression of positive emotions as regards NATO, akin to a social movement, a positive emotional contagion ('passion for NATO') need to be fostered and sustained through the appeal to and advocacy of a common future ('what unites people to engage with NATO'), and core values that transcend ethnic and political divides. An idea of the future characterised by peace<sup>71</sup>, security<sup>72</sup> and stability, which ultimately brings communities together in shared motivation.

To effectively inform and engage public opinion and strengthen support for NATO in the Western Balkans, and more specifically in BiH, an ESBC framework adopting emotional governance and institutional emotional intelligence as core principles should be considered. For this to be successful, NATO should also support and foster public emotional resilience. The integration of a gender-targeted strategy within the framework is also critical, as it will allow for the recognition and integration of men's and women's differentiated emotional experiences of NATO in developing effective responses.

## Emotionally Based Strategic Communication Principles

Identify and map public emotions towards NATO	Understand the quality and dynamics of those emotions - their nature, distribution and intensity.	Identify the emotional contexts and the different influences that inform and negatively or positively shape public feeling.	Recognise and integrate the differentiated emotional experiences of men and women	Develop a <u>comprehensive</u> understanding of the behavioural responses to the emotional triggers in order to achieve the desired policy goals.	Engage with the right emotions to influence citizens and communities with the aim of building and sustaining more trust in NATO and greater resilience.	Ensure that information about the role of NATO and its contributions to peace and security, as well as its values and efficacy, are promoted.	Use emotive storytelling to reduce the public's distance from NATO and make it more relatable.	Consider cognitive dissonance in developing awareness raising campaigns.	Beware of emotional fallacy.
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	--	--	------------------------------

By developing strategic communications that promote a culture of positive public sentiment and support emotional regulation, it will be possible to reduce the influence of harmful collective perceptions, support emotional resilience in BiH and the Western Balkans, and ultimately foster public trust in NATO and strengthen societal cohesion.

71 On emotional peace-making, see Travouillon, K., Lemay-Hébert, N., and Wallis, J. (2024). An Emotions Agenda for Peace: Connections Beyond Feelings, Power Beyond Violence. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 59(2), 135-148.

72 Schwarz's theory of basic values identifies security as one of the ten core values that are universally held and constant across countries and cultures, each with a distinct motivational goal. The basic value of security is about national security, safety and harmony, reciprocation of favours, family security, social order and sense of belonging. See: Schwartz, S. (1992). Universals in The Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (25), 1-65.







[www.atlanticinitiative.org](http://www.atlanticinitiative.org)