

Working paper



D6.4: Trust, Social Cohesion, and EU Democracy Promotion in Bosnia and Herzegovina



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WORKING PAPER

Trust, Social Cohesion, and EU Democracy Promotion in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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SUMMARY

This paper explores trust, social cohesion, and the European Union's promotion of democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines survey-vignette data (n = 560) collected in Sarajevo and Tuzla during late 2024 and early 2025 with a project process tracing analysis of two EU-supported democracy initiatives. Results show consistently low levels of institutional (vertical) trust, while interpersonal (horizontal) trust is comparatively higher, pointing to fragile social cohesion and limited democratic resilience. Despite strong public support for EU integration, citizens remain skeptical about the effectiveness and fairness of EU-funded projects, often perceiving elite capture and weak local ownership. The study suggests that EU democracy promotion would benefit from increased bottom-up engagement, greater transparency, and ongoing efforts to rebuild social trust, all of which are essential to consolidating democracy.



1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The complex political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina was fundamentally shaped by the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995, which successfully marked the end of the four-year war. The Constitution, which is part of the Agreement (Annex 4 of the General Framework Agreement for Peace), institutionalized ethno-national divisions and created a highly fragmented institutional structure across multiple levels of governance. This constitutional arrangement has maintained a political *status quo* over the past three decades, characterized by limited institutional strengthening and minimal progress towards European integration reforms. The instituted political consociational model (Lijphart, 1977), rooted in ethno-territorial divisions, impedes the country's overall development and perpetuates political instability. In the described context, establishing the rule of law remains limited. At the same time, issues such as widespread corruption, party-based clientelism, and electoral manipulation persist (Mishkova et al., 2024), making Bosnia and Herzegovina a hybrid regime. These challenges further hinder the implementation of comprehensive economic reforms, resulting in very low economic activity, high unemployment rates, and pervasive poverty (Hasanović et al., 2024; Repovac Nikšić et al., 2022). The complex political (hybrid) framework obstructs reform efforts and undermines the independence of media, civil society organizations, and progressive advocacy groups seeking change. Consequently, public trust in institutions has declined, social cohesion has weakened, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness has emerged. Over the past 10 years, these factors have worsened, leading to significant emigration, particularly among youth.

Over the past three decades, various initiatives and citizen protests have sought to address the problems mentioned above (Kurtović, 2018; Kurtović & Hromadžić, 2017). The emergence of citizens' plenums from demonstrations in 2014 marked a rare yet highly significant form of civic mobilization across the country, particularly in the urban areas of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of its two entities.¹ These plenums represented the first instances of cross-ethnic mobilization, emphasizing widespread dissatisfaction with the political situation and socio-economic problems. During these assemblies, participants engaged in a deliberative process, advocating for greater transparency, government

¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina is composed of two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, and the Brčko District.

accountability, and social justice for all societal groups (Mujkić, 2016). Sadly, these plenums offered only a short-term sense of hope for developing solidarity and failed to produce a lasting impact. After the decline of this social movement, the following fourteen years have been characterized by demotivation, declining trust in institutions, the reinforcement and consolidation of ethnic leaders and political elites, and the deterioration of social cohesion (Mujkić, 2016). All these trends have contributed to a troubling pattern of increased emigration, including entire families and younger populations (Pejanović & Husić-Mehmedović, 2025), leading to an irreversible erosion of the social fabric and social capital.

The official commitment to join the European Union was reaffirmed as early as 2000. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina made only limited reforms, it gained conditional candidate status by the end of 2022. This was partly due to some progress in EU reform implementation and mainly influenced by the changing complex geopolitical landscape, shaped by the aggression against Ukraine, the trend of democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2020; Kapidžić, 2020a; Kapidžić, 2020b), and the increase in malign influences in the region (Kapidžić et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the European Union's agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina appears limited in its contribution to democratic consolidation and the implementation of reforms. The opening of accession negotiations is currently paused. Political instability (European Commission Progress Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023, 2024), ongoing threats of secession by the authorities of Republika Srpska (the other entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina), alongside persistent unemployment and inflation, have sparked open debates on the effectiveness of European projects and engagement. Despite these difficulties, public support for EU integration remains overwhelmingly high nationwide (especially in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), with the European Union still seen as the most promising partner for the future.

This paper discusses trust, social cohesion, and EU democracy promotion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on empirical findings from a survey conducted in late 2024 and early 2025 in the major cities of Sarajevo and Tuzla, and on an analysis (project-tracing) of the implementation of EU projects linked to democracy promotion and consolidation. This study is part of the broader RE-ENGAGE project, supported by the Horizon Europe Program. The survey examines citizens' trust levels, social cohesion, and perceptions of the European Union's engagement and prospects for integration. In contrast, the project-tracing analysis examines the impact and effectiveness of two EU projects implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By

analyzing the data collected, the paper aims to identify potential ways to support citizen mobilization, rebuild trust, strengthen solidarity, improve overall conditions in the country, and positively influence political elites, particularly in advancing the country's EU accession process.

The paper starts with an introductory section that outlines the historical and political background of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 to the present day. It emphasizes the country's political system and its journey towards European integration. The following section presents the theoretical framework for studying social capital and trust, based on a broader discussion of social cohesion and democratic values. This is followed by a description of the research methodology used during fieldwork in Sarajevo and Tuzla, including project-tracing qualitative research, and an analysis of the results.

The concluding remarks pose questions about the future of social cohesion as a means of citizens' engagement and mobilization, and about the ongoing process of European integration, and suggest potential ways to support it.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

American political scientist Robert Putnam defined the theory of social capital as “shared norms and networks that improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”, based on strong traditions of civic engagement (voluntary associations, trust, reciprocity, cooperation) as outlined in his seminal work “Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy” (1993). Putnam employs the concept of social capital as a primary explanation for evaluating how effectively institutions perform. In this paper, we use Putnam's theory to analyze indices measuring citizens' trust in individuals, political figures, the media, and institutions. It also allows an exploration of public perceptions of the European Union's effectiveness in fostering democratic values and implementing reforms. This approach emphasizes the importance of social capital in establishing institutional legitimacy and public confidence in democratic societies (Putnam, 1993). It provides a compelling perspective for analyzing empirical findings from field research in Sarajevo and Tuzla, conducted through surveys. Putnam's distinction between “bonding” social capital as “inward-looking, strengthening exclusive groups” and “bridging” social capital as “outward-looking, connecting diverse people and fostering inclusiveness,” elaborated in his book “Bowling Alone:

The Collapse and Revival of American Community” (2000), based on the view that the decline of social capital threatens democracy and community, was also crucial in interpreting the data. These Putnam’s concepts provided an understanding of the decline in social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighting societal distrust, near non-existent trust in institutions, and rising skepticism regarding the effectiveness of project implementation and reform initiatives aligned with the European Union’s agenda. Putnam’s theory that “social capital is an indicator of democratic health” (Putnam, 2000) serves as an interpretive framework for discussing the country’s socio-political challenges.

For this paper, both the background literature and the theoretical framework developed within the RE-ENGAGE Horizon Program are applied. The analysis concentrates on the concept of hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, conceptualized as a new form of governance that differs from the traditional hybrid regimes, which were defined by a linear transition towards consolidated democracy (Boas, Giske & Rieker, 2024).

The political systems in the Western Balkans are characterized by a persistent coexistence and dynamic of formal democratic institutions with informal networks rooted in patronage and neopatrimonial practices (Mishkova et al., 2024). Although the formal adoption of democratic mechanisms and partial implementation of progressive reforms provide some legitimacy, power always remains partly behind the scenes within elite-driven personal networks that control resources and uphold regime stability. The cyclical pattern of limited reforms and episodes of authoritarian strengthening allows these regimes to sustain a hybrid state, neither fully democratic nor autocratic. This is what is called a hybrid political *status quo*.

The focus of this research is on the persistence of hybrid regimes, which generates deficits in both vertical trust, which refers to confidence in institutions and leaders, and horizontal trust, indicating trust among citizens. Low vertical trust weakens the legitimacy of public institutions, while fragile horizontal trust undermines social cohesion and collective action. Following Stollenwerk, Börzel, and Risse (2021), democratic resilience requires high levels of both; where they are absent, the social fabric becomes porous to foreign interference. Trust deficits contribute to societal fragmentation and polarization, weaken the motivation for collective action, and help embed informal governance. External authoritarian actors, such as Russia and China, intensify this hybridity by providing material and other forms of support to political elites. Traditional models of EU democracy promotion – linkage, leverage, and governance – have each contributed to partial successes but have failed to fully

address the complex reality of hybrid regimes. Present European Union enlargement strategies, which have focused on legalistic and conditional reform approaches, seem to reinforce ruling elites without resulting in democratic reforms.

3. METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

Data collection started on November 14, 2024, and took place in two urban centers: Sarajevo and Tuzla. Sarajevo, the capital and central hub of B&H in terms of politics, administration, and the economy, was chosen to reflect attitudes shaped by its proximity to government agencies, international bodies, and EU offices. Tuzla, one of the largest urban and industrial areas outside the capital, was included as a 'secondary city'. Tuzla is its own metropole – a periphery to the capital – geographically and culturally distinct from Sarajevo. Tuzla is known for its tradition of labour activism and civic engagement, and its inclusion offers a contrasting urban perspective to minimize bias towards the capital. The survey involved 560 respondents in total (Sarajevo n = 360; Tuzla n = 200), allowing for comparisons between the capital and the secondary city setting in evaluating trust, social cohesion, and perceptions of external actors.

The survey team included 11 interviewers, all based in Sarajevo, with five also assigned to Tuzla. Sampling locations consisted of 10 sites in Sarajevo and 10 in Tuzla, selected randomly using GIS boundary data and randomized through the R analysis tool. Some sites (four in Sarajevo and six in Tuzla) were found to be sparsely populated and were replaced using local knowledge to ensure feasibility while keeping the sample representative. Interviews were conducted face-to-face using a structured questionnaire. A total of 560 respondents participated: 360 in Sarajevo and 200 in Tuzla. The survey is part of the project exploring citizens' trust and perceptions of political institutions, media habits, EU engagement, external actors, and social trust within communities. It also examines the relationship between vertical trust (trust in authorities and institutions) and horizontal trust (trust among peers, kin, and civil society). These insights help assess B&H society's resilience to hybrid threats and citizens' views on ongoing EU engagement. The vignette section presented respondents with a fictional but realistic scenario describing an economic crisis in B&H, involving trade deficits, inflation, and the risk of state default. Respondents were informed that several actors (the EU, Russia, China, and Türkiye) offered rescue packages to help B&H overcome the crisis. This setup allows for assessing how citizens perceive the credibility and influence of

different geopolitical actors. The vignettes provide insight into the relative appeal of democratic versus non-democratic interventions during a crisis. The questionnaire and vignettes were adapted to the local context to ensure cultural and political relevance (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This micro-quantitative, survey-based portion of RE-ENGAGE's research contributes a bottom-up perspective, assessing citizens' views on the actors, targets, and tools of external democracy promotion and thereby how they understand the quality and depth (or the lack of) social cohesion (Giske et al. 2024).

3.2 Sampling and Recruitment

A quota sampling method was used, stratified by gender, age (18–29, 30–54, and 55+), and education level (primary or below, secondary/vocational, higher education). Because some subgroups were oversampled, post-stratification weights were applied using SPSS (version 27.0). Population benchmarks for weighting were based on the latest B&H census data (2013). To reduce potential bias from interviewers or locations, quotas were randomly assigned to interviewers and sites, preventing any systematic link between a particular interviewer and a demographic subgroup. Respondents needed to be citizens of B&H (passport holders). While both cities are urban centers, the inclusion of Sarajevo and Tuzla helps balance capital-city bias by incorporating perspectives from a secondary metropolitan area. Raw census data used for weighting were collected to form the quota strata (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025).

3.3 CAPI Implementation

Data were collected using CAPI technology. The questionnaire was programmed in CSPro 8.0.1 and administered on Android tablets via CSEntry 8.0.1. Sample data were preloaded into the system, allowing interviewers to navigate to designated sites using Google Maps and verify respondent eligibility through an integrated control menu. Interviews were limited to within a 500-meter radius of the assigned location. CAPI featured built-in quota checks, GPS tracking, and metadata on interview duration to ensure data quality. Data were stored offline in encrypted databases and later securely uploaded to a designated Dropbox server via CSEntry (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). For the vignette module, three different presentation orders of the actors were pre-assigned and randomly chosen during interviews to reduce order bias (favoring the first or last actor presented).

3.4 Data Analysis

All statistical analyses for the B&H survey and vignette modules were primarily performed in R (version 4.4.2), using weighted estimations to ensure representativeness. Regression models were used to identify predictors of trust, satisfaction, and attitudes toward external actors: the EU, Russia, China, and Türkiye. Correlation analyses examined the relationships between general trust, government satisfaction, and the dimensions of horizontal and vertical trust. Cluster and factor analyses uncovered underlying patterns in geopolitical orientations, while a variety of visual analytical methods (including weighted bar charts, radar plots, heatmaps, and cluster visualizations) were employed to clearly illustrate group differences and trends. All scripts were reproducible, fully annotated, and designed to maintain transparency of data handling, from cleaning and recoding (NA handling, re-weighting) to modelling and visualization.

3.5 Project Tracing Component

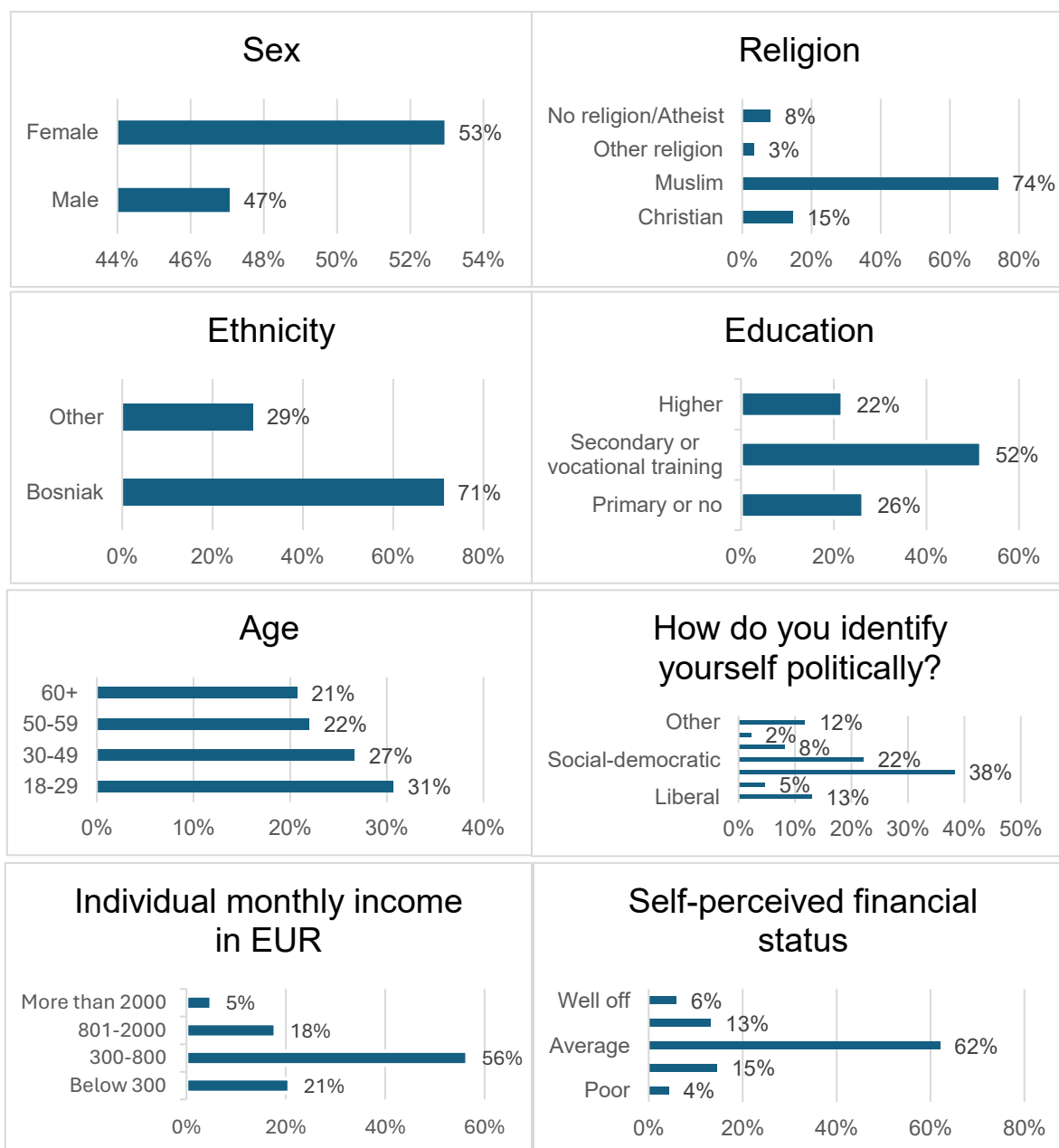
In addition to the quantitative survey and vignette analysis, the study incorporated a project tracing component to examine how EU engagement unfolds in practice in B&H.

This qualitative strand followed best practices in process tracing methodology, applying diagnostic tests for causal inference and data triangulation techniques (Mahoney 2012; Waldner 2015; Giske et al. 2024). Two EU-supported interventions were selected for in-depth analysis, both categorized under democracy assistance. The selection was guided by their relative scale of EU funding and their relevance to institutional and societal democratization. The first project focused on youth and media, aiming to foster independent journalism and civic engagement by connecting young citizens with media initiatives. The second targeted human rights protection for persons deprived of liberty, enhancing institutional capacities through training, information exchange, and preventive monitoring mechanisms to reduce impunity and support reintegration after release. These cases reflect the EU's broader democracy promotion strategy in the Western Balkans, which combines support for institutional reforms with efforts to empower civil society and independent media (Buras et al. 2024). The tracing process involved identifying key stakeholders - financiers, implementing partners, and local beneficiaries - and conducting "life history" interviews to reconstruct each project's trajectory, challenges, and impact. Subsequently, two focus groups were organized with participants from all three stakeholder categories to discuss lessons learned,

tensions, and achievements. In total, 19 participants took part in the qualitative phase (11 in individual interviews and 8 in focus groups). Qualitative data were analyzed using Taguette software, applying thematic coding to extract recurring patterns related to EU engagement, accountability, and local ownership.

4. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION, SOCIAL TRUST, AND COHESION

4.1 Demographic characteristics



The gender distribution in the B&H sample closely mirrors the national population (2013 population census in Bosnia and Herzegovina), albeit with a slightly higher percentage of females. The age spectrum encompasses all adult groups, and respondents are citizens of B&H, with a small fraction holding dual citizenship. Educational backgrounds span from no formal education to postgraduate degrees, though most have completed secondary or vocational schooling. Ethnically, the sample is predominantly Bosniak, reflecting the demographic patterns of Sarajevo and Tuzla, with no representation from Republika Srpska. Religiously, the majority identify as Muslim; economically, most participants view their income as average; and, politically, the majority identify as Moderate. Demographic traits are broadly similar between Sarajevo and Tuzla.

4.2 Trust

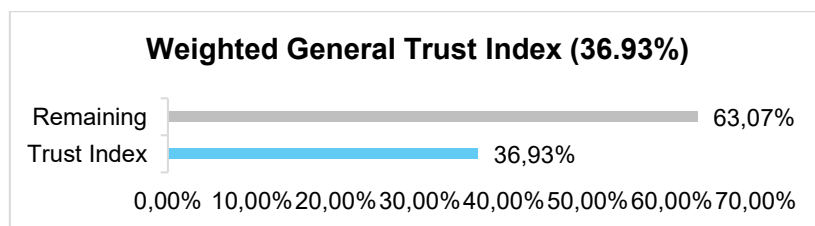


Figure 1. Weighted General Trust Index

The Weighted General Trust Index was computed by averaging the ten recoded trust responses for each participant. The weighted overall trust index of 36.9% indicates that, on average, respondents express relatively low levels of trust across the surveyed social and institutional dimensions. In other words, roughly one in three individuals demonstrates consistent trust in key actors or systems, while two-thirds remain neutral or distrustful. This trust index suggests that B&H's social cohesion remains fragile. In the post-war context of B&H, where the legacy of conflict compromises trust, such findings are to be expected. However, the conflict legacy does not fully explain the persistence of low general trust three decades later.

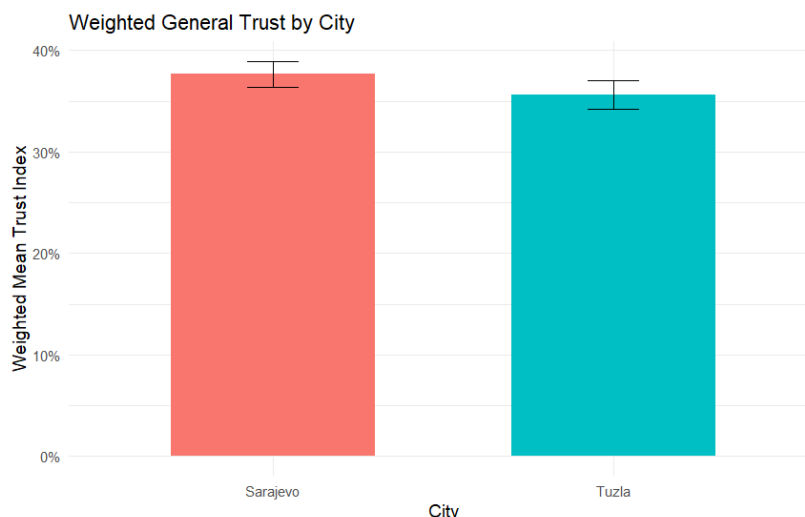


Figure 2. Weighted General Trust by City

Weighted mean levels of general trust among respondents from Sarajevo and Tuzla. Sarajevo shows a slightly higher trust index ($M = 0.38$) than Tuzla ($M = 0.36$), but the difference is not statistically significant ($t(558) = -1.09, p = .28$). In other words, once post-stratification weights were applied, general trust did not differ meaningfully between the two urban contexts. This suggests that trust erosion could be a phenomenon that extends beyond local-specific boundaries and beyond the direct effects of the war, as the two cities experienced different levels of exposure to violence.

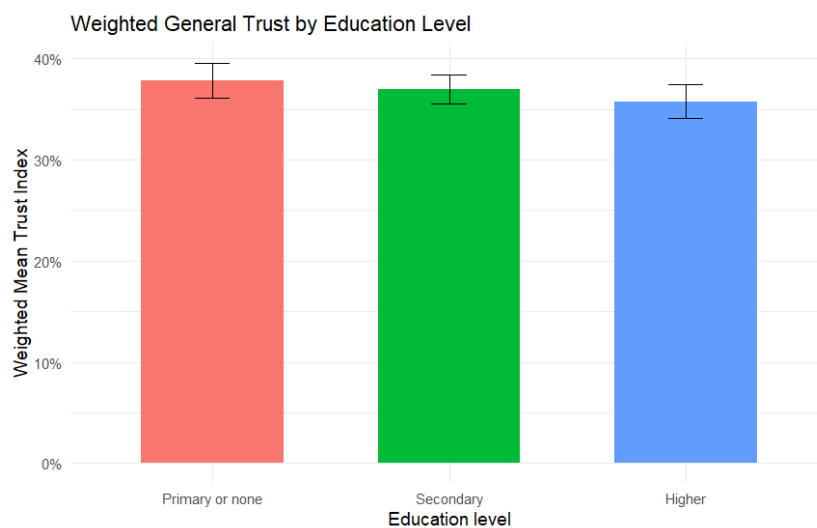


Figure 3. Weighted General Trust by Education Level

Although trust tends to decline slightly with increasing education, the differences are not statistically significant (all $p > .05$). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error. A weighted linear regression was conducted to examine whether education level predicted general trust. The model indicated no significant effect of education on trust, $F(2, 557) \approx 0.46, p = .63$. Respondents with primary or no education ($M = 0.38, SE = 0.02$) reported slightly higher trust than those with secondary ($M = 0.37, SE = 0.02$) or higher education ($M = 0.36, SE = 0.02$). Still, these differences were small and not statistically meaningful. The absence of education effects implies that social trust is not confined to or dependent on educational attainment.

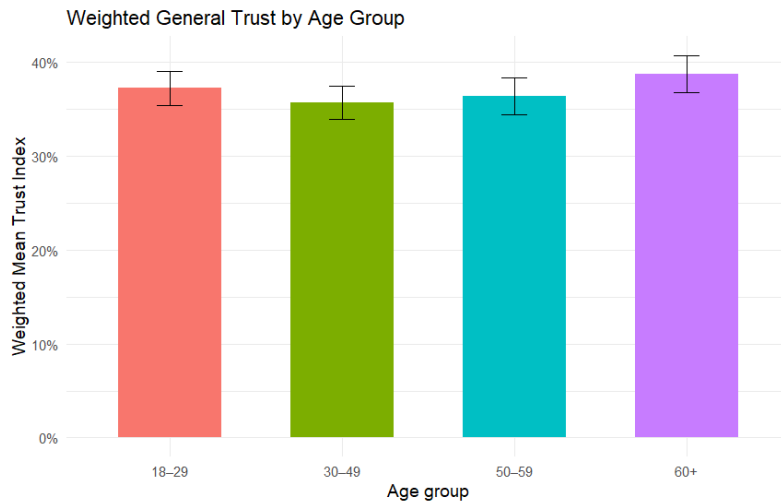


Figure 4. Weighted General Trust by Age Group

A weighted linear regression was used to examine whether general trust varies by age group. The model showed no significant differences in trust between age categories, $F(3, 556) \approx 0.21$, $p = .89$. Mean trust was highest among respondents aged 60 and above ($M = 0.39$, $SE = 0.03$), followed by those aged 18-29 ($M = 0.37$, $SE = 0.02$), 50-59 ($M = 0.36$, $SE = 0.03$), and 30-49 ($M = 0.35$, $SE = 0.03$). This suggests that the general trust level is relatively stable across age groups, with only minor, non-significant variation.

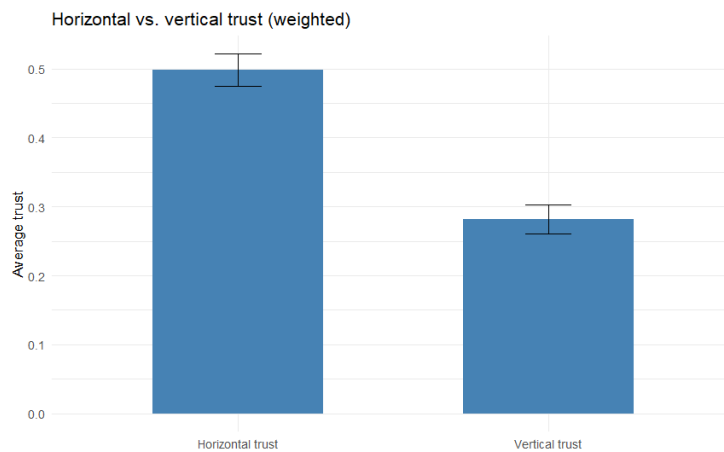


Figure 5. Horizontal vs. Vertical Trust

The weighted averages show that horizontal trust, or trust among peers, family, neighbours, and informal networks, is significantly higher (mean ≈ 0.50) than vertical trust, or trust in institutions, elites, and formal authorities (mean ≈ 0.28). This gap indicates that citizens in Sarajevo and Tuzla rely more on informal social networks than on formal political or bureaucratic institutions. This suggests that cohesion exists primarily within personal or community-level trust rather than

toward state institutions. High horizontal but low vertical trust also shows that citizens trust each other more than they trust those in power. While both horizontal and vertical trust are low, this finding allows us to identify institutions and elites as primary drivers of low general trust. Lack of vertical trust has several implications, ranging from governance-related regulatory enforcement to support for democracy. As governance structures in B&H are multilayered and complex, low levels of vertical trust would tend to cut across multilevel governance and produce systemic effects. More broadly speaking, however, low vertical trust is not corrected by high horizontal trust. It remains relatively low and signals both weak bridging and bonding social capital, according to Putnam. This research confirms earlier surveys that identified similarly low levels of horizontal trust (UNDP 2009).

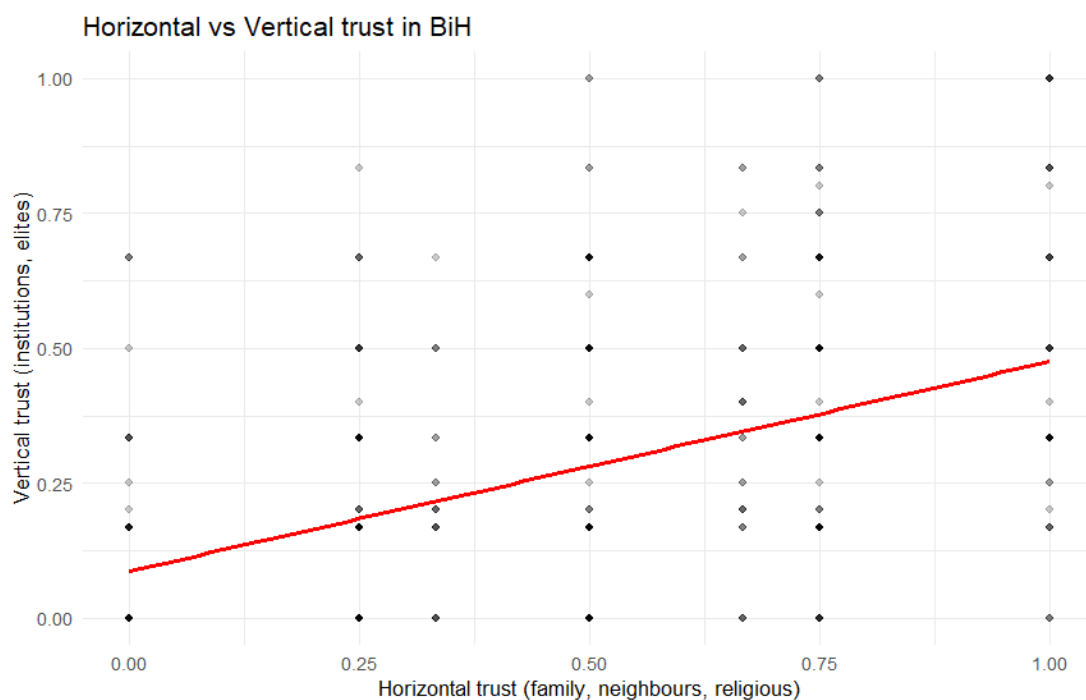


Figure 6. Relationship Between Horizontal and Vertical Trust

The relationship between horizontal and vertical trust is positive but weak. The regression line slopes upward, showing that individuals who trust others also tend to have somewhat higher institutional trust. However, the correlation is modest, implying that these are largely distinct trust domains. Interpersonal trust does not automatically translate into trust in political institutions. Community-level trust thrives locally, but state-level trust remains eroded by perceptions of inefficiency or corruption. While correlated, these two forms of trust operate in different domains. Building vertical trust, therefore, requires institutional reforms, not merely stronger community ties.

4.3 Satisfaction

Weighted Satisfaction by Government Sector
(1 = Very Satisfied, 4 = Not at all Satisfied)

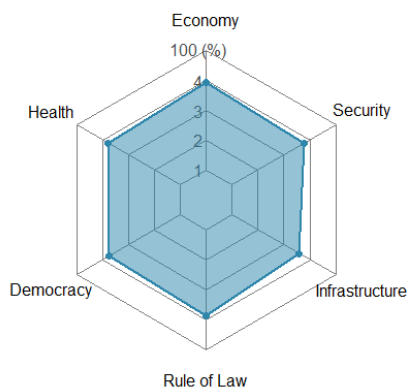


Figure 7. Satisfaction by Government Sector

Weighted analysis of satisfaction with six key government sectors (health, economy, democracy, rule of law, infrastructure, and security) shows generally moderate to low satisfaction among respondents. On a 1-4 scale (1 = very satisfied, 4 = not at all satisfied), mean scores cluster around 3, indicating that respondents are on average “not so satisfied.” The lowest satisfaction levels are observed for the economy (M = 3.20) and the rule of law (M = 3.16), while infrastructure (M = 2.93) receives the relatively best evaluation. There is only a slight difference between sectors, highlighting a general dissatisfaction across all sectors of government.

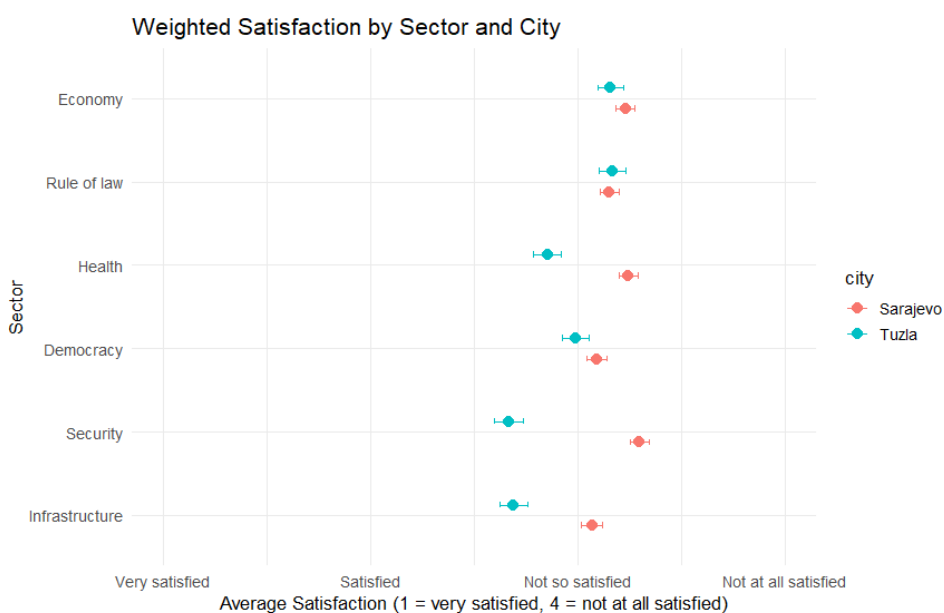


Figure 8. Satisfaction by Sector and City

Respondents from Tuzla (mean ≈ 2.94) express higher satisfaction with government performance than those from Sarajevo (mean ≈ 3.16), although both averages remain above the midpoint, reflecting general dissatisfaction. This variation would need to be explored in further research.

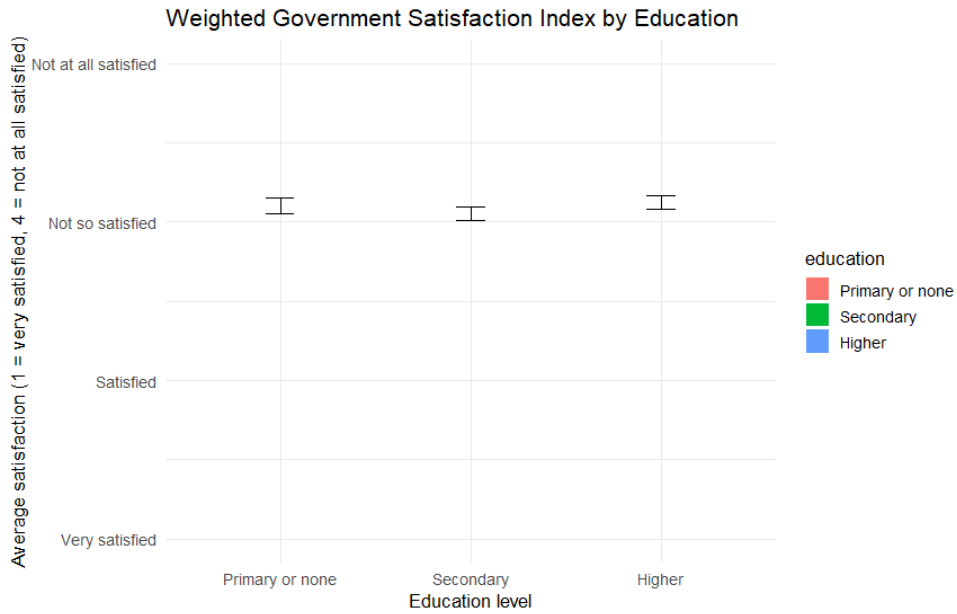


Figure 9. Satisfaction Index by Education

Satisfaction with government does not vary systematically by education level.

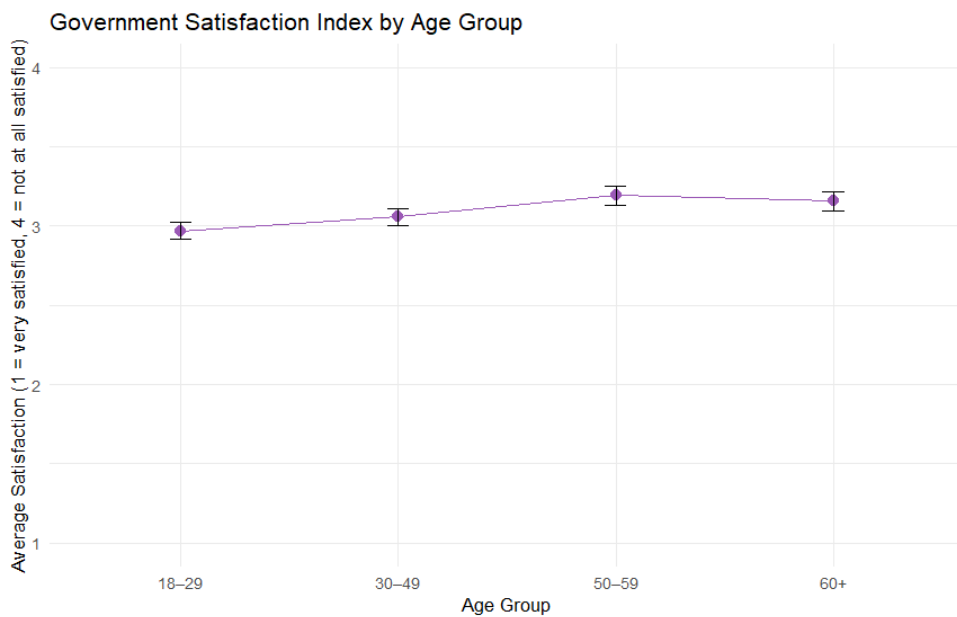


Figure 10. Satisfaction Index by Age Group

Lastly, age emerges as a significant factor. Older respondents express lower satisfaction with government performance, whereas younger groups are somewhat more positive. However, the difference is again not significant.

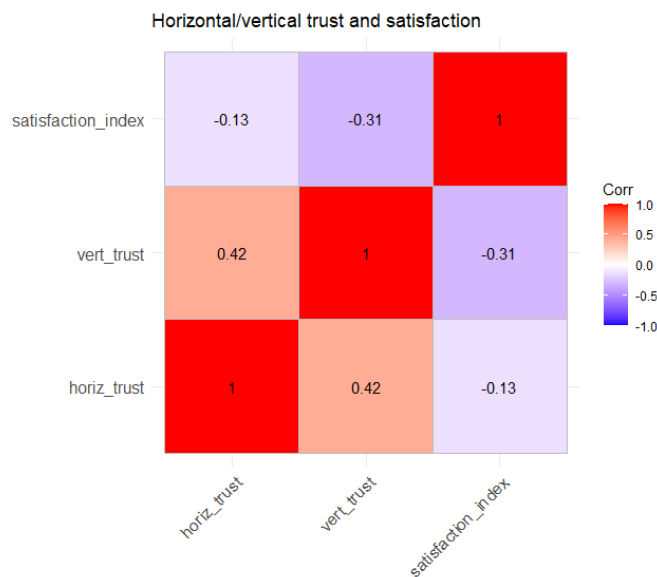


Figure 11. Horizontal/Vertical Trust and Satisfaction

The correlation matrix shows a moderate positive link between horizontal and vertical trust ($r \approx 0.42$), consistent with the scatterplot. It also shows a negative correlation between both trust types and satisfaction index ($r \approx -0.13$ to -0.31). This counterintuitive pattern suggests that citizens who express higher trust in institutions or others are not necessarily more satisfied with governance. Satisfaction here might relate to economic or political frustration rather than social cohesion. Trust and satisfaction measure different layers of political culture: one social, one evaluative. Therefore, trust can persist as a normative value even when satisfaction with outcomes (e.g., governance, policy, economy) is low. Explanations for this finding are complex and can only be tentatively induced. Individual respondents with higher levels of horizontal and, especially, vertical trust could be more active as citizens and have higher expectations of the people and institutions with whom they interact. On the other hand, those with lower levels of trust can be expected to disengage (interpersonally and institutionally), thereby lowering initial expectations of satisfaction. For a democratic society to strengthen and become more resilient, robust expectations are required.

5. GEOPOLITICAL REPRESENTATIONS AND PREFERENCES

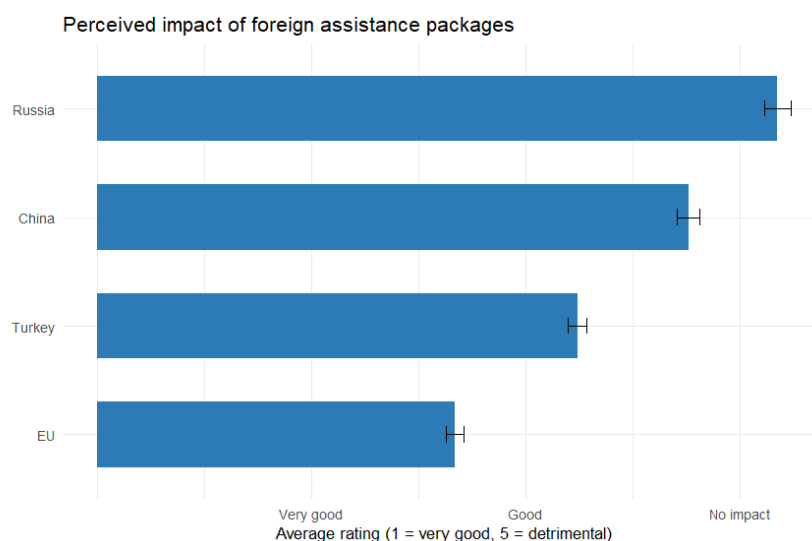


Figure 12. Perceived Impact of Foreign Assistance Packages

Weighted evaluations of external economic assistance show a clear hierarchy of perceived helpfulness. The EU is evaluated most positively ($M = 1.67$, $SE = 0.04$), followed by Türkiye ($M = 2.24$, $SE = 0.04$). China is viewed more ambivalently ($M = 2.76$, $SE = 0.05$), while Russia receives the least favorable assessments ($M = 3.17$, $SE = 0.06$), closer to ‘no impact’ or ‘bad impact’. On this 1-5 scale (1 = very good, 5 = detrimental), lower scores indicate more positive views, so the pattern suggests that citizens primarily see European and, to a lesser extent, Turkish support as constructive, and are more reserved about Russian and Chinese packages. Substantively, this ordering implies that the EU retains a distinct credibility premium as an economic and political horizon, while Türkiye occupies a secondary but still clearly positive position, likely reflecting perceived cultural proximity and long-term presence. Conversely, the comparatively negative assessments of Russia and the ambivalence towards China indicate that non-Western offers are not viewed as equally welfare-enhancing, even when presented in purely economic terms.

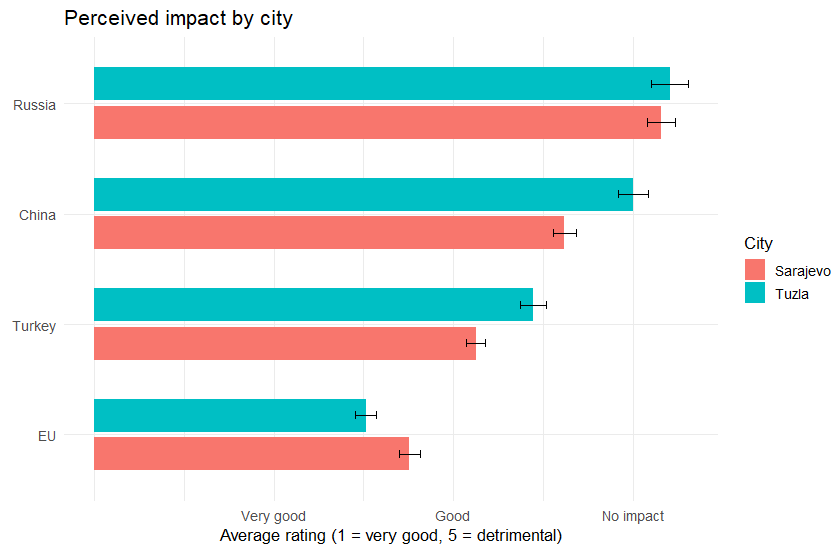


Figure 13. Perceived Impact by City

Perceptions are broadly similar across both cities, but Sarajevo respondents tend to rate the EU and Türkiye slightly more positively than those from Tuzla, while views of Russia and China remain more negative in both places. The limited city-level divergence suggests that these attitudes reflect broader nationwide frames of external actors rather than local policy performance. In this sense, slightly more favorable perceptions of the EU in Sarajevo are not unexpected, as the city functions as the country’s political center, where, due to its proximity to EU representations and international institutions, EU-related narratives are more publicly visible, present, and institutionally embedded.

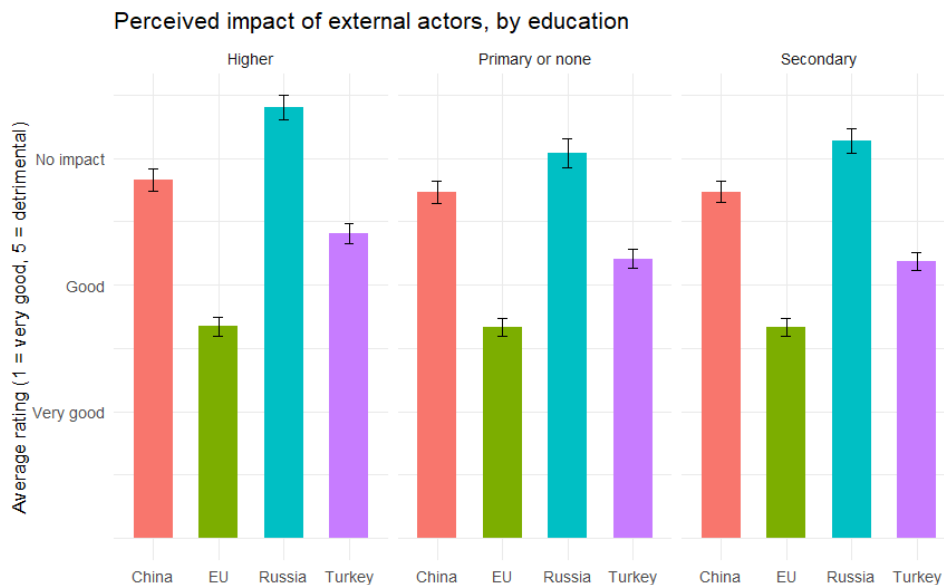


Figure 14. Perceived Impact by Education

The pattern remains stable across education levels: 1) EU; 2) Türkiye; 3) China; 4) Russia. However, people with a higher education rate all actors slightly more critically overall. The limited differences by education level suggest that geopolitical perceptions are less shaped by individual cognitive resources and more by shared societal narratives and lived experiences. In the context of prolonged institutional stagnation and contested reform processes, both higher- and lower-educated respondents appear to evaluate external actors through similar, widely circulating frames.

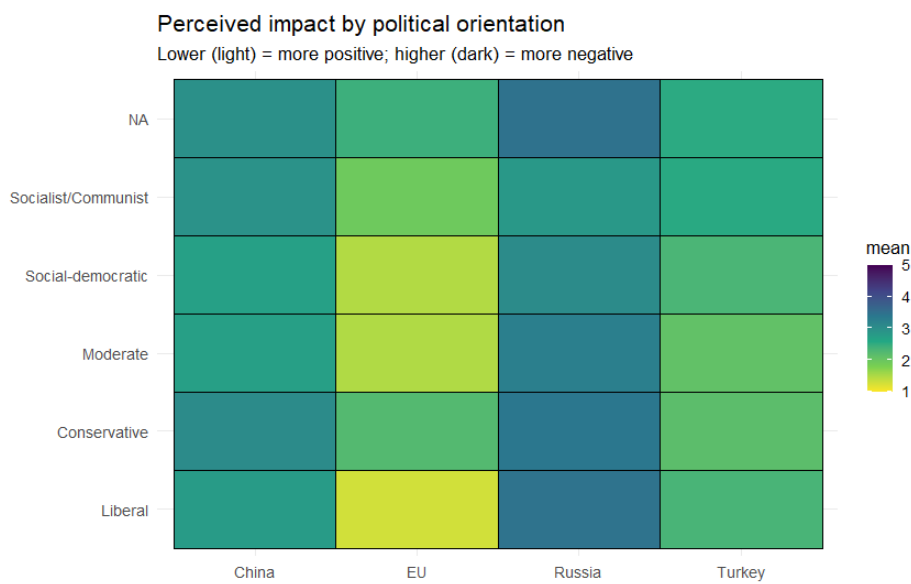


Figure 15. Perceived Impact by Political Orientation

A heatmap visualizing the relationship between political ideology and attitudes toward the four foreign actors. Lighter shades indicate more positive views; darker shades represent more negative ones. Liberals and social democrats tend to evaluate the EU most positively. Türkiye remains relatively neutral across ideological lines. Ideological orientation operates as a selective filter rather than a universal structuring force of geopolitical preferences. Evaluations of the EU are clearly differentiated along ideological lines, as the EU functions not only as an economic actor but also as a symbolic anchor for liberal-democratic identity frames closely tied to domestic debates on reform and governance. By contrast, perceptions of Türkiye, Russia, and China display limited ideological differentiation and are characterized by more uniform, often critical evaluations. While these actors are presented in domestic political discourse, they do not structure ideological division

to the same extent as the EU, and are instead approached through relatively stable, pragmatic, and situational evaluative frames.

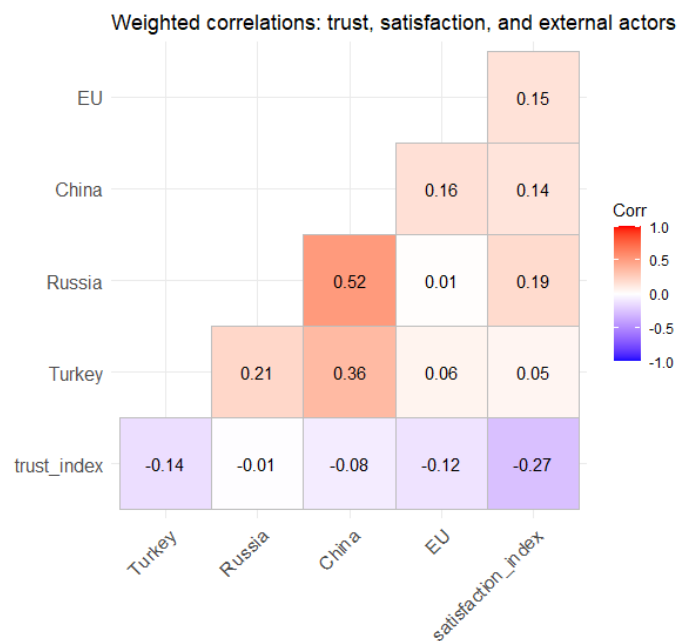


Figure 16. Trust, Satisfaction, and External Actors

Figure 16 shows that perceptions of Russia and China are strongly correlated. Türkiye is moderately aligned with this pattern, while the EU remains weakly connected to the other actors. There is a clearly cohesive perception bloc in which people evaluate Russia and China similarly, suggesting a shared image of “non-Western” partners, even though their concrete roles differ in B&H. Perceptions of the EU do not correlate much with the others, meaning it stands on its own, not part of either “camp.” The fact that the EU remains weakly connected to this grouping underscores its distinct status in respondents’ perceptions. Rather than being evaluated primarily through the instrumental frames that structure assessments of Türkiye, Russia, and China, the EU appears to be assessed along a different evaluative logic.

Domestic mood (trust, satisfaction) doesn’t heavily shape views of foreign actors, so respondents separate domestic evaluation from international attitudes. The decoupling of domestic satisfaction from foreign attitudes implies that citizens evaluate external actors pragmatically rather than ideologically.

Worldview Clusters: Trust, Satisfaction, and External Perceptions

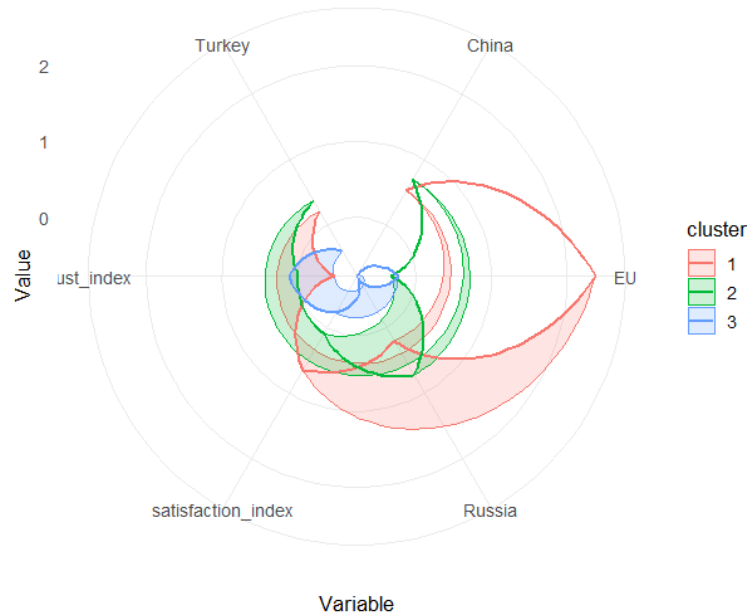


Figure 17. Worldview Clusters

The cluster analysis identifies three distinct attitudinal communities rather than a single polarized divide. Number 1 (red) can be defined as “Euro-optimists”. These are strongly positive toward the EU and less positive toward Russia, China, and Türkiye. They also have moderate levels of trust and satisfaction. This cluster represents people whose worldview aligns with a pro-Western orientation in which the EU functions as a primary normative reference point. Number 2 (green) can be defined as “Pragmatic centrists” who have the middle-of-the-road scores across nearly all dimensions. They are slightly positive toward all actors - neither enthusiastic nor hostile. Also, they show average trust and satisfaction. This group doesn’t take clear geopolitical sides and evaluates actors based on pragmatism rather than ideology. Lastly, number 3 (blue) can be defined as “Disengaged”, as they have slightly worse EU and satisfaction values. This means that they are more negative toward the EU and less satisfied domestically. Also, they show somewhat lower levels of trust. This cluster includes individuals who tend to be less trusting and less internally satisfied, often favouring alternative (non-EU) partners or disengaging altogether. The existence of three clusters indicates a fragmented view of geopolitics rather than a single, dominant division, aligning with a hybrid regime scenario where preferences are influenced by uneven trust, selective exposure, and ongoing dissatisfaction with institutions. The “pragmatic centrists” cluster is especially relevant for policy, as it signals a sizeable constituency that is persuadable through performance signals rather than identity appeals.

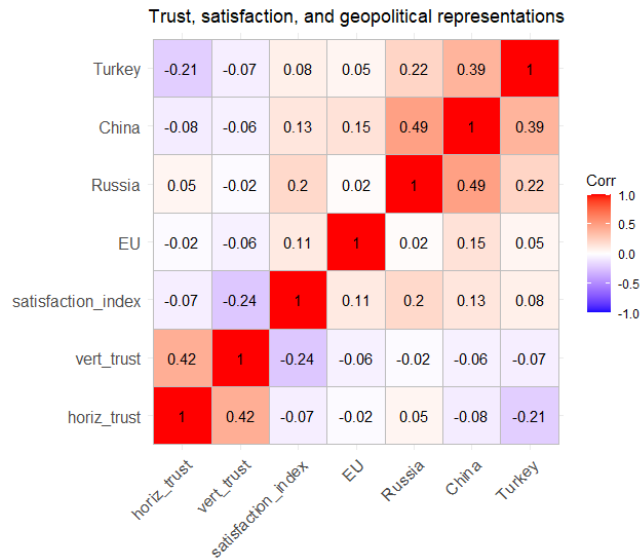


Figure 18. Trust, Satisfaction, and Geopolitical Representations

Exploration of the relationship between trust, satisfaction, and geopolitical representations reveals different geopolitical imaginaries. This suggests that trust operates as a deeper cognitive orientation shaping geopolitical meaning-making rather than functioning as a simple attitudinal variable. For instance, vertical trust correlates positively with trust in Russia and China ($r \approx 0.42-0.49$). Horizontal trust shows slightly negative or neutral relationships with these foreign perceptions. Satisfaction index correlates weakly and inconsistently across external actors. This pattern implies that citizens with higher institutional trust domestically are also more open to hierarchical or strong-state international models, whereas those relying on horizontal trust networks are less aligned with such visions. These alignments could be read as geopolitical representations: individuals projecting domestic political trust structures onto foreign actors. Higher vertical trust is associated with more favorable evaluations of actors commonly perceived as centralized or strong-state systems, whereas stronger horizontal trust tends to align with EU-oriented geopolitical imaginaries.

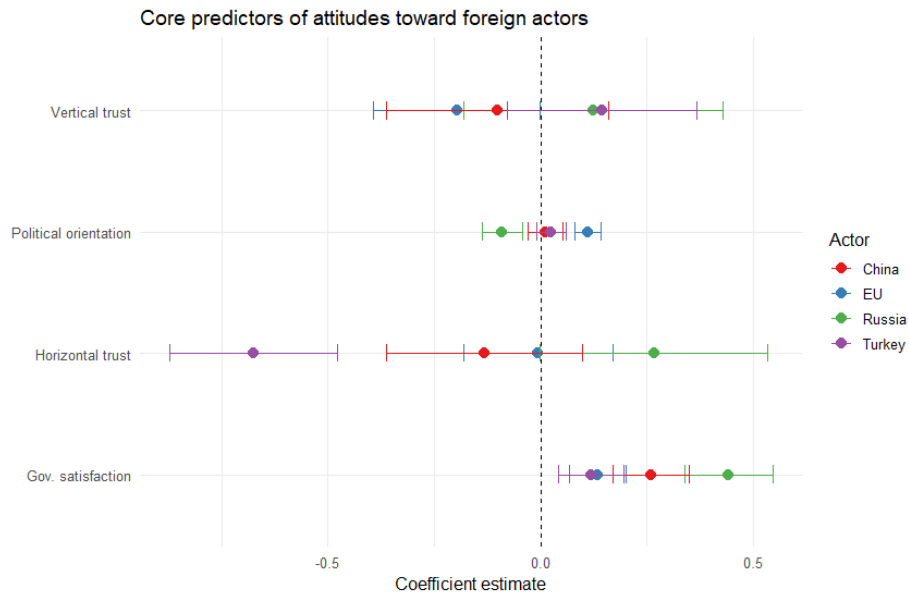


Figure 19. Core Predictors of Attitudes Toward Foreign Actors

The simplified regression plot shows that trust variables (horizontal and vertical) play a limited role in shaping citizens' attitudes toward external actors. The strength and direction of predictors vary considerably across actors, indicating that no single domestic variable uniformly structures geopolitical attitudes. Political orientation and satisfaction with domestic governance are the most meaningful predictors. Specifically, respondents with more liberal or pro-European political self-placement tend to hold more favorable views of the EU, while those with higher satisfaction toward domestic governance show warmer attitudes toward Russia. This association suggests a resonance with perceptions of Russia as a strong-state actor rather than a broader ideological realignment. Views of China and Türkiye appear less systematically driven by trust or ideology, suggesting that these relationships are interpreted more pragmatically. Overall, analysis indicates that geopolitical perceptions in B&H are plural and fragmented: the EU aligns with liberal-democratic identity frames, Russia with satisfaction and strong-state imaginaries, and China and Türkiye remain less ideologically defined reference points.

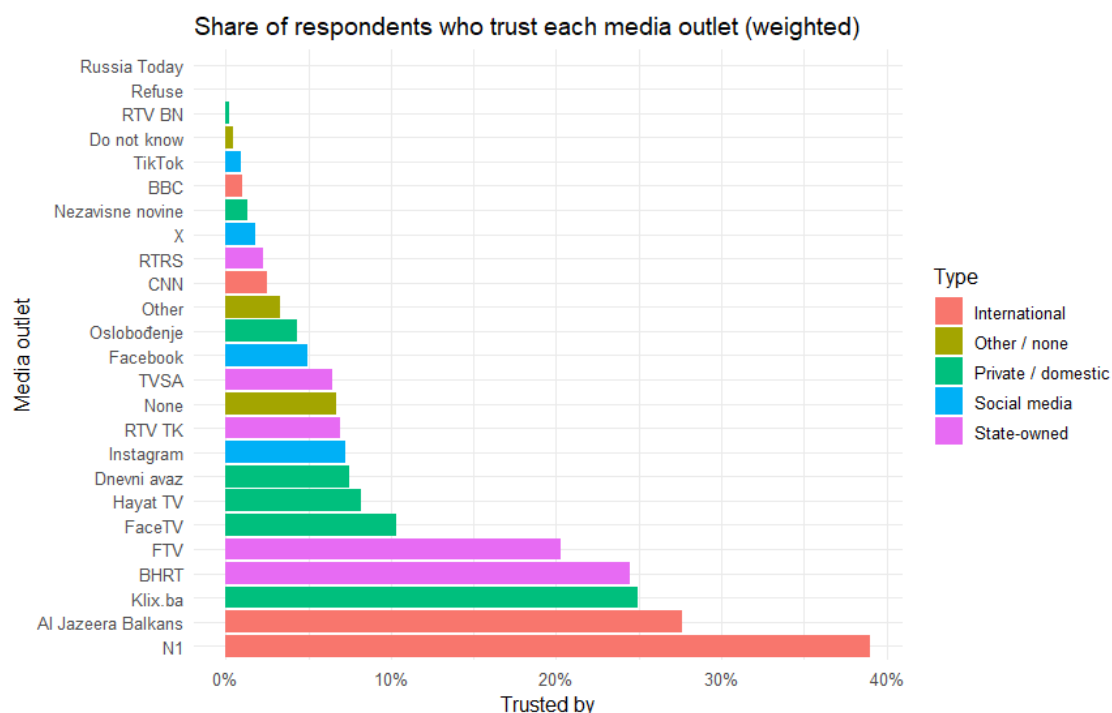


Image 20. Share of Respondents Who Trust Each Media Outlet

Even though the media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina is highly polarized, a large share of respondents (40%) believe traditional media can be trusted. Among all outlets, the most trusted are two international broadcasters – N1 TV (39%) and Al Jazeera Balkans² (27.6%) – which together capture a significant share of audience confidence. This suggests that many citizens perceive international news providers as more credible or professional than local ones. This preference reflects perceptions of editorial independence and professional distance from domestic political pressures, rather than a simple bias in favour of foreign media. These data are not surprising, considering that many media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although numerous in a country with a given population and size, are often targets of political and commercial pressure, with non-transparent media ownership and a narrow space for alternative viewpoints.

Among state-owned media, BHRT (24.5%) and FTV (20.3%) maintain relatively strong levels of trust (BHRT is a state public service, and FTV is a public service of one entity – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). However, their trust levels are notably lower than those of leading international media, indicating that while public service media retain a baseline of institutional legitimacy, they no longer function as dominant trust anchors within the media landscape. The third public

² Al Jazeera Balkans withdrew from the Balkans in mid-July 2025.

broadcaster, RTRS – the broadcaster of the Republika Srpska entity, is negligible among the respondents in this research. Within the private and commercial media sphere, Klix.ba (24.9%), the most read web portal in the country, stands out as the clear leader, followed by FaceTV (10.3%), Hayat TV (8.2%) – both private commercial televisions, and Dnevni avaz (7.5%) – the most read daily newspaper with a highly visited web portal. Social media platforms remain a secondary source of trust: Instagram (7.3%) and Facebook (4.9%) are the most trusted, while TikTok (0.9%) and X (1.8%) lag far behind. There is a gap between the widespread use of social media (respondents stated they use it a lot) and trust in providing accurate information; they look for it in well-established traditional or online media outlets. This might suggest that social media serve primarily as channels of exposure rather than as authoritative sources of information.

6. REPRESENTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION ASSISTANCE

To determine how local needs could be more effectively incorporated into EU policymaking, it was necessary to examine how EU assistance has been implemented and perceived at the local level. This section will analyze the representation and perception of EU assistance through the research of two specific EU initiatives (project tracing process) and citizens' perceptions (research conducted through survey and vignettes).

6.1 Contribution and effectiveness of EU-supported initiatives

Project tracing investigated the impact of the EU's democracy promotion efforts, focusing on the part that aims to increase mutual trust and strengthen an open, democratic political system based on dialogue and respect for human rights and political liberties, while decreasing levels of corruption and other forms of malpractice in governance. The selected projects had objectives aimed at countering social polarization and political fragmentation, and at increasing the level of deliberation and compromise in the political system, as well as in society at large.

In both cases, the project's financier was the EU. In the first project that addressed the media landscape and the influence of young people on its improvement, the implementers were two civil society organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the local beneficiaries were young people and journalists. In the second project, a partnership was established between the EU and the Council of Europe, with the

local Office serving as the project implementer across several phases, and the local beneficiaries included law enforcement institutions, police departments, competent ministries, prisons, and forensic staff. The most important topics discussed with all participants were: project initiation, primary goals, results through contribution, assessment of cooperation with other stakeholders, impact, challenges during implementation, lessons learned, sustainability, and wider contribution.

The EU representatives explained that both projects were initiated based on the “situation on the ground” - the country’s reports on progress and on the harmonization of local standards with the European ones, and other documents, which the EU uses to address needs and components that require improvement and continuous work. The rule of law, the functionality of institutions that provide laws, but also a strong civil society, citizens, and a “healthy” media landscape, are recognized as top priorities in these two cases. What can be concluded from these two cases is that the EU uses a top-down approach when offering programs and calls for project applications, though there are some differences between the cases. In the case of the project in which the implementers were civil society organizations, the EU did use the top-down approach when offering a program and public call. Still, they made it broad enough to leave the potential implementers enough space to create a proposal that will: a) align with the general topic(s), b) consider local context. Both EU representatives and implementers said there are well-established processes and procedures for implementers to submit their project proposals under the various priorities and sub-priorities listed in the call. However, Buras et al. (2024) emphasize that “the EU should consider investing more in a bottom-up approach to strengthening democracy in the Western Balkans.” What is also important to note is that, in this case, the project implementers were organizations with many years of experience in implementing EU projects, which, on the one hand, could be characterized as an EU preference for engaging with organized civil society rather than grassroots. Although the EU traditionally views civil society as a “guardian of democracy”, studies indicate that the focus on organized, professional CSOs can produce “rent politics” where certain organizations become intermediaries for donor funds rather than authentic agents of social change (Fagan & Sircar, 2018). In doing so, the EU may inadvertently weaken grassroots activism and produce an “illiberal civil society” that serves to preserve the *status quo*. Finally, the concept of elite capture, in which political, economic, or CSO elites absorb international resources and thereby limit their democratic reach, poses a key challenge to democratization aid (Søreide & Truex 2013). As emphasized in Buras et al. (2024): “The EU will need to make substantial investments at the societal level,

focusing on empowering civil society, fostering media freedom, and promoting grassroots democratic initiatives. These efforts are essential to apply pressure on governments and drive meaningful change.” On the other hand, the representative of the implementer of the project we have traced offers different perspective on this issue: “I believe that the fact that we have been here for a very long time, that we have implemented a lot of projects is important, but I also believe that what makes the difference is the fact that we have been here long enough to know the environment, and that we are someone who is very deeply connected with the media community to understand the problems of the media community, to understand what the challenges to freedom of expression in B&H are, and I think that this is what maybe positions us well.”

In the second case, in which the local beneficiaries were institutions - entity ministries of interior, ministries of justice, judicial police agencies, and the Forensic Institute, the idea of the project and primary cooperation were established in the EU and Council of Europe headquarters, after which the local COE Office should have delivered the foreseen objectives in collaboration with the state institutions. Representatives of this Office emphasize that they possess enormous institutional knowledge and over two decades of experience, and that they have positioned themselves as a leading institution in the fields of deprivation of liberty, prisons, forensic work, etc. That, alongside a long-standing partnership with the EU, gave them institutional knowledge and credibility with domestic institutions.

Implementing partners from both initiatives/projects rated cooperation with the EU as very successful, important, transparent, and flexible, where possible. Communication with the EU takes place continuously throughout the projects, including the approval of procedural matters and visibility conditions, procurement procedures, and the publication of public calls for services to be performed on the project, etc. This is an administrative part that goes through regular communication and is part of some contractual obligations. Approvals for changes to activities required by the contract, of course, should be requested formally, but the CSOs emphasize that there is valuable flexibility and the possibility of adjusting some parts of the activities during the project (if implementers identify something more important than was planned) through oral conversations, self-modifications, etc. EU staff often attended the events and tried to get involved as much as possible to achieve a greater impact on the initiative. For example, one representative of civil society organization mentioned: “What was very important to me, especially in this specific project, is the level of inclusion, not only the involvement that we submit

reports or communicate on a formal level, but I somehow felt that people from EU are genuinely interested in progress, not only in the position of young people in B&H, but in progress in civil society.” However, one of them also emphasized that EU projects are very demanding in terms of reporting, which is complex and burdensome, which could also be one of the reasons why well-established organizations are more likely to receive support for projects rather than smaller or grassroots initiatives.

When we analyzed responses about the benefits and impact of both projects, all participants in the survey identified at least one aspect they considered valuable and positive. Local beneficiaries rated their experiences as beneficial, meaningful, eye-opening, educational, and useful beyond the scope of the project’s topic. Implementing partners are very satisfied with the achieved results, which they say have exceeded the set goals and objectives. The impact of both initiatives goes from raising awareness to actually very specific strengthening of the capacities of individuals, institutions, and society at large. So, the benefits are numerous, as people involved explained. Nevertheless, challenges cannot be shadowed. The challenges ranged from technical (such as the COVID pandemic that slowed down/changed the modalities of some activities or project deadlines and reporting), motivation (how to motivate more people to get involved), to systemic challenges (complex institutional framework, passive state institutions, frequent changes in the management structures, etc.).

When it comes to sustainability, implementing partners consider their projects to be sustainable. The first selected project led to the creation of a network of young people who continue to work to promote freedom of expression and improve public dialogue. The other project resulted in digitizing the entire prison system in the country, empowering law enforcement personnel to act in accordance with European standards for respect of human rights, creating a manual for the conduct of all officials in the chain, etc. The fact is that more data, better analysis, improved information systems, stronger law enforcement, more effective human rights protection in practice, and a more sustainable and efficient exchange of information have been created. Also, empowering young people to clearly articulate their opinions and understand how the media works, and raising awareness among the media and journalists that it is necessary to redefine their role and pay more attention to their current and future audience, young people. These contributions cannot be ignored or underestimated.

What stood out during the research was the EU staff representative's view that contributions and achievements are often exaggerated by those who implement or participate in project activities, and that B&H institutions heavily rely on international organizations for project sustainability. It is emphasized that state institutions lack the will to take responsibility and share the burden; that is, they lack the will to capitalize on this foreign support and these projects for the benefit of all, with long-term effects. It is also mentioned that state institutions position themselves as if someone else should do the work while they take a secondary role, so they fail to recognize that this is support for them, and they should be the ones driving the process. That's a significant problem across all projects, as this EU representative sees. This kind of "ownership issue" leads to problems with engaging local institutions, their own initiatives, or identifying what can realistically be done in the environment. The concept of "ownership" (ownership of reforms) is central to understanding local perceptions of EU assistance. When reforms and projects are perceived as imposed "from above", without actual participation from local actors, legitimacy and effectiveness are lost (Carothers 1999). Local ownership increases the likelihood that reform practices will be sustainable and contextually adapted. Conversely, top-down approaches often produce "selective compliance" or the formal adoption of EU norms without genuine implementation (Sedelmeier 2011).

6.2 Citizens' perceptions of EU-supported initiatives

Citizens' perceptions of EU-supported initiatives often reflect a broader issue of trust and legitimacy: to what extent do EU policies truly serve the public interest, and to what extent do they maintain existing power structures? What is very important is to draw a distinction between the EU as a political horizon (a framework of values, the ideal of European integration) and the EU as a concrete actor (visible effects of projects at the local level).

Regarding the general perception of EU support and the broader framework of its popularity, 43% of respondents from Sarajevo and Tuzla believe that EU support is "well placed," while 51% think it is not, and 6% do not know. Thus, there is considerable skepticism towards the current policy and practice of EU assistance on the ground. There is a certain paradox: the EU enjoys broad value-based legitimacy because citizens see it as a symbol of economic and political progress, but the perception that EU activities are "well placed" (concrete effectiveness) is much weaker. In other words, the EU is valued as a goal and an ideal, but skepticism about implementation efficiency is widespread.

Analysis of questions about democratic development shows an ambivalent view of the support's effect: 40% believe that the support has helped promote democracy, 37% think it had no effect, 17% think it has even worsened undemocratic tendencies, and 6% do not know. The result, therefore, shows that a relatively high proportion of citizens believe in a positive impact, but a significant portion maintains a distance or even perceives negative consequences. Quantified, this means that although there is an ideological or value-based consensus that EU norms are desirable, the perception that support is truly a catalyst for democratization is not convincingly dominant. If we look at the mentioned perceptions considering demographic and socio-economic criteria (convergences and divisions), we see that the younger population (18-29) has a high proportion of skeptics regarding the "well-placed" nature of the support, but the differences are not drastic. A unified "young-pro-EU" narrative regarding aid efficiency is not present, as young people are more value-inclined towards the EU, but critical of the effects. A higher level of education correlates with slightly greater trust in the EU's general guidelines, but even among the highly educated, the objection that support is not always "well placed" (<50%) dominates. Thus, education increases the recognition of the value of horizon, but not necessarily the perception of effects. Surprisingly, those who assess themselves as "poor" show a relatively high share of correctly placed perception (54%), while "above average" has the highest share of dissatisfaction (68%).

In the economic domain, the perception of the effectiveness of EU measures is relatively more favorable than in the domain of general "well-placidness" - a total of approximately 87% of respondents see a positive (very good + good) impact. The EU is recognized as a relevant and effective actor, especially in economic packages and crisis management. This difference compared to the general perception of project effectiveness suggests that the EU yields better results in areas where intervention capacity can be clearly articulated through financial transfers and aid packages. Based on vignettes, we saw that citizens prioritize long-term political and institutional integration (full membership) and major economic support from the EU, which further explains why the EU has high value attractiveness compared to other options (Russian, Chinese, or Turkish packages).

When respondents were asked how democratic development potentially worsens undemocratic tendencies, the answers were: It fueled corruption 48%, The programs only benefit the elites 36%, It undermined the judiciary and rule of law 10%, while a small percentage chose "Other" (2%) or do not know (4%). A significant portion of respondents sees EU activity as aimed at reproducing (or

consolidating) corrupt networks and benefiting elites. This confirms the hypothesis of the risk of “elite capture” and validates the suspicion regarding the effective redistributive dimension of aid.

A high percentage of respondents (84%) consider the EU important for key fields (democracy, rule of law, security, economy). This is the strength of the EU’s “soft power” and legitimizing capital in B&H. Interpretively, citizens separate the normative attractiveness of the EU from the pragmatic assessment of its interventions. The EU is desirable as a goal, but in certain segments, the public perceives the issue of efficiency and distribution of benefits negatively. According to the survey results, citizens expect strong EU support for the rule of law and the fight against corruption, economic benefits and stability (confirmed by high ratings of the impact of economic measures), and support for peace and security.

Through analysis of the vignettes, we conclude that citizens believe the EU clearly articulates values (horizon), but communication often fails to connect expectations with the real scale of interventions; this creates a perceptual gap. Programs are often administratively correct and targeted, but in implementation, cases of selective distribution of partnerships (ministries, established CSO networks) appear, which reduces the sense of local usefulness and ownership. Economic packages yield fast, measurable results (hence the high ratings); institutional reforms (judiciary, anti-corruption) require longer time horizons and often do not provide immediate tangible benefits to the public. Consequently, the EU often “creates expectations” of a greater scope of action than it can deliver in the short term, especially in institutional changes.

The survey and vignettes indicate that many projects function through pre-determined partners and procedures, which correspond with the results of qualitative research (project tracing). The data shows strong concern among citizens that projects often benefit established elites (36% of respondents answered that programs “only benefit the elites”; 48% believe that democratic development can “fuel corruption”). This suggests the risk that international aid, if channelled through the same networks that dominated before, does not change the fundamental power structures, but consolidates them. Such an approach favors “selective compliance”- formal reforms without deep disruption of interest networks.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examines trust, social cohesion, and the European Union's promotion of democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It uses a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data from Sarajevo and Tuzla collected in late 2024 and early 2025 with an analysis of two EU-supported democracy initiatives.

The first part of the paper provides an empirical analysis of trust, social cohesion, and the roles of the EU and other actors (Russia, China, Türkiye) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, using a case-study approach centred on the cities of Sarajevo and Tuzla. The collected data aimed to explore factors behind the decline in citizen engagement and solidarity and to assess the potential for revitalizing active citizenship. Findings reveal persistently low levels of institutional (vertical) trust, whereas interpersonal (horizontal) trust is relatively higher, indicating fragile social cohesion and limited democratic resilience. A widespread lack of trust among citizens towards the public sphere, according to Putnam's social capital theory, indicates a shortage of "bridging" social capital that fosters connections across diverse and homogeneous groups. Nonetheless, intra-group connectivity and cooperation, such as within families, associations, and neighbourhoods, remain evident, though still low.

The results highlight significant mistrust in state institutions and political elites. Trust in media sources is notably limited, whereas confidence in experts (intellectuals) is comparatively higher. Consequently, these factors contribute to ongoing societal fragmentation and polarization, motivating widespread emigration and posing significant challenges to social integration and stability in the region. Additionally, younger generations display a more optimistic outlook. However, this optimism does not align with emigration data, which indicate that a substantial proportion of the youth population primarily migrates to European Union countries.

The paper also explored the challenges and obstacles in the European integration process, as well as the start of negotiations for Bosnia and Herzegovina following its 2022 candidate status. The promotion of EU democratic values is called into question by negative indicators in the European Commission's reports on judicial reforms, the rule of law, and economic and social reforms. According to the survey, citizens largely support the processes initiated and the EU perspective, but remain skeptical about the effectiveness of implementing European projects, their real impact on improving citizens' daily lives, and their capacity to bring about change.

The persistent dominance of entrenched ethnonationalist politics, the present hybrid regime, and a severe structural trust deficit suggest that external motivations alone are insufficient to drive the necessary systemic reforms.

Through the project tracing process, the impact of the EU's democracy promotion efforts aimed at increasing mutual trust and strengthening an open, democratic political system based on dialogue and respect for human rights and political liberties, while reducing corruption and other malpractices by those in power, was also examined. The selected projects aimed to serve as a counterforce to social polarization and political fragmentation, and to enhance deliberation and compromise within the political system and society at large.

Despite strong public backing for EU integration, citizens remain doubtful about the effectiveness and fairness of EU-funded projects, often seeing elite capture and weak local ownership. The study recommends that EU democracy promotion should emphasize greater bottom-up participation, increased transparency, and continuous efforts to rebuild social trust—key to strengthening democracy.

To promote more effective engagement in local governance, it is crucial to boost local ownership by actively involving grassroots actors in the design and monitoring stages of projects. Implementing participatory budgets and local committees that include informal stakeholders can help reduce perceptions of elite capture. Transparency in project outcomes is essential; clear communication about beneficiaries and the reasoning behind funding decisions, along with indicators such as the number of direct beneficiaries and socio-economic impact mapping, are necessary.

A differentiated approach that combines substantial economic packages, demonstrating the EU's strength, with long-term rule-of-law programs featuring clear political and social indicators can sustain trust through tangible short-term outcomes. Furthermore, monitoring risks of elite capture should be integrated into evaluations, including indicators of clientelism and corrective measures such as partner rotation and public consultations. Lastly, effective outreach and communication are vital for managing expectations. By clearly explaining what the programs can realistically achieve in the short term and transparently showcasing selection processes and criteria, stakeholders can foster a more informed and engaged community.

Promoting European values requires more than technical measures and formal reforms. It involves addressing transparency and accountability issues, as well as

efforts to empower citizens and facilitate societal healing and reintegration. Restoring public trust in institutions, supporting grassroots movements, and enhancing social cohesion are essential to consolidating democratic governance. Without these activities, European Union initiatives and investments may have a limited impact on improving citizens' daily lives, potentially leading to feelings of helplessness and a tendency to emigrate.

Therefore, effective democracy promotion in such contexts requires a shift toward building social trust, rebuilding solidarity, supporting independent institutions and media, and engaging civil society to dismantle informal power structures and foster genuine democratic resilience.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to rethink their security policies fundamentally. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, and also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to ensure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine).