

Majda Halilovic and Nejra Veljan



NATO

IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

COLLECTIVE MEMORY, EMOTIONAL REGIMES,
AND SECURITY IMAGINARIES IN A
FRAGMENTED SPACE

Sarajevo, 2026

**NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina:
Collective Memory, Emotional Regimes,
and Security Imaginaries in a Fragmented Space**

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is practically inevitable that any discussion of NATO begins with references to wartime experiences and recollections of the Alliance's 1995 military intervention, Operation Deliberate Force – which played a decisive role in degrading the military capabilities of the Army of the Republika Srpska and thus paved the way for negotiation of the Dayton Peace Agreement.¹ Because this made NATO a direct military actor in the conflict, local perceptions of the Alliance have always been shaped by the same competing historical narratives and politically mediated interpretations that color all retellings of this past. In this way, the question of NATO has become at least as much about politics and identity as it is about security.

Immediately following the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the international context and the positions of Western actors regarding the country's security orientation were considerably clearer and more decisive than they are today. The same was true of state institutions, which expressed an explicit commitment to full NATO membership. This was affirmed through the 2003 and 2005 Law on Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina,² as well as adoption of the 2006 Security Policy of Bosnia and Herzegovina,³ where Euro-Atlantic integration was named as a strategic objective of the state. Later in 2006, Bosnia and Herzegovina also joined the Partnership for Peace program, and was then invited to participate in a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2010; both of which further reinforced the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Despite political divisions in this period, opposition to the Alliance had yet to develop at the institutional level and therefore lacked any systematic articulation at the entity level, meaning there was broad political consensus at the time that NATO represented the framework of collective security within which Bosnia and Herzegovina should seek long-term stability.

Throughout the late 2000s, this consensus included the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata*, or SNSD) and its leader, Milorad Dodik, who not only did nothing to contest the Euro-Atlantic trajectory of Bosnia and Herzegovina but actively engaged in state-level decision making that facilitated deeper institutional cooperation with NATO. Indeed, in 2009, Bosnia and Herzegovina formally submitted its request to join NATO's Membership Action Plan, with support from key political leaders across both entities,⁴ including Milorad Dodik, then Prime Minister of Republika Srpska. And though Dodik's rhetoric toward NATO was strategically ambivalent even then, he avoided

1 Michael O. Beale, "Operation Deliberate Force," in *Bombs over Bosnia: The role of airpower in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Air University Press, 1997): 31–41.

2 Law on Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina, No. 43/03; Law on Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina, No. 88/05.

3 Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Security policy of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2006).

4 Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2009, October 2). *Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its application for the Membership Action Plan (MAP)*. <https://vijeceministara.gov.ba/en/portal/post/bih-predala-aplikaciju-za-pristupanje-akcijskom-planu-za-clanstvo-u-nato-map-63390341885000000>

overt confrontation, aware that within the SNSD and across the political infrastructure, NATO was understood as part of the international governance framework through which post-war reforms, institutional restructuring, and questions of sovereignty and competence would be negotiated.

Still, while considerable progress was made on the technical and defense reform dimensions of NATO integration, any alignment among domestic elites on the strategic objectives of accession was tenuous, and by 2010, it was evident that a gradual but consequential shift in the political and security positioning of the SNSD was underway. This shift was marked by demands for a referendum on NATO membership, frequent invocation of the doctrine of “military neutrality,” and the dissemination of damaging narratives about NATO in the Republika Srpska.⁵ Parallel to this, governance in the country became more centralized and authoritarian, secessionist political signaling intensified, and nationalist rhetoric was amplified. It was in this environment that NATO was increasingly securitized as a contested political symbol, narrowing the discursive space for pragmatic debate about NATO as a framework for collective security and geopolitical stability. Instead, a growing chorus of voices began to portray the Alliance as an instrument of external pressure, establishing it as a focal point of internal political contestation.

In the mid-2010s, against a backdrop of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, this turn by some political actors away from Euro-Atlantic integration culminated, with governing authorities and government-aligned media in the Republika Srpska moving together in lock-step to depict NATO as an adversarial actor. Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina occupies a distinct security position, as a geopolitical island surrounded by states that have already been integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures; with the exception of Serbia, which formally maintains a policy of military neutrality. And yet, the geopolitical reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina is such that prolonged international military and political presence has rendered NATO and related security arrangements an integral part of the country’s institutional and political landscape. This is reflected in the continuous presence of international missions, most notably EUFOR’s Althea, in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s security architecture for at least the last decade. Althea, which functions as a stabilizing force, formally relies on NATO capabilities through the Berlin Plus agreement. Its mandate is regularly renewed, and yet recurring public and political debates concerning its role and legitimacy contribute to a persistent sense that the mission is temporary and its purpose ambiguous, informing public perceptions of NATO.

Importantly, the role of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina has extended far beyond its visible international military presence, reaching deep into matters of security sector reform, particularly during the effort undertaken in the mid-2000s to consolidate the ethnically fragmented military structures that existed after the war, into the unified Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶ In fact, this is frequently cited as one of few examples of successful post-conflict institutional consolidation in the country. But it should be noted that the way security integration is viewed, especially by domestic audiences, has been shaped to a significant degree by regional political and media narratives.

5 Sead Turčalo and Damir Kapidžić, “NATO Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina: The pursuit of local ownership in externally-led state building,” *Croatian International Relations Review* 20, no. 71 (2014): 71–90.

6 Robert Serry and Christopher Bennett, “Staying the course,” NATO Transcript, 1 October 2004, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2004/10/01/staying-the-course>

For example, negative rhetoric about NATO that is propagated by key figures and outlets in the Republika Srpska tends to be highly impactful because it often intersects with narratives originating from the Serbian or Russian information spaces. In other parts of the country, however, NATO and EUFOR are more commonly perceived as sources of stability.⁷ These competing interpretive frameworks contribute to divergent emotional responses and patterns of meaning-making among the public, which this study seeks to map empirically. In this context, NATO and EUFOR function simultaneously as symbols of security and reminders of the state's enduring institutional fragility, producing an ambivalence in the attitudes of citizens, observed in this research.

⁷ Majda Halilović and Ron Roberts, *The Geopolitics of Emotion: Emotional perceptions of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, policy paper (Atlantic Initiative, 2024).



2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in the premise that perceptions of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be understood solely through the lens of rational security calculations, but require an analysis of collective memory, the emotional patterns that shape the relationships of citizens with international actors, and the ways that history has been politically instrumentalized. It employs an interdisciplinary understanding of collective memory, which is conceived as the product of interactions between public narratives, the media environment, and individual emotional experiences. Hence, rather than treating memory as a static repository of the past or a fixed historical interpretation, the analysis here draws on theories of memory as a dynamic and multilayered process of meaning making, wherein the meaning of the past is continuously negotiated in the present.⁸ Collective memory thus operates at the macro level of public and institutionalized narratives, the meso level of family and community history, and the micro level of individual experience and emotional response.⁹

Particular attention is given in this study to the role of emotions in shaping security perceptions. In this sense, emotions are treated as socially structured patterns that influence how political issues are perceived, articulated, and publicly legitimized. In line with the concept of emotional regimes, the assumption here is that societies develop relatively stable emotional frameworks which regulate the emotions considered socially acceptable, dictating which ones are encouraged or suppressed in relation to specific topics, actors, or events.¹⁰ In post-conflict contexts, emotional regimes are often deeply intertwined with wartime experiences and collective memory, functioning as informal yet powerful regulators of public discourse on security, threat, and international relations. These regimes do not determine individual attitudes directly, but they set the boundaries of what can be expressed, contested, or questioned in the public sphere, strongly influencing security perceptions.¹¹

The part played by the media in sustaining emotional regimes cannot be overstated, as the sector represents a critical intermediary between memory and politics. Here, Nora's notion of *les lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) and Liu and Hilton's concept of social representations of history are both useful guides in navigating a digitally fragmented information environment where security narratives are rarely coherent and tend to exploit recurring symbolic references, affective triggers, and selective interpretations of the past.¹² Accordingly, this study examines how actors in media and politics reproduce and amplify spe-

8 Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

9 Ibid.

10 An emotional regime refers to a set of dominant emotions and affective norms that structure collective interpretations, determining which emotions are socially legitimate and how they are articulated within public discourse. See: William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

11 Ibid.

12 Pierre Nora, *Realms of memory*, vol. 1 (Columbia University Press, 1996); James H. Liu and Denis J. Hilton, "How the past weighs on the present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2005): 537–556.

cific memory patterns, often through simplified or polarizing frames that privilege emotional resonance over analytical deliberation.

It is in this context that memory is politically instrumentalized in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather than resulting from a social process, this study considers such instrumentalization to be the function of a set of practices that selectively activate particular aspects of the past to serve contemporary political interests. At the same time, the empirical findings of this research indicate that citizens are not passive recipients of politically instrumentalized narratives. On the contrary, many recognize the fact of this instrumentalization; however, their ability to publicly articulate alternative or more pragmatic interpretations depends on local emotional regimes, and patterns of memory.

Taken together, the theoretical framework of this study enables an analysis of public perceptions of NATO that is not overly influenced by information deficits or ideological alignment, by accounting for the complex interaction among memory and emotional regimes, information mediation, and political practice. This opens analytical space to examine how security is interpreted, contested, or rendered silent within a society so shaped by competing historical narratives and fragmented public discourse. To do so, the study employed an indicator-guided qualitative research design, combining focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and a comparative review of quantitative indicators of attitudes toward NATO. Quantitative data collected by the Atlantic Initiative in 2023 helped orient the analytical approach, inform the selection of research locations, and direct the focus of fieldwork, while qualitative research methods facilitated deeper insight into the emotional and narrative structures underlying citizens' attitudes today.¹³

This study viewed data gathered in 2023 not as a temporally concrete measure of public opinion, but as an initial reference point for the identification of regional patterns and the design of qualitative inquiry mechanisms. From the time that data was collected, through the commencement of fieldwork for this research in 2025, the analytical framework was further refined in response to regular consultations within the Atlantic Initiative research team, preliminary discussions with relevant stakeholders in the field, and a review of emerging domestic and international research on security perceptions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This iterative process ensured that the fieldwork which followed was not anchored in outdated assumptions and aptly reflected evolving political, media, and security dynamics, while still preserving its comparative value to earlier quantitative findings.

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout 2025 across multiple locations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with participants selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, gender, and regional background. Focus groups were organised in Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Bosnian-Podrinje Canton, Brčko District, Canton 10, East Sarajevo, Livno, Posavina Canton, Sarajevo Canton, Trebinje, Una-Sana Canton, and West Herzegovina Canton. This geographic distribution enabled the study to capture perspectives from politically, historically, and socially diverse environments across the country.

In total, 350 participants, with balanced representation of women and men, took part in focus group discussions lasting between 120 and 150 minutes. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured protocol covering key themes including security, historical memory, political and media narratives, and trust in information sources.

In addition, 41 semi-structured interviews were conducted with political, religious, and expert stakeholders, including journalists, analysts, and academic researchers. The combination of focus groups and expert interviews enabled methodological triangulation, strengthening the analytical depth of the study and enhancing the validity and robustness of its findings.

¹³ Majda Halilović and Nejra Veljan, *Attitudes towards NATO: A survey report – Summary of key findings* (Atlantic Initiative, 2023).

2.1. Analysis

Interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, and later transcribed and coded using NVivo data analysis software. The analysis was thematic, as well as both inductive and deductive.¹⁴ In other words, the analytical process integrated the inductive phase – which involved coding the transcripts, during which themes and subcategories emerged directly from the empirical material to enable the identification of unexpected patterns, locally specific narratives, and emotional registers not fully anticipated by initial research assumptions – with the deductive phase, entailing further analysis of the data through predefined analytical categories grounded in the research framework.¹⁵ This mixed approach anchored the analysis to theory while also maintaining a sensitivity and flexibility to any contextual and experiential differences expressed among participants.

To enhance the analytical rigor and reliability of this process, the coding of transcripts was reiterated to allow for continuous comparison both within and across focus groups and interviews. Particular attention was given to identifying convergences and divergences, as well as examining how individual accounts related to broader political and media discourses. In this way, qualitative analysis served not only to describe the attitudes captured but also to examine the mechanisms through which perceptions of NATO are formed, reproduced, and, in some cases, transformed.

Interviews with key stakeholders served as a complementary source of data that enhanced the interpretation of findings from focus groups, in part by helping to identify the dominant interpretive frameworks within which public attitudes are shaped. This methodology ensured triangulation, allowing researchers to link individual-level perceptions with relevant political and media discourses.¹⁶ It also helped contextualize regionally specific patterns observed in the perceptions of NATO that were articulated by research participants.

2.2. Mapping

The quantitative findings that informed this research, gathered in 2023 in a separate Atlantic Initiative study, indicated pronounced regional differences in how NATO is perceived across Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁷ Generally speaking, these differences are strongly influenced by the entity in which respondents reside within the country, whether the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – where Bosniaks and Croats make up most of the population – or the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. High levels of support for cooperation with and accession to NATO were documented in most cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while opposition or strong opposition to both were recorded in the Republika Srpska.

This entity-level divide in attitudes toward the Alliance was in fact quite stark. Respondents in a number of cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed near total or extremely high support for NATO accession, as in Bosnian-Podrinje Canton (100 percent), Posavina Canton (100 percent), Sarajevo Canton (96 percent), Tuzla Canton (94 percent), Canton 10 (90 percent), Zenica-Doboj Canton (90 percent), and Una-Sana Canton (82 percent).¹⁸ In contrast, across the Republika Srpska, less than one-third of respondents said they supported accession, and this rate was much lower in some places, including in the vicinities of Trebinje (20 percent) and Banja Luka (24 percent). The prospect of NATO membership received only slightly higher support in Pale (32 percent), and did not gain majority support even where

14 Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (SAGE Publications, 2014); and Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (SAGE Publications, 2016).

15 Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*.

16 Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (Routledge, 2017).

17 Halilović and Veljan, *Attitudes towards NATO*.

18 Ibid.

it reached its highest rates in the Republika Srpska, in Doboj (44 percent) and Bijeljina (45 percent).¹⁹ These results made the findings in Brčko District – characterized by its ethnically mixed population and distinctive institutional structure – even more illuminating, as respondents there voiced moderate levels of support for NATO (58 percent), alongside significant levels of ambivalence toward the Alliance, suggesting that institutional context and information pluralism may function as mitigating factors, resulting in less polarization than in the entities. Subsequent research conducted by international and domestic organizations has offered some, albeit limited, longitudinal insight into the durability of these trends. For example, data collected by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2024 and 2025 indicate a slight decline in overall support for NATO membership across the country, but only because there was a slight uptick in respondents who supported “closer cooperation but not membership.”²⁰ Hence, these data remain consistent with the findings of Atlantic Initiative in 2023 and point to the staying power of regional patterns.

These quantitative findings thus measure more than levels of support for NATO; they also map the structure and geographic distribution of political polarization in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The persistence of pronounced regional differences, particularly the stability of the entity-level divide, insinuates that the attitudes expressed by Bosnians toward NATO are shaped less by security assessments and more by deeply embedded and ethnically specific political identities, collective memories, and information ecosystems. For NATO and its partners, such findings should underscore the degree to which uniform communication and engagement strategies are inherently limited in their effectiveness. Where support is high and stable, it is not persuasion but sustained engagement, trust-building, and continued visible cooperation that is necessary; but where support for accession is persistently low, and especially where respondents are not just indecisive but explicitly opposed to the Alliance, NATO must work to actively counter the strong influence of entrenched political and media narratives.

To that end, the case of Brčko District is particularly instructive; because, if – as findings suggest – the District’s unique institutional architecture and media pluralism act as buffers against polarization, it is important to consider the value of indirect and context-sensitive forms of engagement that do not rely exclusively on security-centered messaging. With that in mind, the quantitative data presented in this report should be thought of not merely as a standalone representation of public attitudes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but as an analytical map of risks and opportunities. By identifying where differences are most pronounced and where attitudes are most entrenched, their long-term reproduction through the interaction of underlying drivers and mechanisms can be more meaningfully examined.

The findings of this study are therefore presented as a spatially differentiated analysis informed by the administrative and political structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina. No assumptions about security perceptions were made by researchers on this basis, but this framework offered an analytical lens that added clarity to the question of how wartime experiences, institutional trust, political discourse, and the media are both locally mediated and reflected in the attitudes expressed by Bosnian citizens toward NATO. And so, the three sections that follow discuss findings first from the Republika Srpska, analyzed by region; then from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, analyzed by canton; and finally from the Brčko District, that distinct administrative and political space which serves as an important touchpoint for insight into the potential for depolarized approaches to security issues in a multiethnic context. This analytical approach enabled researchers to simultaneously map local specificities and broader patterns while establishing the foundations for comparative analysis, offered in the concluding section.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ International Republican Institute Center for Insights in Survey Research, “Western Balkans Regional Poll: May–July 2025.” For results from recent IRI public opinion surveys in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: https://www.iri.org/search/?_technical_area=research-learning-and-evaluation&_country=bosnia-and-herzegovina



3. FINDINGS FROM THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

The narratives that inspire the emotional regimes operating in some parts of the Republika Srpska leave little room for rational debate on the role of NATO. These have emerged not out of evidence-based assessments of its contemporary policies or institutional posture but out of emotionally transmitted and politically reproduced memory frameworks. As a result, many citizens in the entity perceive NATO primarily as a historical actor associated with aggression and injustice, its contemporary meaning or implications largely unconsidered or unarticulated. This is not universal, however, with considerably less emotional resistance to NATO in certain location, where citizens practice a kind of pragmatic distance that makes them less likely to view the Alliance as a threat.

3.1. The Banja Luka Region

Within the scope of this research, the Banja Luka region emerged as the most emotionally and symbolically consolidated space of negative perceptions toward NATO in all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unlike other regions, where greater flux, ambivalence, or pragmatic adaptations were observable, attitudes about NATO in Banja Luka appear to be highly stable and internally coherent. However, it is notable that this stability and coherence do not imply homogeneity. Meaning, focus group and interview data from Banja Luka indicates that negative perceptions prevail but are reproduced through various distinct social mechanisms, shaped by generation, gender, and the different discursive frameworks through which security is discussed.

Still, one common denominator across respondents in Banja Luka was the strong sentiment that NATO is neither a contemporary security alliance nor an institutional framework for collective defense, but a symbol of power, coercion, and externally imposed order; the presence of which evokes recollections of wartime bombing, postwar political arrangements, and a sense of historical injustice. In other words, these citizens do not experience NATO as an actor embedded within a shared security architecture. Rather, they view the Alliance as an external force that acts *upon* local society, not in partnership with it. This was evident in focus group participants, especially middle-aged and older, who described NATO almost exclusively through the language of occupation, intimidation, and moral injury, with wartime experiences from the 1990s serving as their primary interpretive framework and bombing campaigns their dominant point of reference. Indeed, respondents across the Banja Luka region rarely spoke of NATO as an “alliance” or even an “organization,” portraying it instead as an abstraction that once trampled recklessly across the region, with enduring consequences.

One respondent explained, “*We remember NATO only through its bombs and victims. That does not fade.*”

And another argued, “*NATO never brought us security, only the message that we are not equal to others.*”

These and many similar comments made it clear that respondents in the Banja Luka region evaluate NATO not in terms of its formal mandates or stated objectives, but through their lived experiences of humiliation, exclusion, and injustice. Within this framework, security is no longer a technical or institutional matter, but a moral category, and NATO is perceived as an actor that has “*violated the rules,*” “*did not respect international law,*” and “*made decisions [about us] without us.*” Particularly salient were the testimonies of older women, who described NATO in terms that positioned the Alliance as a tool of authoritarian power, expressing for example that, “*When I hear NATO, I hear control, not protection.*”

These findings illustrate the extent to which resistance to NATO among citizens in Banja Luka is bigger than politics, and extends from an emotional regime that depicts external actors as symbols of domination, discipline, and a loss of autonomy. NATO is thus perceived in the abstract, as an actor operating “from above” to impose itself locally. As interviews with journalists and university professors confirmed, this interpretive framework is reinforced through public discourse and local media that rarely discuss NATO as a partner and typically represent it as a means of exerting outside influence.

As one interviewee noted, “*Here, NATO symbolizes pressure. People experience it as something that happens to them, not with them.*”

An expert also highlighted that, when it comes to NATO accession, local residents feel “*only a reflex of fear and a sense that history is repeating itself.*”

These accounts reflect media and elite discourses that have dominated Serb spaces for decades, particularly those alleging that Serbs have been victimized, misrepresented, and misunderstood by the West. This rhetoric situates the West as “other” while, at the same time, decrying that Serbs have themselves been made “other” by the arrogance and antagonism of Western actors. These narratives play a significant role in sustaining an emotional distance between NATO and communities in the Republika Srpska, as observed in this research.

Across focus groups in the Banja Luka region, the discursive framing of NATO articulated by respondents frequently situated the Alliance within broader historical and civilizational narratives, employing terms such as “*imperialism,*” “*colonialism,*” “*occupation,*” and even “*slavery*” to describe a perceived asymmetry of power. Participants who compared NATO to “*conquerors*” or spoke of “*colonization*” drew on claims of a prolonged subordination of the local community within an international order that is accused of granting Bosnian Serbs almost no meaningful sovereignty over their own political future. From this perspective, NATO is understood as little more than an extension of a Western-led order in which local citizens are expected to assimilate and submit to externally-dictated norms.

In fact, this fear of forced assimilation seemed to lie beneath the choice of some respondents to reframe security matters within a cultural and religious register. These respondents described NATO as not only “Western” but “Protestant,” implicitly positioning the Alliance in opposition to Orthodoxy and Serb Orthodox identity. Participants could cite no evidence that NATO poses a threat to their religious freedom, but this framing betrayed their deeply felt anxieties that they could be subject to forced cultural assimilation, putting their unique cultural identity at risk.

The information environment to which citizens in the Republika Srpska are exposed only bolsters these fears, through narratives of Western double standards. Such narratives characterize NATO as an organization that speaks of human rights while acting inhumanely, for instance. This grounds opposition to the Alliance in a moral logic that shrinks the space for rational debate on its geopolitical implications,

leaving NATO to be evaluated not on the basis of its current institutional role or activities but as a symbol that occupies a very specific place within the collective memory and historically rooted interpretive frameworks of Bosnians in the Republika Srpska.

Youth in Banja Luka: An inheritance of fear

An especially valuable insight gained from focus groups conducted with the youngest research participants (students born in 2004 and 2005) in Banja Luka was the fact that generational distance from the war has not translated into emotional distance from wartime narratives. None of these respondents had any firsthand experience of the conflict, and yet their referential frame for understanding NATO was almost exclusively linked to wartime suffering and injustice. They all associated NATO with negative emotions, like fear, anger, and discomfort.

One youth respondent explained, *“My initial... feeling, whenever I think of NATO, is always negative... there is a sense of fear, and this is shared among my peers.”*

Some young adults in these focus groups acknowledged that their own knowledge of NATO’s contemporary role was limited, but conveyed that *“NATO has always been presented as a negative influence”* by the media and older generations. In this context, an absence of information has not produced ambivalence but has reinforced judgments made on the basis of the emotional regime that prevails within the community. Thus, it was notable that some youth respondents articulated their awareness of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, with one referring explicitly to “generational trauma” in emphasizing that negative attitudes toward NATO form part of an inherited framework that functions even in the absence of direct wartime experience. In such cases, negative perceptions of NATO are not weakened by this lack of personal suffering on the part of youth, because the transgenerational transmission of traumatic narratives reproduces emotionally-modulated evaluations of the Alliance.

That said, some young respondents articulated concerns about NATO that were not solely driven by perceptions of the Alliance as a historical adversary linked to wartime actions, but extended from their view that it represents a potential threat to the internal stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the present day. Through this lens, these youth evaluated the prospect of NATO membership as likely to bring negative internal consequences for social cohesion within the country.

According to one youth respondent, NATO accession *“would create even deeper divisions among the three constituent peoples.”*

Another warned that such a development *“could be a trigger for civil war.”*

In this sense, young respondents in Banja Luka tended to view NATO not primarily as a matter of foreign policy and collective security but as a question of social stability and Bosnian security. The extent to which they displayed anxiety about potential insecurity, and anticipated it as inevitable in some instances, indicates that these youth filter even their assessments of future developments through the trauma inherited from previous generations.

In some young women who participated in the research, these risks assumed to be associated with NATO were translated to the micro level, into fears of how unrest may erode social cohesion, leading them to evaluate NATO less through a geopolitical lens and more through perceived implications for the stability of the immediate social environment. Among some young men, the same intergenerational trauma was

translated into a rather unambiguous cynicism, particularly regarding the political instrumentalization of NATO, which they described as a tool used by political actors to distract from socioeconomic and governance-related failures. For them, resistance to NATO functions additionally as an indirect expression of dissatisfaction with domestic politics.

As one young man put it, “*Whenever NATO is mentioned, I know someone is trying to distract from real problems.*”

At the same time, some young respondents injected a pragmatic rationality into focus group discussions, arguing for example that, “*We don’t have to like NATO, but we have to understand that the world has changed*” [since the 1990s]. This perspective was hardly widespread but its articulation was an indicator that discursive openings do exist, where alternatives to the prevailing narrative may gain traction. However, this requires that citizens are willing to engage on the question of NATO at all, which research participants said remains a “*taboo topic*” that people – including youth – actively avoid discussing. This was seen in focus groups with young women in Banja Luka, who expressed less overt antagonism toward NATO than other respondents, but did not necessarily have more positive attitudes toward the Alliance. Their neutral responses to questions about their views (such as “*I don’t have an opinion,*” or “*I haven’t really engaged with the topic*”) did not signal ambivalence, but functioned as a protective discursive strategy in an environment where the issue of NATO is highly contentious and socially sensitive.

In other words, reticence on the topic of NATO is a socially adaptive strategy, not an indication of disinterest. In fact, youth focus group participants demonstrated a considerable critical awareness of many practices employed by media and political elites vis-à-vis NATO messaging, but nevertheless found it difficult to distance themselves from the emotional regime that is upheld by these practices in their community. For instance, young respondents referred to the use of clickbait, media manipulation, and the “double dealing” of political actors who promote anti-NATO narratives in public while advancing cooperation with the Alliance at institutional levels. Yet, one young woman admitted that her ability to maintain a sense of neutrality about NATO collapses when specific wartime events from 1995 are invoked, setting off “*an eruption of emotions.*” This makes it clear that neutrality in this context does not reflect an absence of affect, but a mechanism for emotional regulation that attempts to mitigate affective responses activated through symbolic triggers linked to collective memory.

Narrative construction in Banja Luka: NATO as warmonger, not peacemaker

Across all focus groups held in the Banja Luka region, respondents consistently described NATO as an organization that supports war, rather than peace. Even participants who implicitly acknowledged that international intervention in 1995 contributed to ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not express a positive normative evaluation of the Alliance. Thus, among these respondents, NATO remains firmly situated within a symbolic register of force, aggression, and imposed power, and its peacekeeping or stabilizing functions are dismissed.

This is evidence of the ways that hegemonic narratives transmitted from Serbia and structured around collective memories of victimization shape public understanding in the Republika Srpska, pre-emptively narrowing the scope of debate within the entity about the war and NATO’s role in it, while also limiting space for critical reflection on wartime responsibility. Such memory frameworks reinforce emotionally closed and negative perceptions of NATO, leaving little room for nuanced interpretations of international actors, or for civic engagement grounded in reflective confrontation with the past.²¹ Analytically, this

21 Orli Fridman, “Memories and narratives of the 1999 NATO bombing in Belgrade, Serbia,” *Südosteuropa* 64, no. 4 (2016): 438–459.

serves to anchor a discursive disconnect, in that NATO objectively played a central role in ending the armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina but is afforded no symbolic recognition or moral rehabilitation on this basis. Instead, its wartime intervention is interpreted as further evidence of Western imperial projection and the asymmetry of international power.²² NATO is not seen to embody the paradox of force used to *end* violence, but as an actor for which war itself is the defining instrument of action.

Still, as this analysis demonstrates, resistance to NATO in Banja Luka is not monolithic, because it is reproduced through distinct generational and gendered patterns – among older generations, through lived war trauma and moral injury; among youth, through inherited fear and expectations of destabilization; among young men, through cynicism and political distancing; and among young women, through an affective neutrality and concerns about social cohesion – that converge toward the shared normative outcome of opposition to NATO as a legitimate security actor and perceptions of the Alliance as an aggressor.²³ To that end, NATO functions not as a subject of rational political deliberation but as a moral symbol, projected through an emotional regime wherein attitudes are shaped and sustained by deeply embedded affective structures rather than assessments of contemporary security policy or institutional performance.²⁴ This limits the impact of any efforts to influence the prevailing narrative that neglect to account for local experiences of collective memory, moral injury, and the discursive frameworks through which NATO is perceived.²⁵

In this sense, it is important to understand that negative perceptions of NATO in the Banja Luka region operate in line with what Sara Ahmed has conceptualized as an affective economy, in which emotions such as fear, resentment, and moral injury do not remain confined to individual experience but circulate socially, attach themselves to specific objects, and become embedded in collective meaning structures over time.²⁶ This positions NATO not merely as a military alliance but as an affective marker around which memories, identity boundaries, and narratives of injustice are organized. At the same time, these findings in Banja Luka bring to light what Bahar Rumelili describes as a “liminal identity” in the context of international relations, in that the Republika Srpska is by some accounts persistently in-between.²⁷ Formally, the entity is embedded within the security architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet emotionally and symbolically, it sits at a distance from the country’s core institutions. Within this liminal space, NATO is perceived neither as “ours” nor as a neutral actor, but as an external force that evokes unresolved past conflicts and uncertain futures.

These dynamics make the phenomenon of an emotional veto particularly significant when examining attitudes toward NATO in the Banja Luka region. Meaning, even when research participants acknowledged certain functional or pragmatic aspects of NATO, including its potential role in preventing conflict, such recognitions did not translate into shifts in their normative evaluation, because the moral framework shaped by wartime experience and perceived injustice retains interpretive primacy.²⁸ The emotional veto they apply therefore stems from perceived injustice and an enduring distrust in the international order.

22 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001); David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building* (Pluto Press, 2006).

23 Bahar Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (Routledge, 2015).

24 Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*.

25 James V. Wertsch, *How Nations Remember* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

26 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

27 Bahar Rumelili, “Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in international relations,” *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 495–508.

28 K. M. Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Fridman, “Memories and narratives of the 1999 NATO bombing in Belgrade, Serbia.”

It is also notable that many respondents in Banja Luka analyzed security not primarily through the lens of external threat, but internal social equilibrium, and perceived NATO as a potential trigger or intensifier of polarization within Bosnia and Herzegovina. This perspective makes it hard to view the Alliance as a solution to the country's security dilemmas. Indeed, such a reframing explains why, even for participants who readily acknowledged the role of NATO in ending the war, NATO remains outside the local peace imaginary. They have adopted a security logic that shifts the focus from external protection to internal stabilization.

Taken together, these findings in Banja Luka are illustrative of what can be described as an affectively consolidated security space, in which interpretive frameworks are sufficiently stable to absorb and neutralize alternative narratives. Although potential discursive openings were observed among younger and more highly educated participants, fundamentally, the structure of the prevailing emotional regime is robust. This has both practical and broader theoretical implications, but highlights the critical point that attitudes toward international security actors in post-conflict societies cannot be adequately understood without the meaningful consideration of dominant local emotional regimes, the role of collective memory in meaning making, and symbolic boundaries of belonging.

3.2. Bijeljina

Focus group discussion in Bijeljina revealed that perceptions of NATO are informed in that community by an exceptionally homogeneous, emotionally intense, and cognitively closed framework. The attitudes of participants toward the Alliance were almost unanimously negative, and they unambiguously associated it with war, aggression, and fear. They placed NATO exclusively within a register of violence that lacked any alternative meaning or interpretive nuance. As in Banja Luka, NATO therefore functions not as an object of political evaluation in Bijeljina but as an affective symbol, the meaning of which is pre-structured.²⁹ This extends from the fact that local perceptions of NATO are shaped almost entirely by wartime memory from the 1990s; and despite the variation of individual experiences, war trauma emerged in the Bijeljina focus group as a shared narrative resource, structuring the entire discussion. Research participants referred, for example, to experiences of “*childhood trauma*,” “*childhood fear*,” and “*uncertainty*,” and noted that, “*young people were killed*” during the war, amounting to a “*catastrophe*.” In this sense, NATO is not viewed at all as a contemporary political-military actor with evolving functions, only as a symbol embedded within a broader experiential framework of violence and insecurity. Accordingly, respondents made no distinction between different NATO operations, including between the intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 and the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. Some participants claimed that these events were “*all the same*,” merging discrete historical contexts into a single moral narrative of NATO as a destructive force.

This narrative fusion serves to intensify the emotional resonance of NATO vis-à-vis local emotional regimes, while inhibiting analytical differentiation. This is consistent with the concept of implicit collective memory, wherein past events are not retained as discrete historical episodes but as stable narrative templates.³⁰ Hence, when asked to identify emotions they associate with NATO, respondents in Bijeljina cited fear, without exception; and this fear was much more than abstract, exposing a deeply internalized emotional response in participants, connected both to wartime memory and ongoing anxieties about renewed conflict.

29 Orli Fridman, “Memory activism and the past in Serbia: The politics of remembering the 1999 NATO bombing,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 12, no. 1 (2018): 94–110.

30 Erll, *Memory in Culture*; Wertsch, *How Nations Remember*.

In fact, many of these respondents perceive NATO as a potential trigger of future violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This became particularly evident in focus group discussions centered around the prospect of the country's membership in the Alliance, during which participants almost universally articulated that such a development could lead to renewed internal conflict, even all-out war. These assessments were not grounded in any analysis of contemporary institutional arrangements or security guarantees, however, but in the logic of traumatic repetition: “*what could not work then cannot work now.*” NATO is affixed in the view of these respondents in its own historical failure to protect, and cannot be reconciled as an institution that is subject to transformation over time.³¹

Distrust in Bijeljina: Finding closure in an absence of information

One of the most striking findings in Bijeljina was how willing respondents were to acknowledge their own limited knowledge of NATO – admitting for instance that they “*did not understand,*” “*did not know,*” or “*did not see any benefits*” when asked about the potential value of NATO membership – while also exhibiting almost no curiosity about the Alliance, or any openness to reconsidering their pre-existing views. Rather, this absence of knowledge on the subject appeared to contribute to solidifying a discursive closure; leaving room only for negative attitudes to be strengthened, disallowing any movement toward neutrality. A similar pattern was observed in the attitudes of these respondents toward the European Union (EU), which prompted expressions of widespread opposition, often without detailed justification, even though this was not a primary focus of discussion. In this way, NATO and the EU were implicitly conflated, bound together as “external structures” considered to offer limited tangible benefit while introducing potential risks.

This speaks to the degree to which attitudes in Bijeljina are shaped by a generalized distrust toward the international order.³² Deep distrust also extends to domestic media, and media coverage of NATO was widely described by these research participants as politically motivated, manipulative, and selective. They frequently emphasized that no media outlet or institutional source was consistently credible, indicating that they view the local information space primarily as an playground of political influence, not as a source of objective knowledge.

As one respondent put it, “*every [outlet] presents [information] in a way that suits their own interests.*” Parallel to this, respondents articulated their distrust in political elites, as well. These participants acknowledged the significant influence of political actors on public perceptions of NATO, but attributed little credibility or legitimacy to these actors – who are seen to instrumentalize NATO, whether in support of or in opposition to membership, solely for strategic political gain. Importantly, though, this awareness did not induce any apparent critical disengagement by respondents in Bijeljina from dominant local narratives, meaning that the continued reproduction of these narratives is reinforced within a closed discursive environment.³³

A question of values: Cynicism in Bijeljina regarding principles in practice

It was notable, when the values associated with NATO were discussed in focus groups, that participants overwhelmingly affirmed the importance of democracy, human rights, individual freedoms, and rule of law, yet responded negatively or indifferently to the notion that NATO genuinely embodies these values. Moreover, some respondents characterized democracy more broadly as an ideal, which “*doesn't function in practice.*” They also assessed rule of law in Bosnia and Herzegovina as weak, but did not consider NATO credible or capable of contributing to good governance or stronger institutions. Ultimately, this is

31 Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice*.

32 W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, “The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions,” *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 2 (2018): 122–139.

33 Ibid.

because focus group participants in Bijeljina treated NATO as symbolic of threats to their national sovereignty. Emphasizing the importance of self-determination and autonomy, they perceived NATO not as a framework for collective security but as a geopolitical behemoth that imposes external desires and has the potential to entangle the country in foreign conflicts.

Fears of renewed war and external destabilization serve to reinforce this perception. In Bijeljina, this has nurtured a highly stable and explicitly negative imaginary of NATO, rooted in an emotional regime shaped by war trauma, fear, and a profound distrust of structures of authority. This prevents citizens there from appraising the Alliance as a contemporary security actor, measured in terms of its impact on policy, institutional function, or strategic alignment.

Given the degree to which respondents in Bijeljina viewed NATO as an extension of past violence and a symbol of future instability, the findings there arguably say little about how NATO is perceived as a security institution. Instead, the data collected there reflects more on the condition of social trust in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, how wartime experiences are integrated into collective memory of this region, and where the boundaries of permissible public discourse on security are drawn accordingly. So long as NATO remains fixed within a symbolic register of war that is translated into local emotional regimes, new information will continue to be filtered through this framework and reinterpreted thusly.

3.3. East Sarajevo

In East Sarajevo, perceptions of NATO are strongly informed by memories of the 1999 bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which functions in public discourse as a collective injustice and enduring communal injury to Serbs. Across nearly all focus groups, respondents in East Sarajevo associated NATO with “*bombs*,” “*pain*,” and “*hostility*.” Through this lens, they rarely considered the Alliance within the framework of contemporary security processes or current international relations, regarding it instead in the context of a historical event for which symbolic meaning continues to be reproduced.

One participant exemplified this, remarking, “*I don’t know much about NATO, but I know it’s not good when someone bombs you.*”

Interviews with religious and political actors in East Sarajevo shined a light on how this narrative is reinforced through their own rhetoric, which tends to mobilize wartime memory as a mechanism of identity consolidation and contemporary political legitimacy. Statements such as “*our people will never have a favorable opinion of NATO*” position the Alliance as “*other*” and external to “*our people*,” for example. Yet, these actors fail to examine or give voice to broader wartime contexts, or contemporary relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO. The framing they advance buttresses an emotional regime in which rational arguments about any potential benefits of the political or security functions of NATO have limited interpretive influence.

Still, in contrast to respondents in Banja Luka and Bijeljina – where attitudes toward NATO were more homogeneous and ideologically closed – there was greater internal variation, and even evidence of breaks in the dominant narrative, in East Sarajevo. For instance, in more urbanized areas of the region, younger and more educated participants were especially likely to exhibit a pronounced fatigue with the repeated invocation of the 1999 bombing, as well as an obvious skepticism about the political instrumentalization of these events.

As one participant noted, “*The EU is still mentioned [regularly], but NATO is a topic that is brought up [by politicians] only during elections.*”

This and other similar statements revealed an acute sense of disillusionment concerning the question of NATO among these respondents, which has reduced the ideological rigidity of their resistance to the Alliance, if only by moving them further toward apathy or disengagement. This was particularly pronounced in one focus group in East Sarajevo, during a discussion of the role of media and political elites in promoting certain narratives. While the respondents retained a strong emotional reactivity to NATO – expressing fear, anger, and even explicit expressions of hostility toward the Alliance – they simultaneously demonstrated a high degree of cynicism in relation to how media outlets and political actors exploit the topic of NATO to serve their own interests. Several made the point that they seek a diversity of information sources and consciously avoid sensationalist media, while actively verifying facts, in order to make sense of the public discourse.

One of these respondents explained, *“Whenever I read something [in the news], I check multiple sources and try to form my own conclusions.”*

In this way, NATO has come to be correlated not only with historical injustices, but with the contemporary political machinations used to mobilize fear and reinforce political loyalty within the country, and across the region. Its status as a potent and propagandistic tool of the political class has added to the emotional burden laid upon the Alliance, not even as a result of its own actions but through a kind of guilt by association. As respondents in East Sarajevo seek a critical distance from their political leaders, they are naturally applying an increasingly critical lens to political messaging – which they described as frequently contradictory; arguing for example that politicians *“say one thing... and do another”* vis-à-vis cooperation with NATO, or make statements about the Alliance that are *“pure spin.”*

These citizens felt a palpable sense of betrayal by their political representatives, and this clearly contributed to their ambivalence about NATO. Most considered the organization a threat, but they were equally distrustful of the domestic elites who shape and make decisions with implications for cooperation and integration with the Alliance, without broader public consensus. Generational dynamics add further nuance to this picture, as younger respondents lacking wartime experience yet again articulated attitudes shaped by family narratives and the emotional transmission of trauma, but in this case demonstrated a greater capacity to operate beyond the narratives advanced within closed emotional regimes. This was particularly true when youth in focus groups were met by the comparison of NATO to the EU, which they differentiated based on institutional function rather than solely on historical association, for instance discussing EU membership as a pragmatic option due to its perceived economic benefits.

The sentiment of one participant was representative of this, when they shared, *“If I have to choose, the EU is the lesser evil; NATO is a military alliance.”*

Compared to other parts of the Republika Srpska, where this research found that NATO functions almost exclusively as a symbol of existential threat, squeezing out alternative narratives, the discursive landscape of East Sarajevo was more complex. While citizens there maintain a strong emotional continuity with events of the 1990s, they are increasingly cognizant of the ways that those events, and NATO, are being instrumentalized for political purposes. This has left them fatigued by the continuous reproduction of a closed framework for understanding these issues. Resistance to NATO has not dissolved as a result of this, but it has transformed, from a more rigid form intertwined with community identity, into something more ambivalent and at times even contradictory.

A lesson from journalists in East Sarajevo: The value of discursive distance

In one focus group in East Sarajevo, every participant was an area journalist. This offered a striking and instructive contrast to focus groups drawn from the general population, in which discussions were dominated by emotional associations, fragmented knowledge, and wartime narratives. Indeed, these journalist-respondents demonstrated a significantly higher capacity for reflexivity, conceptual clarity, and discursive distance on the topic of NATO.

Journalists in East Sarajevo do not necessarily hold uniform or strongly positive opinions of NATO, yet the structure and tone of their discourse on the subject differed substantially from that of other focus group participants in their community. First and foremost, this was because the emotional register of their analysis was markedly less pronounced. Meaning, these respondents viewed the NATO interventions of 1995 and 1999 as historically significant but not as automatic or exclusive interpretive frameworks. Additionally, they tended to situate wartime events within broader political and institutional contexts, clearly distinguishing between the historical Alliance and its contemporary counterpart, and exhibiting an awareness of the ways memory is instrumentalized in the service of politics.

A key discursive difference between this group of respondents and others was also observed in conversation related to NATO and the EU. These journalist-respondents challenged the assumption that NATO membership is a prerequisite for EU accession, treating NATO and the EU as distinct political and institutional entities, rather than a unified “Euro-Atlantic package.” They neither categorically rejected nor idealized NATO membership, instead focusing on its potential benefits, costs, institutional obligations, and impacts on state capacity. And, despite raising concerns about sovereignty, potential obligations to the Alliance, and the risk of involvement in international military operations, these respondents articulated their arguments in a way that was analytically informed, not emotionally charged. The journalists in this focus group were more knowledgeable than other respondents about the ways that NATO is used in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a political tool, as well, particularly during election cycles to mobilize voter support or signal alignment with external actors. Thus, they understood NATO as a symbolic political resource, the meaning of which shifts according to political context, and recognized that the dominant narratives in their community – those reproduced by other research participants – are politically constructed.

Importantly, as it has potential implications for efforts to encourage cognitive openness, these journalists demonstrated a greater metacognitive awareness regarding knowledge and uncertainty, compared to other respondents; in that they openly acknowledged both public misinformation and the limits of their own knowing. In contrast to focus groups involving members of the general public, many of whom expressed strong attitudes based on incomplete information, journalists in East Sarajevo were mindful of the complexity of the issues surrounding NATO and emphasized that this was a reason for more informed public debate to help offset the impacts of overly simplistic, politically-driven messaging. The problem, as one of these respondents noted, is not that citizens hold “incorrect” views about NATO but that the structural conditions for informed and open public deliberation are lacking.

And so, this focus group with journalists proved to be incredibly enlightening in the context of this research, especially in illustrating that higher information consumption and professional exposure to political discourse may not necessarily translate into stronger support for NATO but do seem to contribute to interpretations of the Alliance that are less polarized and more analytically grounded. The line between knowledge and emotion, between critical analysis and rote narrative reproduction, represents a critical dividing line in understandings of security in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In many ways, journalists function as a discursive bridge between emotional memory and analytical reasoning, and can therefore play a key role in shaping perceptions of NATO among the general public.

3.4. Trebinje

Trebinje and other parts of the Republika Srpska located in the country's south, near the Adriatic Sea, constitute a distinct emotional-political space in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Attitudes toward NATO are not articulated by members of this community on the basis of concrete, highly ideologized narratives but in response to an assortment of inherited wartime associations, a sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis “great powers,” and a certain degree of pragmatism. While most respondents in Trebinje spoke quite negatively about NATO, many were unable to elaborate their reasoning, revealing a lack of knowledge on the topic that prompted some focus group participants to share that they would rather avoid discussing it altogether. These respondents evaded engagement, with comments including, “*I don’t get into politics,*” “*I’m not informed,*” or “*I don’t follow these things.*”

The low information milieu within which many research participants in Trebinje operate means that they experience NATO not as a contemporary political issue so much as a symbolic shorthand for past interventions, and above all, for their community's suffering in “*other people’s wars.*” In keeping with this, some made claims that the Alliance starts “*wars for resources*” and wars that are “*illegal.*”

One respondent put it bluntly, declaring that NATO quite simply “*reminds them of war.*”

The willingness of many respondents to admit their own limited knowledge and interest in the subject suggests that these negative attitudes are formed largely as a function of collective memory and generalized social narratives, and not critical political analysis. That said, unlike focus group participants in many other locations in the Republika Srpska, the emotional tone of NATO resistance in Trebinje was far less charged; marked primarily by a profound distrust and fatigue. This was on display in the insistence by some respondents on a kind of ambiguous neutrality regarding the Alliance, an apparent strategy of distancing motivated in some cases by a clear sense of powerlessness and even apathy. Comments like, “*I’m neutral,*” “*I couldn’t take a position,*” and “*it doesn’t matter to me*” were paired with remarks articulating the extent to which these respondents believe their civic agency is constrained to the point of irrelevance, such as “*we don’t really choose [anyway].*”

Likewise, there was a near consensus among respondents in Trebinje that the issue of NATO, among others, is exploited “*for political benefit*” to the point that it has almost no meaning. This has generated such cynicism in relation to politicians and the media that one focus group participant said they “*don’t believe anyone’s words anymore.*” Further assertions by respondents that all information is “*manipulated*” and “*nothing is reliable*” align with what Bennett and Livingston describe as a feature of the contemporary disinformation order, which is marked by an erosion of trust in institutional knowledge authorities, a weakening of the legitimacy of media and political institutions, and the spread of perceptions that political processes are subject to hidden interests and strategic interventions.³⁴

Where distrust in political processes runs so deep, and citizens judge their own influence as so limited, “neutrality” of the sort expressed by citizens in Trebinje serves as a form of psychological and political withdrawal, and cannot be considered a pronounced security position.³⁵ At the same time, the ambivalence of this neutrality may open space for more nuanced views. For example, even among respondents in Trebinje who expressed negative perceptions of NATO, some acknowledged its potential value, at least as far as preventing war, and allowed that the Alliance may deliver “*some security*” or that membership could play a role in ensuring “*there won’t be war.*” According to one respondent, NATO and the EU alike

³⁴ Bennett and Livingston, “The disinformation order.”

³⁵ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans’ beliefs about how government should work* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

represent a “*double-edged sword*” – with some conceded benefits, though they are offset by risks ranging from “*political disputes*” to all-out conflict.

This does not amount to a pro-NATO position, but discursively, it situates the Alliance simultaneously as a threat and a possible guarantor of stability; distinguishing the interpretive framework applied by respondents in Trebinje from those observed in some other parts of the Republika Srpska. This may be due in part to its proximity to Dubrovnik and Montenegro, placing Trebinje and the region at a geopolitical crossroads that has produced an observable pragmatism among citizens there. For instance, one focus group participant noted that the community is adapted to life in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious territory, stating matter-of-factly, “*We have to live together; we’re on the border.*” This sensibility appears to soften the ideological potency of narratives that underlie the emotional regimes seen in other regions.

It was also notable that a number of respondents in Trebinje discussed consuming information “*with reservation,*” and several said they no longer follow the news or that they “*switch off*” if the topic is security-related. This indicates that some citizens in the region are actively avoiding content they experience as propagandistic or polarizing, and this likely plays a role in shaping the interpretive framework through which they evaluate NATO. In contrast to localities in the Republika Srpska where negative attitudes toward the Alliance are delivered through fixed ideological narratives, perspectives in Trebinje are rooted in a more diverse set of factors, from wartime associations, to the pragmatism of the periphery, to political apathy. Survey results in the area may register low support for NATO, but the qualitative evidence suggests that this may have relatively little to do with ideology, informed instead by low levels of information, a sense of fatigue and powerlessness, and concerns about any change that could disrupt “normal” life. This strongly suggests that the potential exists to de-ideologize the question of NATO membership in this community, so that the interpretive frame through which this issue is viewed exclusively centers security, mobility, and institutional credibility.

A lesson from journalists in Trebinje: In support of a healthy skepticism

As in East Sarajevo, a focus group was held with journalists in Trebinje; and again, these journalist-respondents exhibited a markedly different discursive pattern than focus group participants from the general population. For example, they discussed NATO and the EU with a critical, professional distance, through a primarily analytical frame. And, while journalists in Trebinje were acutely aware of the history and legacy of NATO interventions that took place during the 1990s, they did not relativize or suppress this past, nor did they employ it as their sole interpretive lens. As a result, wartime experiences functioned merely as a reference point for these respondents, in the process of developing a rational assessment of NATO’s contemporary role. While still associating NATO with past violence and civilian suffering, they were somewhat resigned to the de facto presence of the Alliance in the country, through training, equipment support, and cooperation with the armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This perspective led many respondents in this focus group to take a relatively moderated position, neither openly affirmative nor categorically negative vis-à-vis NATO. They expressed more skepticism than some respondents in the general population about the prospect that NATO represents a security guarantee, and it was clear that they do not view membership in the Alliance as an inherent protection against external conflict or internal insecurity. In fact, many of the security concerns they articulated are linked to systemic inefficiencies and weaknesses in domestic institutions, particularly the judiciary, which in their view, cannot be solved through NATO accession. In this context, NATO is seen as an external framework with limited internal impacts in the absence of the domestic political and institutional will for reform.

Among these journalists, it was notable that the EU is viewed less as a guarantor of prosperity and more as a normative and regulatory framework through which pressure can be exerted on domestic institutions to operate more effectively, transparently, and accountably, and is thus regarded more positively than NATO. At the same time, the contradiction between declarative political commitments to the European path and the substantive absence of reform was not lost on these respondents, who described the European integration process as discursively endorsed but structurally blocked. For this, they placed blame primarily with domestic political elites rather than the EU itself.

The strong distrust seen generally in respondents toward information sources – whether domestic institutions, political actors, or media – was echoed in this focus group with Trebinje area journalists. However, among these journalist-respondents, this distrust has pushed them not toward withdrawal or apathy but toward more rigorous verification strategies. Participants emphasized, for instance, that in gathering information on NATO, the EU, and global developments, they rely on a diversity of sources, but treat none as authoritative on its own. In other words, critical comparison and analytical processing function as the primary mechanisms through which their views are formed.

It was clear in Trebinje, as it was in East Sarajevo, that journalists who participated in focus groups evaluated the question of NATO differently than their non-journalist peers, and that this was true of security matters more broadly. It is fair to speculate that this difference is informed to a significant degree by the professional training of journalists, which prepares them to assess potentially charged issues with less emotional reactivity, to hold competing interpretations simultaneously, and to look toward structural instead of symbolic explanations. For many journalists in Trebinje, this has brought their focus to internal drivers of instability, and the view that a failure to address them will make debates about NATO membership moot. This reflects a realism, informed by professional distance and critical analysis, that treats NATO – as well as the EU – as components of a broader political and security apparatus rather than as causes or solutions in themselves.

3.5. Summary of Findings: Republika Srpska

As illustrated by the data collected in different parts of the Republika Srpska and analyzed here, perceptions of NATO among participants in focus groups and interviews were varied, shaped by a combination of local experiences, generational dynamics, and socio-political contexts. In some places, perceptions of NATO were more strongly rooted in wartime memory, with the bombings of the 1990s especially serving as a moral and interpretive touchpoint. Still, in public discourse, NATO is often presented as a universally polarizing issue, and the qualitative findings of this research indicate that it functions primarily as a symbolic reference. Even among respondents who expressed strongly felt and emotionally charged views of the Alliance when prompted, the subject had little direct effect on their political attitudes or decision making.

In Banja Luka and northwestern Republika Srpska more broadly, a stable emotional regime dominated by moral injury, political marginalization, and distrust toward international actors means that NATO is rarely evaluated as a contemporary security alliance but as a symbol of external pressure and lost autonomy. Within such a framework, new information and alternative narratives are filtered through established affective and interpretive structures so that they rarely destabilize existing paradigms. Findings from Trebinje and parts of eastern Republika Srpska offered a contrast, capturing less overt emotional resistance to NATO and more pragmatic distance, if not ambivalence, on the topic. In these locations, respondents were less likely to perceive the Alliance as a direct threat, and often understood it as an abstract international structure with few implications for their everyday lives. In focus group discussions,

these participants cited socioeconomic issues, the (dys)function of institutions, and matters of personal security as pressing concerns, whereas they characterized the topic of NATO as one that is activated mainly within political and media discourse for the interests of elites, with no immediate local relevance.

That said, even where respondents exhibited more emotional distance or ambivalence with respect to NATO, many lacked meaningful knowledge about the Alliance. This meant they could rarely ground their opinions in concrete facts or refer to relevant contemporary policies, and instead gave voice to narratives drawn from political discourse, media, and family or collective memory. The assembly of journalists into two focus groups in East Sarajevo and Trebinje was therefore quite valuable, in that it demonstrated the extent to which they represented a clearly more informed set of respondents, with a greater capacity to view NATO beyond binary categories of support or opposition. This was likely due in part to professional practices they exercise in the name of objectivity and verification, and their greater level of media literacy.

Overall, findings across the Republika Srpska did not reflect the dispersion of a coherent or ideologically uniform anti-NATO discourse. Instead, perceptions of the Alliance are influenced by an emotional continuity with the past, a deep institutional distrust in the present, and a pragmatic distancing. In this way, NATO functions as a symbolic object within a broader discursive and memory framework, the meaning of which is activated through existing narrative and affective associations rather than sustained, critical evaluation of political conditions. This positions the Alliance as a discursive resource within processes of securitization, even while it remains weakly embedded in everyday information spaces and in the immediate political priorities of citizens.³⁶ In fact, the discrepancy between NATO's strong symbolic presence and its limited informational and institutional embeddedness in citizens' everyday experiences represents a key analytical insight of this research, because it implies that the attitudes of citizens are not formed primarily through a rational evaluation of contemporary security policy but through the lens of local emotional regimes constructed from patterns of memory and politically mediated narratives.

The low levels of knowledge of NATO that were observed in this research should be cause for concern, particularly given the extent to which this is a consequence of increasingly fragmented media environments. Equally alarming should be the number of respondents who lacked information as a result of avoiding political information and news; and sometimes intentionally, because it could challenge their existing beliefs, particularly those tied to emotionally sensitive historical narratives. In this regard, Skovsgaard and Andersen distinguish between unintentional news avoidance – resulting from habit, lack of interest, or competing priorities – and intentional news avoidance, reflecting a conscious strategy to distance oneself from information perceived as emotionally distressing or politically untrustworthy.³⁷ However, regardless of motivation, limited exposure to information about strategically important issues, such as Euro-Atlantic integration, contributes to the development of a passive and distanced form of citizenship.

36 Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (Verso, 2013); Michael Schudson, "Journalism as a Vehicle of Non-Commemorative Cultural Memory," in *Journalism and Memory*, eds. Barbie Zelizer and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Eds.), 85–103.

37 Morten Skovsgaard and Kim Andersen, "Conceptualizing News Avoidance: Towards a Shared Understanding of Different Causes and Potential Solutions," *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 4 (2020): 459–476.

As Lee argues, news avoidance is not a neutral position, and over time it reduces informed political engagement and limits the capacity of an electorate to develop reflective and informed positions on complex issues. Indeed, in this sense, information avoidance functions broadly as a social mechanism that indirectly reproduces existing political and narrative structures.³⁸

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that perceptions of NATO in the Republika Srpska cannot be adequately understood through the simple lens of political support or opposition. In varying combinations, the views of citizens in the entity reflect constructs of collective memory and the interpretive frames of emotional regimes, as well as a deep distrust of institutions. In some cases, citizens have also engaged in a pragmatic depoliticization, often expressed as neutrality. The broader implications are clear: security is not experienced solely as a matter of strategy or policy, but as a question of meaning, identity, and trust.

38 Francis L. F. Lee, Chi-Kit Chan, and Gary K. Y. Tang, "Political Tolerance and Forms of Active News Avoidance," *Journalism Studies* (November 2025): 1–19.



4. FINDINGS FROM THE FEDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, perceptions of NATO are shaped by a different emotional and interpretive framework than in the Republika Srpska. Respondents in the Federation viewed the Alliance from a mostly pragmatic standpoint, and understood security not only in the context of their wartime experiences but as it relates to institutional fragility and ongoing political instability. Across the entity, the finding of focus groups and interviews was that NATO functions primarily as a symbol of externally guaranteed order and violence prevention; rooted not in an unconditional trust of the West but in the rational assessment that domestic institutions alone are unable to ensure long term security and predictability. This perspective was so prevalent that it was rare to hear research participants in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina contemplate the Alliance as a political or values-based community with which they identified emotionally. But where emotion and historical memory did play a central role in shaping the views of these respondents, it tended to push them *toward*, rather than away from, support for NATO.

4.1. Una Sana Canton

Una Sana Canton is an example of a place where historical memory operates as a framework for support, not resistance, to the Alliance. Respondents primarily associated NATO with ending the war, protecting civilians, and bringing stability. Just as in the Republika Srpska, focus group participants evoked wartime memories when asked about their perspective on NATO, but in Una Sana their interpretive lens in this context was one of gratitude and relief.

The sentiment of one focus group participant summarized the feelings of many others: *“If it hadn’t been for NATO, who knows what would have happened to us. Today, at least, we feel that someone is watching.”*

This reflects the dominant emotional regime in the canton, in which NATO is positioned as a guarantor of order and state survival, associated with feelings of security and safety. While respondents in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina often linked the Alliance to impositions of power or injustice, in Una Sana, NATO has become a symbol of protection. In focus groups, it was therefore common to hear participants describe NATO as an institutional structure that *“sets limits”* on the potential for political instability.

These respondents also expressed a pragmatic dimension of support for the Alliance, by highlighting economic and developmental discourse. They argued that NATO serves as a framework which signals stability to investors, and that membership is understood as a step toward institutional modernization

and a greater adherence to the “rules of the game.” As one participant explained, “*When you have a secure country, investors come. Everything else follows from that.*” This economic rationality is closely tied to the perception in Una Sana that NATO and the EU form a unified integration framework. For instance, many participants noted explicitly that “*NATO and the EU go together.*”

A similar pragmatism was observed in the way memories of the wars of the 1990s, and NATO airstrikes, were interpreted in Una Sana. While these memories are still salient, they are filtered through the logic that “*victims are never forgotten, but the future must be built.*” And so, some focus group participants acknowledged an enduring grief and sense of loss from wartime experiences, yet were determined not to remain permanently attached to this trauma, and were decidedly forward-looking. The insistence of these respondents that they will remember the past while constructing the future exemplifies how the moral and emotional framework in the canton has transformed local experiences of war in the 1990s into an argument for preventive security in the present.

Despite the very different way these focus group participants in Una Sana Canton constructed their interpretive framework regarding NATO, compared to their counterparts in the Republika Srpska, one thing they had in common with respondents in the other entity was a pronounced skepticism toward domestic political elites. This is specifically true with regard to their messaging on NATO. Some respondents in Una Sana thus emphasized that the Alliance is frequently instrumentalized for electoral purposes, commenting for example that it is deployed, “*for political points, not for the people.*” In their view, even politicians who publicly support NATO often act inconsistently with that position.

This suggests that respondents in Una Sana place a high value on political actors who “practice what they preach” and demonstrate a certain degree of dependability; a sensibility that aligns with the prevalent discourse in the canton, which characterizes NATO as a framework of equity and predictability. In focus groups, participants frequently reflected on the Alliance using terms such as “*rules,*” “*law,*” and “*order,*” indicating that their support is grounded less in geopolitical identification (i.e. as citizens in a Euro-Atlantic space) than in their desire to live in a functional and regulated society. These respondents particularly emphasized the importance of the rule of law applying equally to all, and associated NATO with standards of institutional reliability and accountability.

While the interpretive framework that shapes perceptions of NATO in Una Sana Canton is less consolidated than some of those seen in parts of the Republika Srpska, it rests on three interconnected pillars: the Alliance as a guarantor of territorial integrity and security, the hope that membership will bring investment and stability, and such a high degree of skepticism in domestic political actors that international security structures are more trusted. Within this framework, NATO is perceived not as a symbol of domination, but as a guarantee of order, rule of law, and institutional predictability. To that end, respondents in Una Sana understood membership in NATO as a concrete assurance of institutional support to the state, protected borders, and partnership in times of crisis, rather than in the abstract.

This perspective was encapsulated in the statement that, “*It makes a difference whether you stand alone. What matters is knowing that you have someone to stand with you when it counts.*”

4.2. West Herzegovina Canton

A distinct pragmatism was observed in the security discourse in West Herzegovina Canton, as well. A majority of the canton supports NATO, but the findings from focus groups and interviews indicate that this is driven by a realist understanding of the country's security situation and not an enthusiasm for the Alliance, on the premise that NATO offers a framework for stability and regularity. Historical trauma and wartime memory do not serve as dominant reference points in this context, so the attitudes of respondents here toward NATO were shaped primarily by everyday experiences of security and order.

As one focus group participant explained, *“For us, NATO is a guarantee that there will be no war. Politics is one thing, but security is security.”*

In West Herzegovina Canton, NATO is clearly associated with institutional functionality and the absence of immediate threat. Moreover, respondents characterized the Alliance as more stable and predictable than domestic political actors and processes. In this discourse, NATO was often distinguished from local actors as an entity that *“sets boundaries,”* in contrast to domestic institutions. At times, focus group participants also externalized the Alliance by describing it as *“part of”* the West.

In the words of one respondent, *“We have always looked toward the West, and NATO is part of that.”*

However, statements such as this one were not an indicator that respondents in West Herzegovina view NATO through an emotional lens. Rather, they perceive it as a component of a broader Western institutional framework which they associate with order and stability – both important foundations to economic and social development. Indeed, support for NATO in the canton was articulated by some respondents through developmental and economic discourse, with membership in the Alliance framed as a positive signal to investors.

It was also notable that, like their counterparts across Bosnia and Herzegovina, focus group participants in West Herzegovina reported having very little trust in domestic media; but in West Herzegovina, many respondents said they have countered this by relying increasingly on foreign sources of information. This appears to have contributed to their more depoliticized and pragmatic orientation toward international security issues. In fact, media and political narratives from Serbia and Russia were rarely mentioned in focus group discussions, and it was clear that, for the most part, these are considered immaterial to shaping everyday security deliberations in the canton.

This may contribute to the relatively stable level of support NATO enjoys in West Herzegovina Canton, the emotional dimension of which largely correlates to expectations of predictability and competence. In other words, perceptions of NATO are not driven here by traumatic experience or emotional urgency linked to the past, but by a more pragmatic kind of emotional framework constructed in order to move beyond that past. This has guided their understanding of security toward the promise of long-term reliability and institutional stability.

4.3. Posavina Canton

This promise of stability resonates similarly in Posavina Canton – where a rational and moderate security discourse prevails, in which NATO is associated with the end of conflict and the subsequent stabilization of the region. In this sense, collective memory is alive in the canton, but does not play a central emotional role in shaping contemporary attitudes. Focus group participants most frequently referenced the past as a context wherein international intervention restored a basic sense of predictability after years of war, so that NATO has become symbolic of the break between a chaotic “before” and an orderly “after.”

One respondent remarked, for example, that, *“When [NATO] appeared, we knew there was no going back to madness.”*

This captures the way that respondents in Posavina treated their wartime experience as a reference point which confirms the value of institutional control and external security guarantees. In assessing NATO, they overwhelmingly framed it as a presence that reduces tensions and reinforces compliance with the rules. As in other research locations, these respondents articulated a limited trust in domestic capacities to ensure long-term security in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and this appeared to strengthen their support for the Alliance, as a means of guaranteeing stability. These findings suggest that NATO functions in Posavina as a symbol of institutional order and externally mediated security.

In fact, one focus group participant claimed that, *“When NATO is present, everything is calmer. People somehow respect the law more.”*

Because support for NATO is not highly politicized or emotionally charged in Posavina, and security is understood primarily as a technical and practical matter, the Alliance is not conceptualized as a values-based community or a marker of identity alignment. It is merely a mechanism designed to maintain a framework that prevents escalations of conflict. The realism of this perspective contributes to relatively low levels of polarization on this topic in the canton, and a relatively stable consensus regarding the importance of an international presence in the country.

Still, in some focus group discussions, older participants expressed a degree of distrust in NATO, often in relation to how belatedly they believe international intervention was initiated during the 1990s. At the same time, this sentiment has not translated into opposition to the Alliance, instead clarifying for these respondents how important it is that the country build a reliable security framework. If NATO can help achieve this, even these older, more skeptical respondents appear to support such a prospect.

As one of them put it, pragmatically, *“NATO was late then, but now it could help strengthen the state.”*

These respondents did not deny the pain of the past, but have set their attention on how to prevent violence in the future. In this way, Posavina Canton stands out, for it lacks a concrete emotional regime or overarching narrative structure for interpreting NATO – which does not occupy a central place in the local political imagination – but the Alliance nonetheless plays an important stabilizing role as a backdrop to everyday life, and as a guarantee of security assumed to operate behind the scenes. This singularity observed in Posavina is informed by low levels of emotional mobilization and an understanding of security primarily as a function of order, predictability, and conflict prevention. The prevalence of such depoliticized evaluations of NATO in the canton make it analytically significant, by demonstrating that international security structures can in fact be accepted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, without strong identity based associations. In Posavina, this has emerged from a prioritization of practical desires for stability over emotionally mobilizing narratives that offer little concrete benefit in people’s daily lives.

4.4. Canton 10

A focus on improving daily life and ensuring a stable future were also themes that dominated the perspectives of respondents in Canton 10, expressed in discourse on NATO characterized again by an unmistakable pragmatism. As in other parts of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, focus group participants in Canton 10 were strongly oriented toward the future in a way that has diminished the potency of history and collective memory in their community, giving primacy instead to matters of security, institutional stability, and quality of life. They view NATO through the lens of what it can deliver, and believe it represents a framework that enables predictability and continuity, particularly in the current context of demographic challenges and economic migration.

According to one focus group participant, *“We need security so that our children have a future, and NATO symbolizes that.”*

These findings illustrate the extent to which security is understood in this region as a question of community survival and population retention. In a similar vein, NATO was frequently discussed by respondents in Canton 10 in the context of investment, modernization, and institutional consolidation, with security integration positioned as a prerequisite for necessary development. Hence, it is clear that NATO is perceived as a mechanism that can enhance professional and technical standards while simultaneously gesturing to institutional credibility, with potential positive impacts on the local economy.

For instance, one respondent contended that, *“The advantage [of NATO] would be investment in our armed forces, improved conditions, and better equipment. That is a benefit for ordinary people working within the system.”*

In articulating their support for the Alliance, research participants in Canton 10 also demonstrated a clear conceptual awareness of collective security, an arrangement they considered a rational exchange in favor of greater stability. Following the classic logic of collective security – whereby states transfer a degree of their security autonomy to a shared institutional framework in order to reduce the risk of unilateral vulnerability and increase predictability within the international environment³⁹ – security is viewed by these respondents not as a condition of absolute sovereignty but as the capacity to manage threats collectively through institutionalized cooperation. This signals the functional and depoliticized relationship they have with security integration and is why they were likely to emphasize concrete mechanisms of protection and deterrence rather than symbolic questions of identity or memory.

The comment of one respondent was illustrative of this: *“We are partners in a coalition of states where if one is attacked, all are attacked. We are no longer alone, and that is why we are secure.”*

At the same time, there was a clear sense of fatigue among focus group participants in Canton 10 regarding the instrumentalization of NATO in domestic politics. They lamented that fear-based rhetoric is deployed as a norm in political discourse on security issues, at the cost of meaningful debate. To that end, they highlighted the need for a depoliticized, informed, and technically grounded dialogue on security integration.

On this, a focus group participant noted, *“Citizens should not be frightened by the idea of NATO membership. Politicians should speak about it in a more constructive way.”*

These findings were complemented by interviews with local stakeholders in Canton 10, which confirmed the strength of the legitimacy enjoyed by NATO locally. They explained that the Alliance is not perceived as an external actor that has been imposed on the community, but as part of a welcome institutional frame-

³⁹ Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, “The Promise of Collective Security,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 52–61.

work linking security, development, and long-term national stability. One interviewee made the case that the value of NATO goes beyond this, though, by incorporating Bosnia and Herzegovina into a broader international apparatus; arguing, “*If we want to be a serious country, we must be part of that system.*” In this sense, respondents in Canton 10 exemplify how support for NATO can be grounded in a rational assessment of future community needs and geopolitical realities, and disconnected from wartime experiences.

4.5. Bosnian Podrinje Canton Goražde

Respondents in Bosnian Podrinje Canton Goražde have reconciled wartime experiences in much the same way as their counterparts in Canton 10, by integrating them into rational contemporary narratives that give precedence to protection from violence and conflict resolution. This extends from an emotional regime that functions as a contextual framework through which international actors are evaluated pragmatically.⁴⁰ Thus, perceptions of NATO in the region are consistently positive, and the Alliance is considered a guarantor of peace, institutional stability, and international protection.

Focus group participants in Bosnian Podrinje Canton Goražde also engaged on the topic of NATO with a notable degree of emotional composure, in a way that exemplified the degree to which they neither consider the Alliance a threat nor were prone to idealize it. Rather, they discussed it as a mechanism of order, security, and international legitimacy. At the same time, they identified domestic politics as the primary source of insecurity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, clearly distinguishing between international and local actors. In this context, NATO was evoked by respondents with neither fear nor enthusiasm, but with a sense of reassurance and relief that it is “*protective.*” This does not reflect an absence of memory but its narrative integration into a framework of stability, where past violence is interpreted as a lesson that reinforces the need for institutional protection in the present.

In other words, NATO is not idealized here; it is understood through its function. In this region known during the war as a symbol of resistance and survival, its citizens now recognize NATO as an institutional guarantee that this violence of the past cannot be repeated. This was true even among older respondents in Bosnian Podrinje Canton Goražde, who had not suppressed their memory of the war but had reinterpreted and reoriented it, to serve forward looking needs.

One older focus group participant explained, “*The past should be left behind; we need to look toward the future.*”

Respondents in this region did not view NATO exclusively through a military lens, and were just as likely to associate it with broader developmental and international frameworks, for instance by emphasizing its connection with the EU and the United States, and the implications of this for economic stability. In fact, focus group participants argued so frequently that NATO membership would amount to faster accession to the EU, as well as better relations with American administrations, that it is fair to suggest the Alliance functions *primarily* as a reference point for institutional order and international belonging in this region, rather than as a symbol of military power. Moreover, it was clear in focus group discussions that respondents were unconcerned about the prospect of military action stemming from the Alliance itself, but were fearful of the unpredictability surrounding regional dynamics and domestic politics. They cited the potential for secession of the Republika Srpska and for conflict involving Serbia and Russia as real and immediate concerns. In such a scenario, it is not NATO that these respondents fear, but the reactions of other actors to the presence or role of the Alliance.

⁴⁰ Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, “Fear no more: Emotions and world politics,” *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008): 15–135.

This analysis reveals a developed awareness of geopolitical complexities on the part of research participants in Bosnian Podrinje Canton Goražde, which appears to be strongly informed by regular engagement with international media and other external sources of information. The information environment to which they are exposed is therefore more diverse and less polarized, and this translates into a political and social awareness that allows for rational and functional understanding of international institutions. Rather than demonstrating an emotional or identity based attachment to NATO in the abstract, respondents in the region could articulate tangible benefits of membership in the Alliance. They perceive NATO first and foremost as an institution through which “*order takes precedence over force.*”

Respondents in Bosnian Podrinje Canton Goražde were remarkably consistent, knowledgeable, and pragmatic in their orientation toward NATO. This is owed largely to their interpretive frame for security issues, which applies a lens of predictability, institutional reliability, and international order. NATO is thus removed from a space of political contestation, and situated instead as an integral component of the security architecture needed to provide a sense of stability and protection to the state, in an otherwise uncertain future.

4.6. Sarajevo Canton

As in Bosnian Podrinje Canton Goražde, respondents in Sarajevo Canton drew sharp distinctions between international and local actors. Their perspective on NATO – shaped by a relatively rational and informed discourse that tends toward pragmatism – is that the Alliance is a relatively predictable partner; in contrast to the instability of domestic politics, which are viewed as the primary source of insecurity in the country. Unlike focus group discussions in some research locations, memory did not determine the emotional tone of these discussions in Sarajevo, as participants were inclined to consider NATO within broader contexts rather than through the lens of local or identity based narratives.

The view of many respondents was captured by one, who assessed that, “*The problem is not NATO or the EU, but our politicians.*”

Younger research participants in Sarajevo took a realist approach to evaluating NATO; they did not idealize the Alliance but did recognize it for its role in strengthening the international position of Bosnia and Herzegovina and reducing its strategic isolation. These respondents acknowledged that NATO is far from perfect, but insisted, “*it’s better to be inside than outside.*” They engaged in a rational assessment of the benefits of membership, informed by a relatively high level of international awareness, and emphasized the ways that NATO serves as a broader political and institutional framework for cooperation.

One student explained, for example, that “*NATO is not just a military force. It’s an alliance in which every country has a voice.*”

Older respondents in Sarajevo navigated discussions of NATO in slightly different ways. Despite continuing to associate the Alliance with the end of the war and the lifting of the siege, they approached the topic without the emotional intensity of many of their counterparts in other research locations. But, across several focus groups, they emphasized the need for clearer and more depoliticized explanations of what NATO membership delivers, in practical terms, through public communication that focuses on concrete mechanisms and implications.

Currently, according to one participant, “*People don’t really know what NATO membership means. It is used as a political weapon instead of being explained.*”

Among respondents of all ages, there was a relatively consistent consensus regarding the complementarity of accession to NATO and the EU, which are perceived as parallel but interconnected pathways; that is, NATO is associated primarily with security and the EU with development. One participant called them “*two lanes on the same road.*” Yet, research participants in Sarajevo also shared that they feel a latent sense of insecurity, resulting from ongoing political instability. In this context, it was frequently noted that NATO membership would reduce the uncertainty that has persisted in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to political crises and security threats, effectively treating NATO as a framework of psychological security as well.

This was reflected in the comment by one respondent that, “*Every morning we check the news to see if someone is threatening war again. If we were in NATO, we would sleep more peacefully.*”

In focus group discussions, participants in Sarajevo also made a clear distinction between the political and military components of NATO, and displayed a clear grasp on how the Alliance operates through collective decision making and consensus among member states. Their knowledge of the topic went beyond an abstract political awareness and was situated in a specific discursive context, through the lens of which security issues are regarded as institutional and procedural matters, leaving no room for emotionally charged or identity based frameworks. Sarajevo Canton thus emerges as a space in which perceptions of NATO are formed, for the most part, through the rational evaluation of risks and benefits. If there is an emotional layer informing the way some of these respondents understand the Alliance, it is no longer wartime trauma that most strongly influences their underlying sense of insecurity but the seemingly endless political instability and recurring crises in the country. Against this backdrop, NATO is understood as a practical institutional framework that can provide stability in a politically unpredictable environment.

4.7. Summary of Findings: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

These findings from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate that attitudes toward NATO in most of the entity diverge from those recorded by this research in the Republika Srpska. In the Federation, respondents tended to ground their views in pragmatic assessments of the country’s security needs; unlike their counterparts in the Republika Srpska, whose perceptions of NATO were largely shaped by emotional considerations. Across the Federation, the common view was that NATO is not an identity based or ideological project but a functional framework of stability. Respondents regularly placed NATO in contrast to domestic politics, which are perceived as the primary source of long-standing insecurity in the country in part because the issue of membership in the Alliance has been so instrumentalized, producing a political fatigue that was palpable in every research location. However, support for NATO among respondents in the Federation cannot be said to be homogeneous in nature, as it is shaped at the individual and community level by combinations of diverse factors, including wartime experiences, levels of institutional trust, everyday security conditions, and expectations about the future.

In some cantons, such as Una Sana and Bosnian Podrinje, the memory of wartime experiences remains highly salient, but has become a framework for prioritizing the prevention of renewed violence. In the collective memory of focus group participants in these locations, NATO is seen as primarily responsible for ending the conflict and enabling civilian survival, and is now representative of an institutional guarantee that this past will not be repeated. While these respondents therefore associated emotions of gratitude and relief with the Alliance, this has not led them to idealize it; instead, NATO membership is treated as a realistic prerequisite to establishing predictability and acquiring external security guarantees.

In Sarajevo Canton, which occupies a distinct position in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as the entity's discursive and informational center, respondents also articulated an emotional affinity toward NATO that extends from their wartime experiences, including the siege of Sarajevo. The end of the siege, and of the war, represents a powerful reference point for perceptions of NATO as the actor who “*stopped the war*,” again producing a lasting sense of gratitude and affective attachment. This plays a role in why Sarajevo often functions as a source of normative orientation toward international security structures. However, this emotional relationship to NATO did not preclude rational and informed evaluation of the Alliance by respondents in Sarajevo, who were not prone to idealizing NATO. In focus groups, for instance, participants were consistent in referring to membership in the Alliance in terms of its real-world advantages to Bosnia and Herzegovina; as a stable international framework and part of the broader architecture of collective security, as well as an institutional and political framework for joint decision making.

Emotional attachment and rational evaluation do not function in opposition in these cantons, but are mutually reinforcing, shaping a coherent and generally positive attitude toward NATO. But this affective pull was not observed throughout the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with respondents in some cantons, such as Posavina, displaying such a consistently depoliticized understanding of the Alliance that it was clear NATO does not occupy a central place in the local political or emotional imagination. In these places, the Alliance functions instead in the background, as a discreet guarantor of order, and security is conceived as technical and practical, rather than political.

To that end, where respondents exhibited the most normalized and depoliticized outlook on NATO – in West Herzegovina Canton and Canton 10 – the Alliance is considered little more than part of an expected institutional order, associated with competence, rule of law, and long-term stability. The focus in these communities has turned from past trauma to the future, and thus to development and demographic sustainability. Hence, respondents in these locations believed that any sovereignty lost to a collective security arrangement is a worthwhile cost, for the predictability this will deliver.

Taken as a whole, these findings in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina reveal a pattern of pragmatic evaluation in relation to matters of security. Across the entity, perceptions of NATO were not that it symbolizes domination or threat, nor that it represents an ideal, but that it functions as a framework of order, protection, and institutional reliability in the context of persistent internal instability. Despite subtle regional variations that emerge from different wartime experiences, socioeconomic priorities, and ways in which security is translated into everyday life locally, the broad understanding of security that prevails in the Federation centers concerns about risk management and institutional predictability, effectively neutralizing the potency of identity based mobilization.⁴¹ This speaks to a common denominator seen across the Federation, where most respondents drew a clear line between the past and the future. In this context, wartime memories have not been suppressed but, if they are applied at all as an interpretive framework through which security structures are viewed, the resulting assessment prioritizes arrangements that offer clear rules, external guarantees, and assurances that the state will not be abandoned in times of crisis.

41 This is a pattern observed in some post-conflict societies. See: Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (SAGE, 1992); Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security: A new framework for analysis*; Jelena Subotić, “Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 610–627.



5. FINDINGS FROM THE BRČKO DISTRICT

Within Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Brčko District represents an idiosyncratic space.⁴² In the context of this research, respondents there were also distinctive, as far as the political, historical, and emotional dimensions of their attitudes toward NATO; which do not coalesce into a single dominant narrative. Unlike their counterparts in the entities, respondents in Brčko expressed neither a strong discourse of resistance nor explicit support for the Alliance. This was not translated into ambivalence, so much as an attempt to balance between the institutional logic of the District, everyday experiences of security, and selective associations of memory.

Research participants exhibited what can reasonably be described as a functional neutrality, rooted in a community identity that positions Brčko as a multiethnic and intermediary space, “*neither here nor there.*” This has raised the social primacy of maintaining stability, and has produced an emotional regime that elevates equilibrium. Accordingly, respondents in Brčko voiced little fear or enthusiasm about NATO, but adopted the cautious orientation that it could bring predictability while functioning to avoid escalations and minimize conflict.

Focus group participants in Brčko also clearly differentiated between everyday interpersonal relations and the political sphere. Some highlighted the continued impact of a politics in which institutional employees may be pressured to attend political gatherings, for example. This was set against the normalization that has occurred at the interpersonal level among citizens in the District, and this distinction provides an important context for understanding how security issues are perceived and communicated in Brčko.

As one respondent said, apart from politics, the District has “*moved beyond the 1990s*” so that “*relations are much more mature, normal, and better.*”

⁴² Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a unique, self-governing administrative unit of local self-government under the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, established by the Final Arbitration Award in 1999. The District is a condominium of both entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska), is directly subordinate to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and has its own multiethnic administration, judiciary, and police.

5.1. The Brčko paradigm: NATO as a background security framework

Respondents in Brčko most often described NATO as a “*military alliance*” or an “*organization that guarantees peace*,” in a matter-of-fact way, absent any strong emotional orientation. They claimed the Alliance is rarely discussed locally and “*only comes up when there is some crisis*,” as people are more concerned with so-called kitchen table issues. Some respondents also emphasized that “*everything in Brčko must remain in balance*,” noting that any stronger political mobilization around the question of NATO risks reopening lines of division in the District.

In this sense, NATO functions as a signal of stability, ever-present in the background but mostly visible only during moments of tension. This produces inconsistencies, which emerge in the space between pragmatic support and practical discomfort. In other words, as one focus group participant put it, “*It’s good that NATO is here; let them stay*,” but “*when all those vehicles from EUFOR arrive in such numbers... it cannot feel entirely normal... you wonder whether you are truly safe*.” This illustrates how, for local residents, the international presence in Brčko simultaneously denotes the deterrence of instability and serves as a reminder of the fleeting nature of stability.

Findings in Brčko suggest that this duality is linked to memory. NATO is remembered here both as having prevented “*a greater evil*” through a minimal framework of security, and as a purveyor of wartime destruction through its air power. Still, a key distinction compared to other regions is that these interpretations coexist in Brčko without conflict, and the frameworks constructed from them have coalesced around a shared pragmatism. Thus, the view of many respondents was that it simply makes no sense to identify emotionally with NATO, a framework they believe “*keeps things under control*” in the present.

The remark of one focus group participant that, “*This is not romance, it’s reality*,” captures the essence of the Brčko paradigm, wherein emotional distance is a strategy for preserving balance. At the same time, some of the most informed research participants – including journalists, activists, and political scientists – emphasized that the legacy of the 1990s remains a sensitive topic in the District. “*Even after 30 years*,” one commented, “*it has not been fully processed*.” It was notable, though, that within the same discussion, there was a willingness among respondents to admit that “*mistakes on all sides*” were made in the past. This acknowledgement, exercised more broadly, has created space in Brčko for a nuanced security discourse, aimed not at political mobilization but at rationalizing and depoliticizing the topic.

5.2. The (dis)information space in Brčko: Stability through skepticism?

As in the entities, many research participants in Brčko raised concerns about the local and regional information environment. They emphasized that reliable information on NATO is lacking, as well as public platforms to enable discussion of the Alliance outside the confines of its political instrumentalization. Additionally, these respondents expressed a deep skepticism toward online information sources more generally, referring for instance to websites as “*infected*” and declaring their rejection of Big Tech in statements such as, “*I don’t use Google*.” It was clear that, for research participants in Brčko, digital spaces are not understood as neutral sources of knowledge and are associated with untrustworthiness and manipulation. As a remedy, some proposed the development of educational content, along with the launch of “*debate platforms*” where “*different perspectives could be heard*.”

Indeed, according to one respondent, this disinformation has influenced political figures, so that “*politicians themselves are neither sufficiently informed nor educated about NATO*.”

However, interviews with political and civil society actors in Brčko revealed that they have a rather comprehensive understanding of NATO's role, compared to the general public, and are aware that aggressive or symbolically charged communication about the Alliance could disrupt the local balance. One younger politician from the District – who recognized the enduring strength of anti-NATO narratives in local politics and linked them to external influences prevalent in the Republika Srpska, like Russia – highlighted that some responsibility must be laid at the feet of NATO in this context, for failing to mount a “sufficiently proactive response” to the problem of disinformation. This is an important observation, given that such a problem becomes even more acute in fragmented information environments. In fact, where official information is limited yet the digital sphere is saturated with antagonistic messaging, the public tends to retreat from information altogether or rely on preexisting narratives.

In Brčko, it is possible that the prevailing emotional regime calling for equilibrium may serve, appropriately, as something of a counterbalance to disinformation; by fueling a trend toward long-term stability and institutional predictability, including as an economic signal to investors. This produces a discourse that is functional and instrumental in nature, whereby NATO is perceived as a security “umbrella” that reduces risk and indirectly enhances prospects for investment. Yet it must be noted that the Alliance remains an issue around which symbolic disputes can still be activated in Brčko, as proven by a protest that erupted when high school students were invited to attend a NATO-related activity; which served as a reminder that the institutional neutrality of the District cannot be taken for granted and must be actively maintained. Some respondents contended that this can be achieved through a consistently forward-looking focus that does not lose sight of community balance.

As a local political actor noted, “*Stability is key. Investors seek secure countries, and NATO guarantees that.*”

5.3. Summary of Findings: Brčko District

What emerges from these findings in Brčko District is the picture of an intermediate security regime. Meaning, NATO is neither an object of mass political mobilization nor a symbol of identity alignment, but exists in the background, an element of the security order that enables the community to function without the constant threat of political and emotional tension. In this sense, Brčko can be understood as a security community – in which security is maintained through institutionalized cooperation and stabilized norms, rather than through mobilization around existential threats.⁴³ At the same time, the singularity of the District makes it a liminal space within the international order, so that its formal inclusion in security structures coexists alongside a symbolic distance from that order and local demands for internal balance.⁴⁴

This amounts to a restrained, institutional neutrality that makes Brčko analytically significant. For, the local sentiment vis-à-vis NATO demonstrates that, even where the Alliance conjures negative emotions in some members of a community, security frameworks can be broadly accepted without ideological identification, through the pragmatic prioritization of everyday needs for stability and balance. That said, the intermediate nature of such a security regime makes it more vulnerable to disinformation and political crisis than fully consolidated regimes, especially where divisions can be quickly reactivated through a fragmented media environment and affectively charged symbols.⁴⁵ For this reason, it is essential to engage in ongoing, informed, and depoliticized public dialogue on the matter of security, in the interest of ensuring the Brčko District's long-term stability and preserving its unique local character.

43 Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

44 Rumelili, “Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in international relations.”

45 Bennett and Livingston, “The disinformation order.”



6. SYNTHESIS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Collectively, the findings of this study show that, across Bosnia and Herzegovina, perceptions of NATO cannot be understood through the binary lens of support versus opposition. Instead, views of the Alliance are shaped to varying degrees by several stable emotional regimes, reflecting the different ways citizens experience security, remember the war, and assess the role of institutions more broadly. NATO does not function in this context primarily as a foreign policy issue, but as a mirror of internal relationships to the state, to trust, and to the future.

Within the Republika Srpska, this research found that one dominant emotional regime features the emotional veto – a mechanism that can emerge when emotions like trauma, humiliation, fear, or guilt become politically institutionalized through public discourse, media, educational narratives, and commemorative rituals, producing conditions in which particular foreign policy options are excluded in advance from public debate because their consideration would violate the prevailing emotional order.⁴⁶ This has created a framework in parts of the Republika Srpska by which NATO is essentially excluded as a policy option; with membership preemptively vetoed as a function of collective memory, a filter through which wartime experiences and perceived injustices have been transformed into an enduring emotional resistance to the Alliance. So long as NATO remains such a strong symbol of past injury in the entity, many citizens may find it difficult to evaluate as a contemporary security actor, limiting the effectiveness of rational arguments about collective security. The dominance of this emotional regime was not uniform across the Republika Srpska, however, and does not align entirely with entity boundaries, and it was clear in multiple research locations that openings may exist for the views of some citizens to become more nuanced on matters of security.

In contrast, a pattern of widespread support for NATO was observed in most of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, grounded not in identity but in practical understandings of security. Through this lens, NATO is perceived primarily as a framework of stability, considered in opposition to the weakness of domestic institutions. And, wartime experiences and memories of violence are typically interpreted by citizens as a rationale for a clear set of rules, external guarantees, and preventive mechanisms, rather than as a basis for emotional mobilization. Still, this support for NATO does not equate to an idealization of the West or an unconditional trust in international actors; it reflects a rational assessment that security can be maintained only if it is institutionally structured, predictable, and supported by a broader international framework. Ultimately, NATO is viewed across the entity as a practical security mechanism, and not as a symbol of political or normative alignment, even if there is some variation, based on the ways memory, socioeconomic priorities, and each discursive environment impacts local interpretive frameworks.

⁴⁶ Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar, eds., *Researching Emotions in International Relations: Methodological Perspectives on the Emotional Turn* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

In the space between these two regimes, which dominate each entity, a third interpretive pattern emerged in the research, exemplified most clearly in the Brčko District; an appropriate site for such a framework, given that the District itself symbolizes the transitory territory of the intermediate. The understanding of security that prevails in Brčko – but was echoed by some respondents in urban locations nationwide as well as by some younger research participants – is constructed around the priority of maintaining social balance and avoiding polarization. It is these goals by which the local relationship to NATO is oriented in the District, and in this context, the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina remains outside a fully consolidated security community is deemed a potential vulnerability to future stability. And so, the issue of NATO is not necessarily entirely depoliticized in Brčko but neither is it an object of political mobilization; and different memories and interpretations of the war coexist in the interest of preserving the local equilibrium, the predictability of institutions, and a minimal level of stability. The Alliance thus operates almost entirely in the background, to enable the secure, everyday functioning of the community.

It should be emphasized that these regimes do not strictly correspond to administrative boundaries or ethnic affiliation, despite general trends. Further, citizens in a single region may rely on numerous frameworks for understanding, shaped by factors including generational differences, urban or rural location, gender roles, and levels of institutional trust. As a result, perceptions of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina are generally stable and resistant to influence, but are simultaneously open to potential transformation.

Naturally, that potential rests largely with changing the perspectives of youth, and a key challenge identified by this research concerns the lack of formal knowledge of security policies and international actors, including NATO, among younger respondents. This not-knowing shapes security perceptions as much as information, or disinformation, does; especially when, as this study found, youth are constructing their understanding of security largely through content absorbed in fragmented digital environments. Such information spaces reinforce implicit mnemonic patterns, emotional responses, and dominant online discourses, which may substitute for analytical reflection on security by youth. At the same time, this implies a degree of engagement, and it is notable that an absence of stable informational frameworks has not necessarily translated into political apathy in young people. If youth appear ambivalent toward NATO, this should not be interpreted as a sign of disengagement but as an indicator of the structural gap between how security issues are communicated and how young people acquire knowledge today. This gap represents a critical challenge, in that security discourse risks remaining either irrelevant or highly susceptible to disinformation if security policy does not prioritize investment in media literacy, critical engagement with digital content, and the creation of meaningful spaces for youth participation in public debate.

Arguably, these findings reveal less about the Alliance itself and far more about social conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly with respect to levels of social trust, the integration of wartime experiences, and citizens' expectations of the state. Where wartime trauma remains socially unintegrated, NATO is primarily a symbol of threat or imposed power; where past violence has been translated into a mandate for prevention, NATO is seen as a mechanism of deterrence and protection; and where the preservation of social balance is a central community priority, NATO is considered a practical security infrastructure that can help uphold this balance. The diversity of these perspectives should not be seen as an obstacle to understanding the security landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but as a key by which it can be more meaningfully interpreted.

Indeed, the Bosnian context does not reflect an irrational relationship between its citizens and NATO, but a specific model of post-conflict security reasoning. Stability is interpreted less through abstract strategies and more through assessments of the capacity of a system to reduce uncertainty and prevent crisis escalation. It is through this analytical frame that Bosnia and Herzegovina's relationship to international security integration should be viewed.

To that end, it is important to appreciate that attitudes toward NATO are rarely disconnected entirely from historical experience, political discourse, and the country's media environment, even when shaped by formal assessments of security doctrines, procedures, or decision-making mechanisms. In other words, various affective and cognitive filters act to pre-structure how information about NATO is deciphered by citizens, determining which messages are perceived as relevant and legitimate, and which are rejected as unreliable or unacceptable. This reflects Ahmed's argument that emotions are not private responses, but socially and politically organized frameworks which orient attention, meaning, and belonging, thereby directly influencing how political actors and security arrangements are interpreted.⁴⁷ In this sense, NATO is a symbolic reference point for questions of protection and stability, within a framework that elevates the simple heuristic of whether the Alliance contributes to predictability in a politically unstable environment. Meaning, does it increase or reduce uncertainty, and does it constrain or amplify risk?

A significant finding of this research, however, is that a gradual shift appears to be underway, toward a more pragmatic understanding of security in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly among younger generations and in urban settings. In the context of assessing NATO, this pragmatism focuses greater attention on its concrete functions and advantages, including civil protection, crisis management, international cooperation, mobility, and long-term stability. This does not imply the abandonment of historical narratives, but a reprioritizing of memory and emotion, as secondary to security needs in the present and future. While past events have not been reinterpreted, new perspectives on security are being articulated through the language of predictability, risk management, and tangible institutional benefits at the local level. Through this process, more space has been created in Bosnian society for rational evaluations of international security arrangements.⁴⁸

6.1. NATO, memory, and security in a fragmented space

Memory of NATO interventions in the 1990s – in 1995, when the Alliance intervened in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 1999, when it intervened in rump Yugoslavia – remains a key frame through which security is evaluated by Bosnian citizens. But the specificity of individual wartime experiences means that, across the country, different mnemonic codes have emerged in response to these interventions. In the Republika Srpska, NATO bombings are largely associated with a narrative of moral injury, while in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Brčko District, this history is more often remembered as a function of its contribution to ending the violence and protecting civilians.

This asymmetry of memory is an expected consequence of war and reflects the social fragmentation experienced by citizens, then and in its aftermath, which has become a filter for their collective interpretations of history. Research on asymmetric mnemonic codes positions family narratives as an intermediary between official histories and individual assessments.⁴⁹ In the Bosnian context, where wartime memories remain highly politicized, this sheds light on why the same events do not produce uniform conclusions about NATO, as they are refracted through family stories of loss, protection, or injustice. In this context, even when citizens acknowledge the practical benefits of cooperation with NATO or its role in preserving

⁴⁷ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

⁴⁸ See: Beck, *Risk Society*; Subotić, "Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change."

⁴⁹ Aline Cordonnier et al., "Collective memory: An hourglass between the collective and the individual," *Memory, Mind & Media* 1 (2022): e8.

peace, a moral framework of trauma remains a powerful influence on their evaluation of the Alliance. This introduces an emotional veto – wherein the burden of wartime trauma limits the space for rational debate about contemporary security arrangements – arising not from cognitive closure or ignorance, but from a coherent response to experiences of violence and their long-term social consequences.

For this reason, rational arguments alone tend to have a limited impact in societies where memory remains the primary evaluative framework. At the same time, the findings of this research demonstrate that the position of memory in security discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not entirely static. In some respondents, a shift toward a more emotionally distanced and politically pragmatic relationship with NATO was discernible, and was sometimes expressed in contrast to the dominant emotional regime in a local community. This signals that some citizens are increasingly prone to assess the Alliance on the basis of its current functions and capacities. In doing so, they are not denying, or even forgiving, the past, but are (re)placing it within a broader evaluative framework that prioritizes stability, predictability, and risk management above symbolism and memory. This may indicate that the role of the family as an intermediary between the public and personal is weakening in some cases, or has been reshaped by education, professional experience, and new information.⁵⁰

This is noteworthy in a country where collective memory of NATO operates through parallel but unevenly visible registers. For, as Hirst, Yamashiro, and Coman have noted, collective memory encompasses both the publicly available symbols and narratives that are maintained institutionally by society, as well as individual and family memories shared within communities.⁵¹ These discursive patterns function as *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory; described by Nora as the places “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself” into a “memorial consciousness.”⁵² Throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, sites of memory are continuously reproduced through political communication, education, and commemorative practices.⁵³

In this way, memory carries a considerable symbolic and political weight, so that collective memory functions not only as a repository of past experiences but as means of regulating contemporary security discourse. Thus, the qualitative finding of this research, that some people in the Republika Srpska were willing to evaluate NATO privately in ways they are unwilling to publicly, is quite significant; particularly because these people typically voiced support for a more pragmatic approach to security, when behind closed doors. This suggests that a strong social pressure exists to articulate only certain opinions and emotions in public, and that citizens fear the social sanctions which may result if they act alternatively. Such is the nature of the emotional regimes that serve to sustain political and social divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To be clear, neither the entities, nor the country’s ethnic communities, are monolithic; and the interpretive frameworks applied by citizens are constructed from a complex convergence of individual experiences with wartime memory, political discourse, and competing informational ecosystems. Still, the fact that this research found the emotional regimes in both entities to be quite consolidated, with only relatively small openings for change, makes the analytical implications of findings from the Brčko District even more pronounced. There, information pluralism and institutional arrangements rewarding moderation appear to mitigate the social polarization seen in other parts of the country, in part by allowing different memory narratives to coexist without creating an escalatory tension. This provides practical evidence of the potential for a depolarized security discourse that does not necessarily require consensus about the past, at the national level.

50 Cordonnier et al., “Collective memory.”

51 William Hirst, Jeremy K. Yamashiro, and Alin Coman, “Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 22, no. 5 (2018): 438–451.

52 Nora, *Realms of memory*, vol. 1.

53 Liu and Hilton, “How the past weighs on the present.”

6.2. The political instrumentalization of security

Reconciling the issue of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina is complicated by the degree to which it serves as a powerful instrument of political mobilization. The Alliance is not the subject of ongoing, informed civic debate, instead appearing in public discourse mostly in selective, episodic, and highly emotional political messaging that is activated during electoral campaigns or political crises. In the Republika Srpska, this messaging typically positions NATO as a “negative other,” portrayed as a threat to identity, sovereignty, or security, often through narratives implying that membership in the Alliance will draw the country into foreign wars. Focus group participants in the entity recognized this rhetoric as a predictable political ritual and not an authentic starting point for debate on security, with one noting that “*NATO is mentioned only when politicians need to awaken fear.*”

This awareness tends to engender cynicism, prompting many citizens to distance themselves from politics and withdraw from security debates. In certain contexts, this distance may function to open space for a more pragmatic approach to security, by disconnecting NATO from its symbolic associations and making it an object of practical evaluation. But it has led most people to assume an instrumentalization of security and, to a certain extent, of the domestic logic of securitization, as well.

Elites securitize an issue when they frame it as an existential threat in order to justify mobilization strategies and consolidate political authority, and in the Bosnian context, NATO is securitized selectively and asymmetrically. In the Republika Srpska, it is framed as a threat to collective identity and political autonomy, and in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a symbol of state survival and international legitimacy. In either case, it is rarely treated solely as a complex institutional system with clearly defined procedures, obligations, and constraints.

In fact, political discourse in the Federation produces a different yet equally simplified framework, as the one used to instrumentalize NATO in the Republika Srpska. In the Federation, the Alliance is often presented as a marker of international legitimacy and political alignment, with little discussion of the concrete obligations, risks, and long-term implications of becoming a member state. This framing prioritizes symbolic affirmation over substantive explanation, leaving key security questions outside the scope of public debate. But for some respondents, such affirmation is sufficient incentive to support NATO membership, based on the promise that it will function as “*a sign that we are recognized.*”

The Brčko District represents an important counterexample to the entities, in that its social environment and public discourse rest on a certain pragmatic moderation, which precludes the exploitation of NATO as a strong mobilizing tool or symbol of identity alignment. Respondents there were insistent that, “*everything is a matter of balance.*” Their example demonstrates that the instrumentalization of NATO is not an inherent consequence of the security issue itself, but a product of the political environment in which it is articulated.

The prevalence with which NATO is treated as a political tool, rather than a complex institutional arrangement, has led to a growing fatigue and cynicism about security issues and the perception among some citizens that these issues are deployed selectively in the service of individual political interests. According to focus group participants, citizens recognize this as political instrumentalization and distinguish politicized rhetoric from actual security debates. Nonetheless, so long as NATO remains a key tool of political mobilization, and is not the subject of substantive public messaging and outreach, perceptions of the Alliance are unlikely to change considerably in much of the country.

6.3. Factional media narratives and external media influences

Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina is highly fragmented and strongly segmented along ethnic and political lines, directly shaping how NATO is discussed in the public sphere. Rather than a shared information space, the country features parallel media frameworks that exist alongside each other, interpreting the meaning of NATO through different pre-determinate narratives. The structure of the sector effectively stifles meaningful public debate; and worse, serves to reinforce the attitudes and emotional regimes that prevail in each entity.

Divisions in the media market also legitimize factional reporting. Hence, no media outlet is widely accepted as a shared reference across the country. Instead, media communicate with audiences in relative silos, and present security issues selectively. In this way, these outlets are capable of reinforcing the notion that NATO is a symbolic marker of political affiliation. Media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina thus function as extensions of political discourse, instead of as autonomous sources of information. In the digital media environment, this is further intensified, as the logic of “clicks and likes” favors conflict-coded content that activates local wartime associations, while analytical and explanatory content is pushed to the relative margins. Commenting on modern market dynamics, which produce the greatest traction and visibility for information that evokes the most negative emotions, one journalist explained, “*We get the most clicks when the word ‘bombing’ appears in the headline.*”

External media influences represent an additional layer of this landscape. Among younger generations, who increasingly seek information sources from the West, this can help nurture a more emotionally distanced and globally-oriented perspective on NATO. But it is primarily Serbian and Russian outlets and portals to which many Bosnian citizens are likely to be exposed, even if they don’t seek them out; and these tend to promote narratives of “NATO aggression” and “Western double standards.” Indeed, it has long been Russian policy to prevent the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Alliance, and its media apparatus in the region supports this goal in part by advancing narratives of Western imperialist design in the Balkans.

Often, this content is uncritically reproduced in local media, particularly in the Republika Srpska, creating an echo chamber that limits space for alternative interpretations of the Alliance or depoliticized debate on security integration. By acting “as multipliers” for Russian narratives, these outlets also give “disproportionate weight to the Russian position within the domestic information space.”⁵⁴ And so, rather than reducing uncertainty and enabling informed decision-making, media in Bosnia and Herzegovina often serve to further entrench symbolic and identity-based frameworks. On the topic of NATO, media thus functions largely as a mechanism for reinforcing existing emotional regimes and the narratives they generate. As a result, ethical and professional journalists who engage in educational, depoliticized reporting on security issues end up being drowned out by the factional noise. As digital media environments become cluttered with affective triggers and more information is acquired in the form of short, emotionally charged content that uses visual symbols and repetitive messaging, the vulnerability of users to disinformation, simplified interpretations, and manipulative narratives will only increase.

6.4. Creating distance from affective triggers

Perhaps one of the most valuable findings of this research emerged from interviews with experts, and two focus groups held exclusively with journalists, which emphasized the distinction that exists between the way NATO is understood by the general public and by professionals with more knowledge or expertise in matters of security. These professionals did not apply the dominant affective and memory-based

⁵⁴ Đorđe Vujatović, “Russian Influence in the Balkans,” Fridrich Ebert Stiftung, November 2025, 5.

frameworks observed among the broader population, and moreover, they exhibited a pronounced epistemic distance from emotional triggers. This distance allowed them to routinely assess security through a more pragmatic and process-oriented lens.

In regard to NATO, these respondents were more familiar with institutional mechanisms of cooperation, existing forms of partnership, and the level of interoperability already achieved between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Alliance. This knowledge enabled them to view NATO as an already partially-integrated security practice, and not a symbol of identity alignment or historical trauma. By treating the Alliance as an operational framework for processes unfolding through defense sector reforms, joint exercises, capacity-building programs, and politico-military coordination, the question of membership is made more pragmatic, and involves assessing NATO as a continuum of existing and potential institutional arrangements.

It should be noted that this epistemic distance does not necessarily imply normative support for NATO. It merely reflects an understanding of security as a process rather than a moral or symbolic referendum. Experts and journalists are able to relativize emotionally-charged public debates and shift the focus toward institutional predictability, risk management, and long-term stability because they are more aware that Bosnia and Herzegovina is already deeply embedded in the Euro-Atlantic security space. Yet, the research shows that this cognitive framework is rarely translated into the broader public sphere effectively, to act as a counterbalance to the affective power of interpretations that center collective memory and wartime trauma. This interpretive chasm – between experts and professional journalists, on one side, and much of the public, on the other – is further evidence that perceptions of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina result not from a deficit of information per se, but from a deficit of information that is trustworthy and depoliticized.

6.5. Concluding thoughts

This research demonstrates that attitudes toward NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to emerge from an intersection of collective wartime memory, emotional regimes of the post-conflict context, and deeply rooted distrust toward political and institutional actors. In this sense, NATO is perceived less as a concrete foreign policy actor and more as a symbolic marker through which broader social relations, experiences, and expectations are reflected. Drawing on contemporary approaches in memory studies, these findings confirm that collective memory does not function as a fixed set of historical facts but as a dynamic and multilayered process in which meanings of the past are continuously (re)negotiated in the present.⁵⁵

Through the lens of collective memory, the symbolism of NATO is mobilized in Bosnia and Herzegovina via affective associations and narrative templates, in accordance with theories of security perception in post-conflict societies; which propose that these perceptions are more likely to emerge from enduring emotional and mnemonic frameworks than from informed political deliberation. Thus, a particularly important outcome of this research was the identification of several dominant emotional regimes that operate in different spaces across the country. Emotions function in this context as socially structured patterns that predetermine what can be publicly expressed about topics like security, war, and international relations, and what remains outside the bounds of legitimate discourse. These regimes, and the integration of different wartime experiences has produced different security imaginaries in the country, by which NATO is conceived as a threat to sovereignty and identity, a mechanism to prevent violence, or simply a security and cooperation infrastructure.

⁵⁵ Erll, *Memory in Culture*.

Another significant finding of this study was the role that a deep distrust in political institutions plays as a mediating factor in shaping the perceptions of Bosnians vis-à-vis security. This distrust has produced a profound fatigue in many citizens, articulated as a kind of ambiguous neutrality, or even civic impotency. The fatalism of one respondent captured this sentiment, in the claim that the people “*don’t really choose*” the country’s course. On the basis of this logic, political withdrawal is not an unreasonable option, if for no other reason but to avoid feelings of political powerlessness. That said, the distance these citizens have placed between themselves and domestic institutions and actors has also been extended to international actors, reducing the space for informed and reflective debate on foreign policy issues and NATO membership.

Younger men who participated in this research were particularly apt to articulate a deep cynicism in regard to political actors – often in response to their instrumentalization of security issues, which these respondents described as means of distracting from problems of socioeconomics and governance within Bosnia and Herzegovina. This research teased apart some other gendered dimensions of security perceptions in the country, as well, and in ways that are directly applicable to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. For instance, women respondents indicated that they understand security primarily through the lens of everyday safety, care for family, community stability, and prevention of renewed violence; and evaluate security arrangements in terms of their capacity to maintain peace and predictability. This aligns closely with the WPS approach, wherein security is treated as an experiential and contextual category deeply connected to social relations, trauma, and institutional trust. Accordingly, the perspectives of women respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina reveal how security policies are refracted through lived experience, memory, and emotion.

This study also touched on the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, which recognizes the importance of empowering young people to play a central role in preventing and resolving conflict, and shaping lasting peace. The agenda is also focused on the implications of the digital environments in which youth interact and form their views of security, and the findings of this research reflect how these media spaces can lead young people toward content that emerges from the most consolidated emotional regimes and inflexible online discourses. Initiatives aimed at addressing the structural gap between how security is communicated and young people acquire information, and providing forums for public debate, will be essential to encouraging meaningful deliberative engagement from younger generations on the question of NATO membership.

The diversity and complexity of the attitudes toward NATO that were recorded in this research, across Bosnia and Herzegovina and in respondents of all ages, should not be considered an obstacle to understanding the security situation in the country. Instead, these nuances and contradictions hold the key to more deeply interpreting security perceptions and tolerances among Bosnian citizens by illuminating how wartime experiences, collective memory, emotion, and institutional distrust continue to intersect in shaping contemporary security imaginaries. Thus, if future debates on Euro-Atlantic integration in Bosnia and Herzegovina are to be effective, they cannot be reduced to normative or geopolitical arguments alone, and must seriously engage with local memory frameworks, emotional regimes, and social priorities, in order to be relevant and sustainable.



7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of this research can be drawn upon to strengthen public awareness, trust, and security communication regarding NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, it is useful to know that neither youth nor women respondents responded positively to security narratives that demand political or identity alignment. What demonstrates greater potential in reaching these two strategically important social groups is long-term engagement aimed at translating security into practical knowledge and everyday relevance. To that end, success should not be measured in temporal terms but by the capacity developed among citizens to understand security matters, exhibit resilience to disinformation, and trust in institutional processes.

Because perceptions of NATO are deeply embedded in emotional regimes, in a fragmented media landscape, and in a generalized distrust toward political and institutional actors, it is essential that differentiated and socially grounded engagement strategies are employed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A first strategic shift should entail a reframing of the narrative currently advanced by the Alliance and other international actors, disconnecting it from wartime trauma and rooting it instead in the language of everyday stability and functional security. As this research shows, many communities already view NATO as a kind of background security framework, even if they cannot articulate what this means in practical terms. Communication should focus less on abstract geopolitical narratives and more on the way the Alliance is tangible and relevant to citizens, by highlighting crisis prevention, institutional stability, community safety, and long-term predictability.

It is also necessary to decouple NATO communication from the realm of domestic political elites. Across most of the country, political actors are so intensely distrusted that any messaging perceived to originate from these figures, or from political institutions, is almost automatically delegitimized. Wherever possible, NATO and its international partners should therefore seek to communicate directly with citizens through local forums and public dialogues, and to engage with educational and professional communities, including journalists and academics.

Meaningful engagement with youth is essential, as well; and should begin from the premise that young people are not a homogeneous group, in no small part due to the fragmented knowledge they obtain in modern digital spaces, where it is common to encounter disinformation, including about NATO. Rather than relying on campaigns that assume prior interest or knowledge, resources should be directed toward support for youth media literacy, critical thinking, and security education, in cooperation with schools, universities, and local organizations. In particular, an emphasis should be placed on strengthening the capacity of young people to identify disinformation and manipulative content.

The findings of this study suggest that women and women’s organizations should also be elevated more prominently in the context of security messaging, as they are more likely to articulate security through the lens of social cohesion, everyday stability, and preventing escalation, and less through ideological or militarized narratives. In accordance with the WPS agenda, NATO engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina should move beyond declarative commitments and should be operationalized through concrete initiatives, including support for local women-led initiatives, the greater visibility of women in security structures, and the creation of spaces for constructive and socially grounded dialogue on security.

Finally, the role of the media is essential in influencing the views of citizens on security matters, but opportunities to affect content in the sector are constrained by structural limitations. So, rather than relying on positive coverage, efforts should be aimed at strengthening professional standards, providing contextualized explanations of complex security issues, and supporting journalists in countering disinformation. NATO communications must acknowledge the reality of the fragmented public sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina, taking a long-term view that emphasizes consistency, patience, and credibility rather than expecting rapid shifts in public attitudes.

Recommendations for strategic communication and engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Actor	Focus	Recommendations
NATO	Reframe narratives, communicate directly to citizens	Shift the narrative from war and geopolitics to everyday security; create mechanisms for direct communication with citizens; strengthen local presence through dialogue
International community	Build trust, invest in long-term stability	Avoid politicization of the topic of NATO; support platforms for education and dialogue; empower long-term processes rather than short-term public relations
Media	Information integrity, contextualization	Encourage explanation over sensationalism; strengthen professional standards; develop tools to counter disinformation
Youth	Media literacy, critical thinking, engagement with youth issues	Invest in educational programs on security and disinformation; use formats relevant to youth; do not assume prior interest or ideological positioning
Women	Social cohesion, conflict prevention, WPS agenda	Operationalize the WPS agenda; include women in security discussions; focus on stability, community, and preventing escalation
Local communities	Context-sensitive approach	Adapt communication to local experiences; avoid one-size-fits-all messaging

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IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
COLLECTIVE MEMORY, EMOTIONAL REGIMES,
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