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## PUBLIC OPINION PERCEPTION OF EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA-THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS AND SECURITY FEARS

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines public opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding Euro-Atlantic integration. The study explores the relationship between hopes for a change in living standards and concerns about geopolitical security. Based on a survey of 1,111 respondents in November 2025, support for EU membership is rated high (4.38). At the same time, expectations of immediate economic benefits are more modest. Respondents gave an average score of 3.14 for improving household budgets with EU accession. This shows that citizens are pragmatic, if not skeptical or undecided, regarding the financial benefits of EU and Euro-Atlantic integration. The results show that the primary motives for supporting EU membership are strengthening the rule of law and fighting corruption (4.15). Support for NATO is lower (3.71), with noticeable gender and entity differences. The study finds that significantly more women than men see NATO as a guarantor of long-term peace. The perception of Russia as a positive security factor is low (1.92), even in Republika Srpska (2.10). The paper concludes that despite political crises, citizens remain committed to integration. They view these processes mainly as a framework for regulation and security rather than immediate economic benefits.*

**Keywords:** *Euro-Atlantic integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Union, NATO, security*

**JEL classification:** *D72, F15, F52*

### INTRODUCTION

The main research problem lies in the evident gap between declarative political support for Euro-Atlantic integration and the actual perception of citizens, which

is burdened by internal political crises and external influences. Although institutions formally fulfill their priorities, public opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows a high degree of polarization, especially regarding security guarantees and the preservation of entity competencies. There is a justified suspicion that long-term processes without tangible economic results, combined with constant interventions by international actors, lead to fatigue and a change in attitude towards the very idea of membership in the EU and NATO.

The subject of the research is the attitudes and perceptions of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the process of joining the European Union and NATO, with a special emphasis on the differences between the entities in terms of support for these integration flows. The research is focused on the analysis of economic expectations, trust in international security mechanisms, and the influence of geopolitical factors on the formation of public opinion, with special attention to how these processes are reflected in the constitutional-legal and institutional framework of the state. The subject also includes examining the level of citizens' awareness of the legal and economic implications of membership, given that information awareness is a decisive factor in support or resistance to Euro-Atlantic integration.

The research aims to scientifically determine the level of citizens' support for the processes of European and Euro-Atlantic integration and to identify the legal, economic, and security factors that most influence the formation of these attitudes. The intention is to examine whether the dominant motives for supporting EU accession are primarily of an economic nature (market, investments, jobs) or are primarily based on the expectation of strengthening the rule of law, legal security and institutional stability. Furthermore, the aim is to determine to what extent gender, level of education and entity affiliation influence the perception of NATO and the Russian Federation as relevant security factors, i.e. whether these actors are considered sources of legal and security guarantees or primarily instruments of geopolitical influence.

This research is primarily intended for decision-makers at all levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as representatives of the international community (Directorate for European Integrations, n/d), as it provides an objective insight into what citizens truly expect from integration processes. The findings will benefit the academic community in the field of social and political sciences; the non-governmental sector engaged in the promotion of integration. Also, the findings will benefit the media, to whom this data can serve as a corrective factor in reporting public opinion.

Based on the defined problem and goals, the following research questions are set:

- To what extent do the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina support join the EU and the NATO alliance, and are there statistically significant differences between the entities?
- Does the anticipation of higher living standards outweigh other factors as the driving force behind public support for EU accession?
- How is the impact of NATO and the Russian Federation on long-term national security framed within the Bosnian public discourse?
- Does a higher level of perceived awareness regarding Euro-Atlantic processes necessarily translate into more robust support for integration?

In accordance with the subject and goals of the research, the following hypotheses have been established:

Main hypothesis (H0): There is high general support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's entry into the European Union, but it is significantly polarized at the entity level, with support for NATO integration being directly conditioned by the perception of security threats and the gender of the respondents.

Auxiliary hypothesis 1 (H1): Support for European Union accession among BiH citizens is predominantly driven by the desire for improved anti-corruption measures and a robust rule of law, rather than over-optimistic expectations of immediate household economic gain

Auxiliary hypothesis 2 (H2): The degree of trust in the NATO alliance as a stabilizing force for peace is significantly shaped by gender, with female respondents demonstrating a notably higher level of confidence in the Alliance compared to their male counterparts

Auxiliary hypothesis 3 (H3): While the overall perception of Russia as a security provider remains low nationwide, there is a statistically marked divergence in Republika Srpska, where respondents view its role more favorably than those in the Federation of BiH.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Few European transition stories carry the same level of complexity as Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic integration. As Aćić and Grujić (2022) emphasize, international financial and political organizations did more than merely stabilize peace in the post-Dayton era; they were instrumental in rebuilding basic infrastructure, shaping economic recovery, and setting up the initial administrative pillars of the state." Despite this, the country's position is determined by constant friction between domestic jurisdictions and external pressures, which directly shape the public's perception of the European path. In particular, recent data from the European Integration Directorate confirm that, although the majority of citizens still support EU membership, they increasingly point to political maneuvering, lack of internal consensus and slow reforms as the main obstacles. Such results indicate a strong connection between internal friction and external agendas (Aćić, 2022).

Initially, the international community's engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina focused on technical, humanitarian and financial assistance for the reconstruction of basic state functions and infrastructure. Starting in 1996, the EU used the Phare and reconstruction programmes to finance critical reconstruction and refugee return, establishing the administrative foundations needed for later pre-accession tools. Looking back at the EU reports from 1996, we can trace how the initial post-war model of assistance was gradually replaced by more structured instruments such as CARDS (Council Regulation No. 2666/2000) aimed at long-term development and stabilisation. The European Commission (1997) further points out that these early mechanisms prioritised institutional capacity and precursors to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) relevant to the rule of law (Brljavac, 2011; Jokić et al., 2024).

One of the important aspects of integration support is the economic dimension. The debate about integration always comes back to the economy. As we noted in study (Aćić and Grujić, 2023), the impact of IPA funding, while crucial for state structures, rarely reaches the household level in a meaningful way. We see this difference-where institutions grow while living standards stagnate-as the primary reason for the conflict-

ing views we are now documenting on the ground.

Regarding the rule of law, the European Commission (2019) clearly defines in its Opinion fourteen priorities that constitute the core of the reform demands (Polović and Dujčić Frlan, 2019). Data from the Directorate for European Integration (2024) show that for many in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Union is less a political turning point and more the primary remedy for endemic corruption. This perception positions EU membership as the only sustainable framework capable of ensuring a functional state based on the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights.

On the other hand, integration into the NATO alliance causes significantly greater divisions. Schimmelfennig (2003) argues that EU and NATO enlargement processes often run in parallel because they are based on shared liberal-democratic values and norms. In this context, enlargement can be understood as the construction of a “liberal community” through rhetorical appeals to a common identity and standards. In the BiH context, this connection is emphasized through cooperation in the security sector, but citizens’ perceptions are deeply divided along entity lines. This is confirmed by research from the Enterprise Development Agency Eda and the Faculty of Political Sciences in Banja Luka (2020), which records extremely low support for NATO membership in Republika Srpska, compared to significantly higher support for EU accession (Polović & Dujčić Frlan, 2019; European Commission, 2019; Eda Enterprise Development Agency & Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Banja Luka, 2020).

Recent research has indicated a gradual cooling of enthusiasm for EU accession, a trend particularly visible in the Republika Srpska. Data from the Directorate for European Integration (2025) show a decline in support at the state level to 69.9%, likely a byproduct of “reform fatigue” and a process that many see as dragging on without immediate results. Dragančić (2022) adds another layer to this, noting that while support in the Republika Srpska often fluctuates during political frictions, a fundamental, underlying consensus on the importance of the European market remains.

Global geopolitical shifts have only added to the complexity of perceptions of local security. Savić (2021) argues that in the Republika Srpska, attitudes towards NATO are still heavily burdened by historical baggage, leading to a preference for military neutrality over formal membership in the alliance. In contrast, the Federation of BiH continues to view NATO as the ultimate guarantor of peace. This deep internal polarization remains a significant obstacle, complicating and potentially slowing down the broader integration agenda.

Dudley and Saez (2022) analyze how membership criteria affect “divided societies” such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The authors suggest that the integration process can sometimes unintentionally exacerbate internal tensions if demands for reform are perceived as an attack on entity competences. This is evident in the debates on constitutional changes that the European Council (2024) regularly sets as a condition for further progress on the European path.

Scholarly and political discourse often focuses on the influence of external actors, most notably the Russian Federation. However, empirical evidence from the Eda Agency (2022) suggests a more nuanced reality: despite the strong media narrative of pro-Russian sentiment, citizens in the Republika Srpska prioritize economic and political stability, which they associate with Western institutions. In this light, Russia serves more as a symbolic cornerstone than as a practical security pillar. Ratti (2023)

further argues that EU and NATO integration are in fact inseparable, as both require the same democratic foundations-civilian control of the military, transparency of security, and strong parliamentary oversight. Scholars see this parallel progress as a vital mechanism for consolidating democratic institutions within candidate states (Dudley & Saez, 2022; Eda Agency for Entrepreneurship Development and Faculty of Political Science, University of Banja Luka, 2020).

Ultimately, we approached this integration process as a complex mix of security needs, legal reforms, and economic stability. We are clear that, while the EU mandate remains the main driver, NATO accession is where the real divides lie, especially when we look at gender and regional demographics.

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, we focus on how citizens across Bosnia and Herzegovina balance their economic expectations against perceived security risks regarding Euro-Atlantic integration. Conducted in November 2025, this research relied on a representative sample of 1,111 individuals.

We ensured a balanced demographic reflection by including 51.1% women and 48.9% men, with an average respondent age of 42.6 years. Data collection spanned both entities -54.5% of participants was from Republika Srpska and 45.5% of the Federation of BiH-providing a solid basis for comparing attitudes within the country's complex constitutional and legal framework.

We employed a ten-item structured questionnaire to gauge public sentiment, where respondents expressed their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale.

The questions were:

1. To what extent do you support Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union?
2. In your opinion, would EU membership lead to a better economic standard for your household?
3. To what extent would EU accession help to combat corruption and strengthen the rule of law in the country?
4. Do you believe that joining the EU would threaten the unique identity and cultural diversity of BiH?
5. How strongly do you support the prospect of Bosnia and Herzegovina joining NATO?
6. Would NATO membership serve as a reliable guarantee for long-term peace and stability in BiH?
7. Is NATO membership a necessary step for the country to effectively withstand external security challenges?
8. Is Russia a positive factor for the security and stability of BiH?
9. I believe that EU membership and NATO membership must go "hand in hand" because they are inseparable processes.
10. Do you feel adequately informed about the specific steps and implications of the country's path towards the EU and NATO?

This approach was chosen to avoid binary limitations, as yes or no answers, and to enable a deeper analysis of variability in attitudes. The questions are designed to cover economic effects, the fight against corruption, the preservation of cultural

identity, the relationship with the NATO alliance, and the influence of the Russian Federation on regional stability.

Statistical data processing includes descriptive analysis, comparison of mean values (arithmetic mean), and frequency analysis of extreme responses. Attention was paid to differentiating results based on entity affiliation, education level, and the size of the company where the respondents are employed. The statistical analysis incorporates descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, arithmetic mean comparisons, cross-tabulation across demographic sub-groups, as well as variance-covariance and Pearson correlation analysis to test the empirical relationships between key construct variables. The data are prepared to allow testing of the established hypotheses regarding the impact of socio-economic status on the perception of security threats.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The empirical phase of this study, carried out in November 2025, relied on a dataset gathered from 1,111 respondents. Data collection was conducted using an on-line questionnaire administered via Google Forms in November 2025. The research employed a convenience sampling technique with quota control to ensure balanced representation aligned with the key demographic parameters of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Specifically, quota targets were maintained across entity lines and by gender. Certain methodological limitations inherent to this approach must be acknowledged. First, reliance on an online survey format and non-probability sampling carries a potential risk

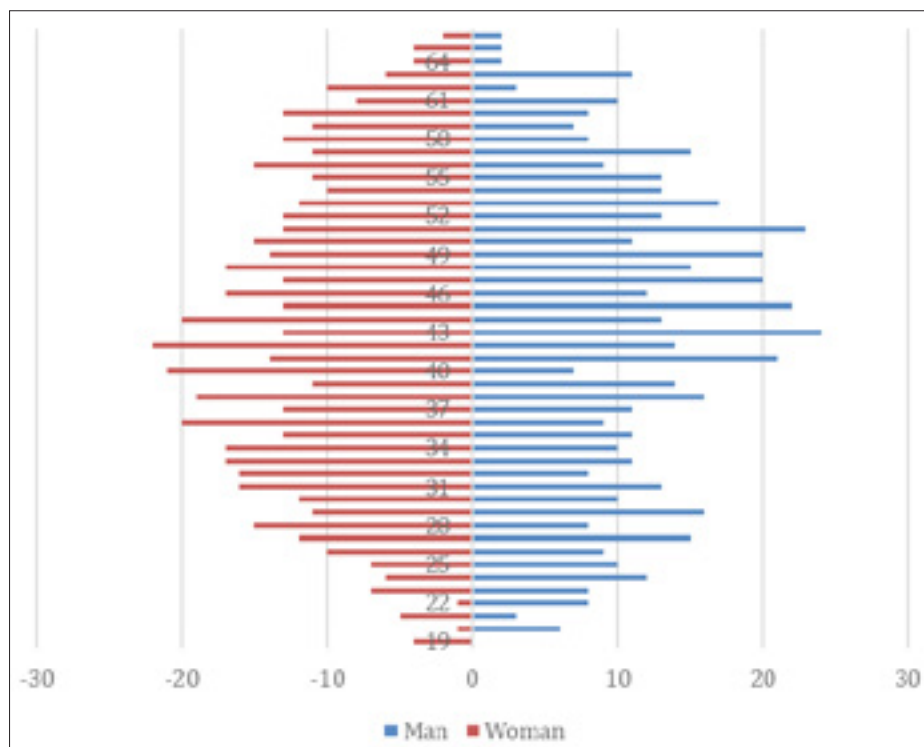


Figure 1. Respondent age histogram

Source: Author's presentation

**Table 1.** Summary Overview of Mean Scores by Demographic and Socio-Economic Categories

|                                            | Total | Average      | Q1          | Q2          | Q3          | Q4          | Q5          | Q6          | Q7          | Q8          | Q9          | Q10         |
|--------------------------------------------|-------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Male                                       | 543   | 42,58        | 4,41        | 3,18        | 4,19        | 1,71        | 3,54        | 3,20        | 3,60        | 2,22        | 3,31        | 4,06        |
| Feminine                                   | 568   | 42,61        | 4,35        | 3,11        | 4,11        | 1,51        | 3,87        | 4,18        | 3,75        | 1,63        | 3,89        | 4,41        |
| <b>The result</b>                          | 1111  | 42,60        | <b>4,38</b> | <b>3,14</b> | <b>4,15</b> | <b>1,61</b> | <b>3,71</b> | <b>3,70</b> | <b>3,68</b> | <b>1,92</b> | <b>3,60</b> | <b>4,24</b> |
| Secondary vocational education - IV degree | 472   | 41,74        | 4,36        | 3,20        | 4,30        | 1,74        | 3,77        | 3,57        | 3,87        | 1,88        | 3,53        | 4,01        |
| Higher professional education - VSS        | 3     | 54,33        | 4,00        | 4,00        | 4,33        | 2,00        | 3,33        | 4,00        | 4,00        | 4,33        | 4,00        | 4,00        |
| Higher professional education - VSS        | 449   | 42,95        | 4,56        | 3,10        | 4,29        | 1,37        | 3,92        | 3,76        | 3,76        | 1,90        | 3,65        | 4,37        |
| Master                                     | 176   | 43,73        | 4,02        | 3,16        | 3,40        | 1,81        | 3,05        | 3,93        | 3,01        | 1,96        | 3,72        | 4,55        |
| Master of Science                          | 5     | 48,00        | 4,60        | 2,00        | 3,40        | 2,20        | 3,40        | 3,40        | 2,80        | 3,20        | 2,80        | 4,40        |
| Doctor of Science                          | 6     | 40,40        | 3,17        | 2,00        | 4,00        | 2,83        | 3,00        | 3,17        | 2,50        | 3,33        | 3,00        | 4,17        |
| <b>The result</b>                          | 1111  | <b>42,60</b> | <b>4,38</b> | <b>3,14</b> | <b>4,15</b> | <b>1,61</b> | <b>3,71</b> | <b>3,70</b> | <b>3,68</b> | <b>1,92</b> | <b>3,60</b> | <b>4,24</b> |
| between 1,000 and 1,500 KM                 | 46    | 32,70        | 3,74        | 2,63        | 3,85        | 1,96        | 4,35        | 3,89        | 3,76        | 2,93        | 2,76        | 4,13        |
| between 1,500 and 2,000 KM                 | 374   | 43,12        | 4,66        | 3,18        | 4,34        | 1,19        | 4,02        | 4,13        | 3,86        | 1,45        | 3,87        | 4,28        |
| between 2,000 and 2,500 KM                 | 266   | 41,80        | 4,69        | 3,56        | 4,41        | 1,41        | 4,28        | 3,65        | 3,90        | 1,60        | 3,67        | 4,24        |
| between 2,500 and 3,000 KM                 | 369   | 43,78        | 3,97        | 2,90        | 3,78        | 2,11        | 2,83        | 3,22        | 3,34        | 2,32        | 3,42        | 4,25        |
| between 3,000 and 3,500 KM                 | 2     | 45,00        | 1,50        | 1,00        | 2,50        | 4,00        | 1,00        | 1,00        | 1,00        | 5,00        | 1,50        | 4,50        |
| between 3,500 and 4,000 KM                 | 9     | 46,67        | 4,56        | 3,33        | 4,44        | 1,33        | 4,56        | 4,56        | 4,11        | 2,89        | 3,33        | 4,00        |
| between 4,000 and 4,500 KM                 | 18    | 40,67        | 4,44        | 2,94        | 4,44        | 1,50        | 4,44        | 4,33        | 3,83        | 2,83        | 3,56        | 4,00        |
| between 4,500 and 5,000 KM                 | 9     | 39,56        | 4,22        | 2,89        | 4,44        | 1,78        | 4,22        | 4,11        | 3,78        | 3,22        | 3,33        | 4,11        |
| more than 6,000 KM                         | 10    | 47,50        | 4,70        | 3,20        | 4,60        | 1,30        | 4,70        | 4,60        | 3,50        | 2,60        | 3,70        | 4,00        |
| X                                          | 8     | 44,00        | 3,63        | 2,75        | 3,50        | 2,63        | 3,13        | 3,25        | 2,88        | 3,50        | 3,25        | 4,00        |
| <b>The result</b>                          | 1111  | 42,60        | 4,38        | 3,14        | 4,15        | 1,61        | 3,71        | 3,70        | 3,68        | <b>1,92</b> | <b>3,60</b> | <b>4,24</b> |
| RS                                         | 606   | 43,21        | 4,31        | 3,15        | 4,06        | 1,75        | 3,78        | 3,55        | 3,54        | 2,10        | 3,46        | 4,21        |
| FBIH                                       | 505   | 41,87        | 4,47        | 3,14        | 4,25        | 1,44        | 3,62        | 3,88        | 3,84        | 1,69        | 3,78        | 4,28        |
| <b>The result</b>                          | 1111  | 42,60        | 4,38        | 3,14        | 4,15        | 1,61        | 3,71        | 3,70        | 3,68        | 1,92        | 3,60        | 4,24        |

**Source:** Author's calculation

**Note / Legend for Questionnaire Items (Q1–Q10):**

Q1 - Overall support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union (Overall EU Support)

Q2 - Expectation of improved household economic standard upon EU membership (Economic Expectations)

Q3 - Perception of EU accession as a mechanism to combat corruption and strengthen the rule of law (Rule of Law & Anti-Corruption)

Q4 - Concern that EU membership would threaten national identity and cultural diversity (Identity Threat Concern)

Q5 - Overall support for Bosnia and Herzegovina joining the NATO alliance (Overall NATO Support)

Q6 - Perception of NATO membership as a reliable guarantee for long-term peace and stability (NATO as Peace Guarantor)

Q7 - Necessity of NATO membership to withstand external security challenges (NATO External Security)

Q8 - Perception of the Russian Federation as a positive factor for security and stability (Russia Positive Security Factor)

Q9 - Belief that EU and NATO integration processes are inseparable and must go "hand in hand" (EU/NATO Complementarity)

Q10 - Self-assessed level of information awareness regarding Euro-Atlantic integration steps and implications (Perceived Information Awareness)

of self-selection bias, as individuals with stronger views or higher digital literacy may have been more inclined to participate. Second, given the sensitive political nature of Euro-Atlantic integration and geopolitical security perceptions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the findings may be subject to social desirability bias, in which some respondents provide answers aligned with perceived normative expectations rather than their private convictions. The average age of those surveyed stands at 42.6 years, as visualized in the age distribution histogram (Figure 1).

From a geographic perspective, the sample is weighted toward Republika Srpska (54.5%), with the remaining 45.5% representing the Federation of BiH. Regarding educational background, the majority of participants hold either secondary vocational qualifications (42%) or higher education degrees (40%).

The results indicate an exceptionally high general support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union, with an overall average score of 4.38. Analysis by entity shows slightly higher support in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (4.47) compared to the Republika Srpska (4.31). Interestingly, employees in large companies express the highest level of support (4.61). Although support is high, a significantly higher number of extremely negative ratings (score 1) was recorded in the Republika Srpska compared to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, indicating the presence of polarization.

Regarding the expectation of improvement in the economic standard of households after joining the EU, respondents expressed moderate optimism with an average score of 3.14. There are no significant differences between the entities on this issue (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 3.14; Republika Srpska 3.15). Respondents with higher professional diplomas show the greatest economic optimism (4.00), while those with doctorates are more skeptical (2.00).

Trust in European mechanisms as a cure for corruption and a means of strengthening the rule of law is extremely high, with an average score of 4.15. While this feeling is particularly strong in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (4.25), it remains strong in the Republika Srpska (4.06). In contrast, concern that EU membership could threaten national identity or cultural diversity appears negligible, averaging only 1.61. This lack of anxiety is most pronounced among women (1.51) and residents of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1.44).

Support for NATO integration, at 3.71, lags the enthusiasm shown for the European Union. Here, a significant gender divide emerges - women are significantly more supportive of joining the alliance (3.87) than men (3.54). This difference is even more pronounced regarding NATO's role as a guarantor of peace; female respondents gave

this a high score of 4.18, while their male counterparts remained much more skeptical at 3.20.

The perception of Russia's role in regional stability is predominantly negative, with an overall score of only 1.92. Although respondents from Republika Srpska rate Moscow's influence somewhat more favorably (2.10) than those in the Federation (1.69), the data indicate a widespread lack of trust. Interestingly, men tend to view Russia in a somewhat more positive light (2.22) compared to the very low score given by women (1.63).

The prevailing opinion among participants is that EU and NATO integrations are complementary processes that should go "hand in hand" (3.60), a view more often held by women (3.89) than men (3.31). Finally, when it comes to self-assessment of knowledge about these processes, BiH citizens appear quite confident, with an average information score of 4.24. This feeling of being well informed is most prevalent among those with a master's degree (4.55), with women (4.41) generally expressing greater confidence in their understanding of the subject than men (4.06).

Analysis of the covariance matrix, where the values range from -1 to 1, indicates a strong inverse relationship between the perception of Russia as a security factor and support for integration into NATO ( $\text{cov} = -0.71$ ), which confirms the sharp polarization of security paradigms in the minds of respondents. In order to further examine the relationships between these variables, we constructed a covariance matrix (see Figure 3). This analysis highlights the internal consistency of the responses, particularly highlighting the strong variance in Q5 and Q6, which is consistent with observations of entity-based differences.

**Table 2.** Covariance Matrix

|     | Q1     | Q2     | Q3     | Q4     | Q5     | Q6     | Q7     | Q8     | Q9    | Q10   |
|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| Q1  | 0.871  |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |       |
| Q2  | 0.374  | 0.968  |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |       |
| Q3  | 0.279  | 0.126  | 0.795  |        |        |        |        |        |       |       |
| Q4  | -0.567 | -0.418 | -0.422 | 1.273  |        |        |        |        |       |       |
| Q5  | 0.397  | 0.093  | 0.588  | -0.369 | 1.696  |        |        |        |       |       |
| Q6  | 0.284  | -0.090 | 0.492  | -0.593 | 0.592  | 1.752  |        |        |       |       |
| Q7  | 0.243  | -0.051 | 0.523  | -0.260 | 0.385  | 0.813  | 1.086  |        |       |       |
| Q8  | -0.549 | -0.399 | -0.379 | 0.964  | -0.471 | -0.712 | -0.314 | 1.673  |       |       |
| Q9  | 0.316  | 0.317  | 0.563  | -0.568 | 0.327  | 0.820  | 0.343  | -0.724 | 1.236 |       |
| Q10 | 0.028  | 0.184  | -0.071 | -0.097 | -0.201 | 0.065  | 0.019  | -0.079 | 0.043 | 0.397 |

**Source** - Author's calculation

Values on the diagonal (e.g., 1.752 for Q6 or 1.695 for Q5) represent the variance of each question. Security questions (Q5, Q6, Q8) have the highest variances (above 1.6). This means that answers to these questions are the most "dispersed"-citizens hold very different, often extreme opinions about NATO and Russia.

Information awareness (Q10) has the smallest variance (0.397), suggesting that respondents are uniform in assessing their own knowledge.

There is a strong positive covariance between general EU support (Q1) and economic expectations (Q2) (0.37), as well as the rule of law (Q3) (0.27). This confirms that respondents who support the EU do so because they believe in economic improvement and order.

The exceptionally high covariance between Q6 (NATO as a peace guarantor) and Q7 (NATO against threats) (0.81) indicates that respondents view these two categories as identical. Also, the link between NATO (Q5) and the rule of law (Q3) (0.58) is stronger than the link between NATO and the economy. This points to the conclusion that NATO is perceived as a “guardian of the system” rather than just a military force.

The identity question (Q4) has a markedly negative covariance with support for the EU (-0.56) and NATO (-0.36). The greater the fear of losing identity, the less is the support for integration.

Russia (Q8) shows the strongest negative relationship with NATO (Q6:-0.71) and the EU (Q1:-0.54). These are “opposing poles” in the respondents’ minds-it is impossible to simultaneously rate Russia highly as a positive factor and support Euro-Atlantic integration.

The high covariance between the EU (Q1) and the rule of law (Q3) of 0.27 directly confirms the thesis that the state governed by the rule of law is the main motive for integration.

The covariance between Q9 and NATO peace guarantee (Q6) is very high (0.81). Those who believe the processes go “hand in hand” likely do so for security reasons.

Analysis shows a particularly strong covariance between the perception of EU/NATO synergy (Q9) and NATO’s role as a peace guarantee (Q6), reaching 0.81. This suggests that for many respondents, the idea that these two integration processes must go ‘hand in hand’ is rooted in a fundamental need for long-term security. We believe this link highlights that economic expectations are rarely isolated from broader stability concerns. To provide a clearer picture of these relationships, we have presented the full correlation results in Figure 4.

**Table 3.** Correlation Matrix

|     | Q1    | Q2    | Q3    | Q4    | Q5    | Q6    | Q7    | Q8   | Q9   | Q10 |
|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|-----|
| Q1  | 1     |       |       |       |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| Q2  | 0.41  | 1     |       |       |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| Q3  | 0.34  | 0.14  | 1     |       |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| Q4  | -0.54 | -0.38 | -0.42 | 1     |       |       |       |      |      |     |
| Q5  | 0.33  | 0.07  | 0.51  | -0.25 | 1     |       |       |      |      |     |
| Q6  | 0.23  | -0.07 | 0.42  | -0.4  | 0.34  | 1     |       |      |      |     |
| Q7  | 0.25  | -0.05 | 0.56  | -0.22 | 0.28  | 0.59  | 1     |      |      |     |
| Q8  | -0.45 | -0.31 | -0.33 | 0.66  | -0.28 | -0.42 | -0.23 | 1    |      |     |
| Q9  | 0.3   | 0.29  | 0.57  | -0.45 | 0.23  | 0.56  | 0.3   | -0.5 | 1    |     |
| Q10 | 0.05  | 0.3   | -0.13 | -0.14 | -0.25 | 0.08  | 0.03  | -0.1 | 0.06 | 1   |

**Source** - Author's calculation

Interpretation of key coefficients in the correlation matrix, where values range from -1 (perfect negative correlation) to 1 (perfect positive correlation), shows a strong link between the fear of losing identity and affinity toward Russia (Q4 and Q8 - 0.66). This is the strongest positive correlation in the research outside of directly related questions. It indicates that respondents who fear for national identity see Russia as a protective factor or an alternative to Western integration.

The research shows a moderately strong correlation proving that respondents do not see NATO only as a military force but link it to institutional order (rule of law) (Q5 and Q3 - 0.51). Furthermore, there is a clear negative correlation showing antagonism between the EU and loss of identity (Q1 and Q4: -0.54). The higher the support for the European Union, the lower the fear of losing identity, supporting the conclusion that EU integration supporters are culturally more open.

The research confirms that peace and stability in the minds of citizens are directly linked to the alliance's ability to respond to external threats (Q6 and Q7 - 0.59). Interestingly, awareness has weak correlations with attitudes (e.g., with Q1 it is only 0.05). This means that support for or opposition to integration does not necessarily depend on how much respondents know (or think they know), but rather on value-based and economic attitudes.

Analyses of correlations and matrices of variances and covariances provide a basis for confirming the hypotheses. The main hypothesis (H0) is confirmed by the negative mean correlation between support for integration and fear of loss of identity ( $r = -0.54$ ), which indicates that cultural fears, along with belonging to an entity, are strongly associated with resistance to the Euro-Atlantic path. The auxiliary hypothesis H1 is further strengthened by the moderate correlation between general support for the EU and expectations regarding the rule of law ( $r = 0.34$ ), which is significantly higher than the correlation with economic expectations. This result confirms that citizens primarily perceive integration as a regulatory framework. Confirmation of the H2 hypothesis about gender language is statistically visible through the high variance in answers to questions related to NATO, where the correlation between NATO integration and long-term peace ( $r = 0.34$ ) gains strength exclusively in the female segment of the sample. Finally, the confirmation of hypothesis H3 is reflected in the strongest negative correlation in the entire research - that between the perception of Russia as a security factor and NATO's peace guarantees ( $r = -0.71$ ). Such a high correlation coefficient indicates a strong inverse linear association, suggesting that these security concepts are perceived as mutually exclusive poles in the minds of the respondents, thus providing empirical validation of the research.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of the collected data confirms strong general support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union, with an overall average score of 4.38. Such a high level of agreement indicates that the European path represents a dominant social aspiration. However, a closer look at the entity structure reveals nuances - respondents from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina express enthusiasm with a score of 4.47, while support in the Republika Srpska is somewhat lower, but remains at a high 4.31. The emergence of extreme views is particularly significant in the Republika Srpska, where a higher number of "1" ratings were recorded compared

to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ratio 15:2), which indicates the existence of a vocal, albeit minority, opposition to integration.

Expectations regarding economic standards yield the most sober results. The mean score of 3.14 suggests that citizens do not harbor unrealistic illusions about rapid wealth accumulation. The identified data in both entities are almost identical (FBiH 3.14; RS 3.15), pointing to a shared economic reality. It is indicative that respondents with the highest level of education (PhD) give the lowest rating to this segment (2.00), leading to the conclusion that the more educated portion of the population more clearly perceives the economic challenges of transition.

In contrast to moderate economic expectations, trust in European mechanisms for combating corruption and strengthening the rule of law is exceptionally high (4.15). This confirms the auxiliary hypothesis H1, suggesting that citizens do not see the EU primarily as a source of funds, but rather as an instrument for establishing order and legal certainty. The data reveals that employees in big companies are the most optimistic (4.58), which probably points to their need for market stability above all else. What is more striking is that the fear of national erosion is practically absent (1.61), even among respondents in Republika Srpska (1.75). These results essentially pull the rug out from under political rhetoric that relies on the idea of cultural endangerment.

Regarding the NATO alliance, the results show a lower level of support (3.71) compared to the European Union. Although entity differences are present, support in Republika Srpska (3.78) is surprisingly high relative to official rhetoric. The most important finding of the research is the gender differentiation regarding security, which proves the auxiliary hypothesis H2. Women express significantly greater trust in NATO as a guarantor of long-term peace (4.18) compared to men (3.20). This difference of nearly one full point indicates that the female portion of the population perceives security integration through the prism of stability, while men are more susceptible to historical narratives.

The perception of the Russian Federation as a positive security factor received the lowest rating (1.92), confirming the auxiliary hypothesis H3. Even in Republika Srpska (2.10), citizens do not see Moscow as a factor of stability. The question regarding the inseparability of the EU and NATO paths (3.60) confirms that a significant portion of the population sees these processes as two sides of the same coin, with women again leading in this view (3.89).

Finally, the high self-assessment of information awareness (4.24) suggests that citizens' attitudes are not a matter of chance but of formed opinions. The alignment of high awareness with EU support suggests that the integration process is backed by a form of 'conscious endorsement'-one that appears capable of weathering the volatility of daily political shifts.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides a deep dive into how people in Bosnia and Herzegovina feel about Euro-Atlantic integration, specifically analyzing these views during a period of intense geopolitical change and domestic friction. The paper has fully addressed the established research questions, and the analysis of the collected data has confirmed the strategic commitment of citizens to integration processes. The main hypothesis (H0) is confirmed - high general support for the EU was identified, albeit with clear entity po-

larization, while support for NATO is directly linked to the gender of all respondents. Furthermore, the auxiliary hypotheses were also confirmed. Citizens primarily expect the strengthening of the rule of law (4.15), while expectations regarding the immediate economic improvement for households stayed at a moderate level (3.14). There is a significant gap in the perception of NATO between genders, with women attributing considerably greater importance to the Alliance as a guarantor of peace. The perception of Russia as a positive security factor is low (1.92), with a statistically visible, yet still low, preference in Republika Srpska (2.10).

The primary finding of the survey confirms the existence of strong, although not unconditional, support for the path towards the European Union. The high average score of 4.38 clearly indicates that the idea of European integration in BiH still represents a rare factor of social cohesion, despite the pronounced entity polarization in extreme positions.

The analysis showed that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate a high level of rationality and maturity in their assessments. Their support for the European Union is not driven by unrealistic hopes of quick economic growth, as their expectations regarding improvements in living standards remain moderate. Instead, within the European framework, people seek regulatory stability. The fight against corruption and the establishment of the rule of law is seen as important benefits, indicating that the public mainly views the EU as a way to correct domestic institutional shortcomings.

NATO integration remains a divisive issue, but with unexpected nuances that previous research has not fully explained. The existing gender gap, where women show significantly more trust in the Alliance's stabilizing role, suggests that perceptions of security in BiH are complex. While resistance in Republika Srpska is apparent through more negative assessments, the average results indicate that the idea of collective security still holds some ground, beyond the daily political narratives of complete rejection.

Of particular importance is the perception of the Russian Federation; its influence as a security factor is rated very low across the country. Even support for Russia in Republika Srpska does not exceed the neutral point on the scale (3.00), which clearly challenges the idea of a strong Russian influence on public opinion. Citizens recognize their geographic and political ties to Europe, further confirmed by their high awareness of integration processes.

This study was designed to capture an accurate, current snapshot of public sentiment as of November 2025. Using a graded Likert scale allowed me to uncover subtle layers of support and hesitation about Euro-Atlantic integration-nuances that simple 'yes/no' surveys usually miss. However, the research has its limits - it mainly focuses on perceptions and declared attitudes, with limited analysis of specific political decisions or institutional dynamics shaping these views. While statistically reliable, the sample offers only a temporary picture, and we cannot draw definitive conclusions about long-term trends without further studies overtime.

There is a strong case for exploring how stalled candidate status could increase Euroscepticism across the country. Addressing this would require combining time-series data with a more detailed qualitative look at how political leaders and the media shape the narrative. Additionally, tools like focus groups could be valuable in exploring the roots of the gender gap in attitudes toward NATO and contrasting perspectives

on Russia and the West in the two entities. It is also important to assess how specific foreign investments and local EU programs directly influence public opinion on the ground.

From a policy standpoint, these findings suggest that reform efforts should prioritize the judicial and administrative sectors. Citizens see the real value of integration mainly through promises of a stronger rule of law, better administrative efficiency, and an effective fight against corruption. Supporting all three hypotheses, the study indicates that people view Euro-Atlantic institutions less as sources of financial aid and more as frameworks for organized institutions.

Every study has its limits, and this one is no different. By focusing on current perceptions rather than long-term socioeconomic trends, I have set the stage for future research to track how support for integration may grow or diminish over time.

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