

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

# ANALYZING YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON SOFT SECURITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND CROATIA

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, security threats have evolved beyond traditional, state-centric paradigms toward more complex, hybrid forms, thereby elevating the significance of “soft security” in academic and policy discourse. Against this backdrop, this study examines and compares the perceptions of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia regarding non-military security risks, including economic instability, organized crime, corruption, and climate change. The younger generations in the Western Balkans are increasingly reframing their understandings of security in response to hybrid threats that transcend conventional military frameworks. To explore how socio-political factors—such as Croatia’s European Union membership and Bosnia and Herzegovina’s fragmented governance—shape these perceptions, the study employs a comparative cross-sectional survey design involving 308 respondents (203 from Bosnia and Herzegovina and 105 from Croatia). The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted policy measures that address youth-specific concerns, enhance civic literacy, and strengthen trust in institutions. Furthermore, the study highlights the pivotal role of youth engagement in developing resilient security architectures and promoting regional stability. While the research does not claim statistical generalizability, the identified trends provide a critical foundation for future monitoring of youth attitudes. These insights are instrumental for designing effective strategies to fortify the resilience of security frameworks in the Western Balkans and to foster inclusive, sustainable approaches to regional security.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, soft security, youth perceptions, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia



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## Introduction

The notion of security is inherently fluid and deeply intertwined with both personal and collective values. It can be conceptualized as the absence of tangible threats—such as hazards, challenges, and vulnerabilities—as well as the absence of anxieties concerning the potential endangerment of these fundamental values (Brauch, 2010). In the global context, perceptions of security threats are shaped not only by objective dangers but also by individual experiences, cultural norms, diverse interpretations of events, media narratives, and broader societal discourses. Focusing particularly on economic instability and ethnic tensions, this article investigates how young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia perceive their security. The unique political contexts and complex historical legacies of these two countries provide valuable insights into youth perceptions of security. For young people in the region, economic challenges—such as unemployment and poverty—together with the persistent effects of ethnic divisions, represent significant sources of concern. Analyzing these perceptions offers critical insights into the broader implications for peace, security, and social cohesion in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, this understanding is especially pertinent as both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia continue their efforts toward deeper integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. By illuminating the security concerns of youth, this study contributes to the discourse on regional stability and the prospects for sustainable coexistence.

The 21st century has witnessed a significant expansion in both the scope and complexity of security threats. The concept of "widening" denotes the evolution of security considerations beyond traditional military concerns to encompass issues such as environmental degradation, cyber threats, and the protection of individuals (Brauch, 2010). Complementing this, "deepening" refers to the increasing intricacy and severity of these emerging threats. The conception of security has undergone substantial transformation since the end of the Cold War and particularly following the events of September 11, 2001. In addition to internal conflicts, such as civil wars, non-state actors—including terrorist organizations, drug trafficking networks, and maritime pirates—have increasingly posed challenges to traditional state-centered security paradigms (Vilks et al., 2024). Moreover, global phenomena such as demographic shifts, climate change, and rapid technological advancements

have introduced novel risks to the international security landscape. These developments have exposed vulnerabilities within existing security frameworks, thereby underscoring the urgent need for innovative approaches to effectively address and mitigate these evolving global threats (GTPE Communications, 2024).

Traditionally characterized by complex and often fragile political structures, the Western Balkans today faces significant security challenges that have profound implications not only for national stability but also for broader international security (Tahirović, 2024). Although Bosnia and Herzegovina has made notable progress in strengthening its security apparatus, the country continues to grapple with substantial obstacles in fostering effective regional security cooperation. While integration into Euro-Atlantic structures offers long-term security benefits, the enhancement of immediate security largely depends on cultivating stronger relationships with neighboring states. In the case of Croatia, addressing domestic and regional security concerns necessitates active collaboration with the international community, particularly in combating transnational threats such as terrorism. Croatia's strategic geographical position—sharing borders with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina—further underscores the need for robust regional cooperation and sustained support from international organizations, including NATO and the European Union.

The complex nature of the security landscape in the Western Balkans is underscored by a rapidly evolving environment shaped by both traditional and emerging threats (Tahirović, 2024). In this context, young people's perceptions of security are shaped by an intricate interplay of historical legacies, contemporary political dynamics, and broader international trends. As Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia navigate regional instability alongside the imperatives of Euro-Atlantic integration, understanding how young individuals conceptualize security—particularly in relation to issues such as ethnic tensions and economic instability—becomes increasingly critical. Such insights can inform the development of policies aimed at enhancing both national and regional security, while also contributing to a deeper understanding of the prospects for peace and cooperation within the region. Despite their divergent political trajectories, both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia face a range of shared security challenges, particularly within the domain

of soft security, which significantly shape the lived experiences and outlooks of their youth (Zamfir, 2020).

Against this complex backdrop, it becomes imperative to delve into how young people conceptualize and prioritize these evolving security challenges, as their perceptions not only reflect the current sociopolitical climate but also shape the prospects for future stability and cooperation in the region. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research question: *How do young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia perceive soft security challenges, and in what ways do these perceptions reflect and respond to broader geopolitical, social, and institutional contexts?*

### Literature Review

In post-conflict societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, the concept of soft security—encompassing non-military concerns that affect both individuals and states—has gained significant prominence in contemporary security discourse. Consequently, a substantial body of literature has emerged, documenting the perceptions and challenges associated with soft security in these contexts. As Hough (2021) notes, the very notion of security is inherently contested, varying considerably depending on situational contexts and the individuals involved. Understanding how young people perceive various soft security challenges is crucial, as their perspectives can profoundly influence policy development and the adaptive capacities of their communities. This study integrates both theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses to examine how youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia understand and respond to soft security issues, including criminal networks, economic hardship, access to education, ethnic tensions, and social inequalities. Furthermore, it seeks to contrast Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented administrative structure with Croatia's comparatively consolidated position as a member of the European Union, thereby illustrating how differing geopolitical dynamics shape young people's security perceptions in these two countries.

In order to fully comprehend the attitudes of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, it is imperative to understand their susceptibility to hybrid threats. As Dolan (2022) explains, hybrid threats encompass a wide array of antagonistic actions that fall outside conventional conceptions

of warfare. In the context of the Western Balkans, Dolan identifies these threats as a collection of low-cost measures and strategies designed to undermine public trust in institutions, erode societal norms, and obstruct aspirations for European Union and NATO membership. Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular, is portrayed as highly vulnerable due to its organizational instability, the deep divisions between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, significant ethnic and cultural tensions, and pervasive skepticism toward political leadership and media outlets. Dolan underscores how the manipulation of political discourse, coupled with economic dependency, weakens democratic resilience. Youth, in this regard, are seen both as primary targets of these manipulative strategies and as potential agents of positive change through their civic engagement and activism.

Given that young people in the Balkans are consistently exposed to conflicting narratives propagated by local politicians and international actors, this perspective is critical for interpreting youth attitudes toward security. This article thus seeks to investigate how young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia conceptualize soft security challenges—such as economic pressures and disinformation—and whether they perceive these issues as immediate threats or as distant, externally driven concerns. By integrating Dolan's macro-level analysis with micro-level examinations of youth behavior and perceptions, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of how these dynamics unfold. Furthermore, Otukoya's (2022) work on securitization theory provides a valuable analytical lens for examining the framing and politicization of soft security issues in post-conflict societies. According to this theory, issues are not inherently threatening but become securitized through discursive practices by political actors who portray them as existential dangers necessitating urgent action. Applying the concept of securitization allows for a nuanced analysis of how security narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina—from state indifference to cyber threats to ethno-nationalist anxieties—contribute to the alienation of young people from formal political processes. This theoretical framework thus illuminates the complex relationship between youth perceptions, security discourse, and broader socio-political dynamics in the Western Balkans.

Although Croatia's EU-driven securitization process has achieved notable progress in reframing

security as a societal and human-centered concern, young people continue to express dissatisfaction with the slow pace of tangible improvements. Zweers et al. (2023) argue that external actors exploit Bosnia and Herzegovina's economic vulnerabilities, interethnic tensions, and ineffective governance to disseminate disinformation and foment instability for their own strategic benefit. The structural weaknesses of Bosnia and Herzegovina's security apparatus in addressing contemporary challenges—ranging from organized crime and hybrid threats to ethno-political unrest—are extensively analyzed by Bajramovic (2022). He asserts that the country's fragmented administrative structure, a legacy of the Dayton Peace Agreement, renders it particularly susceptible to both internal and external threats. Bajramovic highlights the politicization of military reforms and the lack of coordination among various governmental bodies as significant obstacles to effectively countering threats such as cyberattacks and external interference.

Further emphasizing these concerns, research conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung foundation on youth perceptions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2024) identifies corruption, unemployment, and political uncertainty as the most pressing issues confronting the country's youth. Young people perceive the administration as inefficient, the education system as deeply inadequate, and governmental institutions as unreliable and incapable, leading to widespread disillusionment and accelerating emigration trends. In contrast, while Croatia is considered comparatively more stable—an assessment corroborated by the same foundation's 2024 study on youth in Southeast Europe—young people there continue to express concerns over soft security threats, including limited employment opportunities, economic volatility, and persistent skepticism toward governmental institutions. Despite the stabilizing influence of EU membership, which has positioned Croatia favorably within the region, efforts to establish and maintain a robust security environment remain arduous and slow, fueling youth disillusionment and unease.

As Szerencses (2024) elucidates in Croatia Since the Declaration of Independence, the country's security paradigm has transitioned from a traditional, state-centric and militarized approach—rooted in the experiences of the 1990s conflict—to a more comprehensive, cooperative, and human-focused strategy. Croatia's national defense and

security policy has evolved in response to modern challenges, aligning with the values and strategic orientations of both the European Union and NATO.

Despite significant contextual differences arising from their distinct socioeconomic histories, both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia continue to grapple with soft security challenges related to the uneven inclusion of women, limited political participation, and low levels of institutional trust. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (2024), while Croatia has made notable strides in improving women's access to education and participation in the labor market, it still lags in achieving financial parity and equitable representation in governance. Even within the European Union context, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, a situation perpetuated by enduring traditional gender norms. Nevertheless, institutional trust in Croatia is comparatively higher than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite widespread frustration over the slow pace of reform.

In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces even more pronounced challenges in integrating women into security-related sectors. As Tomic (2015) observes, although legal frameworks for gender inclusion exist, they are often ineffectively implemented, resulting in the continued marginalization of women's voices. Deep-seated corruption and ethno-nationalist agendas further reinforce widespread mistrust and hinder substantive progress. Analysis of women's political participation during the 2014 and 2018 elections by Mulalic et al. (2020) reveals that, despite policy measures aimed at enhancing women's representation, their actual impact remains minimal, rendering gender inclusion more symbolic than transformative. Although both countries struggle in this domain, Croatia's EU membership provides a platform for incremental advancement and holds potential for greater female political engagement and empowerment.

Moreover, the UNDP's Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans report (2021) offers an instructive comparison of how young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia perceive security issues, taking into account historical legacies, political realities, and external influences. The report highlights the complex position of Bosnian youth, who find themselves caught between conflicting forces: one advocating for peaceful, multiethnic coexistence, and another



reinforcing ethno-nationalist divisions. In contrast, interethnic relations in Croatia are less contentious, allowing youth to focus their concerns on issues such as social justice and economic prosperity. The report underscores the centrality of youth openness to dialogue and peaceful coexistence as crucial for fostering a more secure and cohesive society in both contexts.

By examining selected scholarly articles, this research explores differing perspectives on soft security challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, with particular attention to the voices of youth in these two nations. The analysis reveals that soft security issues—such as corruption, socioeconomic vulnerability, and ethnic tensions—are interpreted through the lenses of contemporary geopolitical upheavals and post-war societal transformations. While these countries share certain historical commonalities, their present-day challenges differ markedly in both scale and intensity. Beyond a shared past, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia exhibit distinct internal and external environments, which significantly shape young people's perceptions of security-related issues.

Croatia's trajectory toward European Union integration and its NATO membership have contributed to greater policy alignment with the standards of more developed nations; however, achieving full harmonization with other member states remains an ongoing and complex process. In both countries, the limited involvement of youth in formal security dialogues underscores the critical importance of civic education and democratic governance in bridging the gap between ideological aspirations and practical policy solutions. Furthermore, future research should focus on examining the long-term effects of inequality and the influence of digital engagement on shaping youth perspectives. Ultimately, fostering meaningful youth participation in soft security frameworks holds potential for promoting regional cohesion and long-term stability.

While existing literature has extensively explored traditional security paradigms and the role of state-centric threats in the Western Balkans, there remains a notable lack of empirical research focusing specifically on youth perceptions of *soft security* issues in this region. Most prior studies have concentrated on elite political discourses, institutional analyses, or broad societal perspectives, often overlooking how young

people—who are both especially vulnerable to and uniquely positioned to address these challenges—understand and respond to non-military risks such as economic instability, corruption, and climate change. Moreover, comparative studies that examine differences between countries with divergent political trajectories, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, are particularly scarce. By directly engaging with youth perspectives in these two distinct yet historically interconnected contexts, this research not only addresses this empirical gap but also contributes valuable insights into how socio-political and institutional factors shape security perceptions among the next generation. In doing so, it offers a foundation for more youth-centered, inclusive security policies and fosters a deeper understanding of the potential for regional cooperation and resilience.

### Methodology

This study adopts a comparative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate and contrast the perceptions of youth regarding soft security issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. The choice of a comparative approach is grounded in the distinct socio-political trajectories of these two countries: Croatia's integration into the European Union and NATO has created a relatively consolidated governance structure, while Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to grapple with a fragmented administrative system and persistent ethno-political divisions. By examining these two contexts side by side, the study aims to illuminate how differing institutional and geopolitical environments influence youth perceptions of non-military security threats.

The research sample comprised 308 young respondents aged between 18 and 30 years, including 203 individuals from Bosnia and Herzegovina and 105 from Croatia. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure diversity in terms of gender, educational background, and geographic location within each country. While this approach does not allow for full statistical generalizability, it enables an in-depth exploration of emerging trends and attitudes among youth populations that are often underrepresented in security studies.

Data collection was conducted via an online questionnaire distributed between May and August 2024. The survey instrument included both closed- and open-ended questions designed

to assess familiarity with soft security concepts, perceived importance of various security threats, trust in national governments and international organizations, and expectations for future security challenges. Key areas of focus encompassed economic insecurity, organized crime and corruption, climate change, social inequality, and the role of both national and international actors in addressing these issues.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods, including regression analysis and correlation tests, to examine relationships between variables such as education level, gender, country of residence, and perceived familiarity with soft security concepts. Additionally, comparative analyses were conducted to identify significant differences between the two national contexts. The research also incorporated theoretical frameworks, particularly securitization theory, to interpret how young people frame and prioritize certain issues as security threats. This lens enabled a deeper understanding of the discursive and institutional processes that shape perceptions of non-traditional security risks.

Finally, ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and data confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to protect participant privacy and encourage honest, reflective responses.

### **Soft Security Trends and Perceptions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia – Discussion and Results**

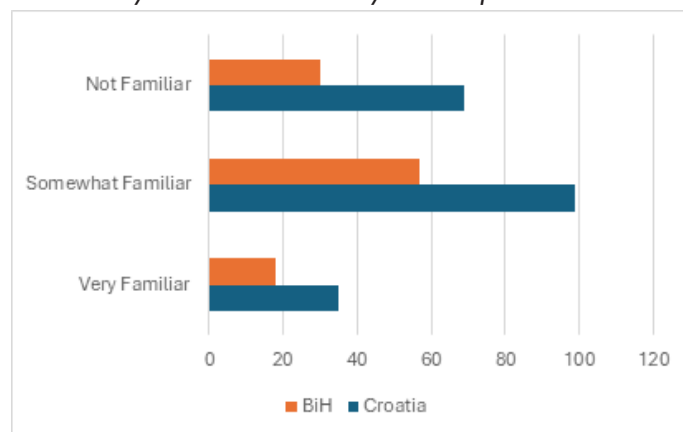
As previously mentioned, soft security encompasses non-military threats such as economic instability, environmental degradation, cyber threats, and social fragmentation. It focuses on non-traditional, non-realist security threats and aligns closely with the concept of human security—a notion popularized by the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report of 1994. This framework positions the individual as the primary referent object of security, thereby departing from the traditional state-centric perspective (Hough et al., 2020). The survey findings indicate that young people possess a moderate level of awareness regarding soft security issues and are familiar with their implications in their daily lives. This aligns with previous research, such as the UNDP's Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace

in the Western Balkans report, which notes that while youth are aware of various security challenges, they often lack a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of these issues (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). This observation further underscores the need for enhanced educational initiatives aimed at deepening young people's comprehension of soft security dynamics.

### **Familiarity of Soft Security**

When comparing the results, the majority of respondents in Croatia reported being somewhat familiar with the concept of soft security. A similar trend was observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, a slightly higher proportion of respondents there indicated that they were not familiar with the concept.

**Figure 1.**  
*Familiarity with Soft Security Concepts.*



The trends remain broadly similar in both countries, with only a slight increase in the proportion of respondents who reported being "very familiar" with soft security issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Regression analysis revealed that the country of residence did not have a statistically significant effect on familiarity ( $p = 0.51$ ), although the coefficient for residing in Croatia was positive ( $\beta \approx +0.06$ ). This indicates a marginal increase in mean familiarity among Croatian respondents; however, the effect size is very small and not statistically reliable. These findings suggest that merely living in an EU member state does not necessarily enhance youth familiarity with soft security issues, particularly when such topics are not sufficiently emphasized in educational curricula or public discourse.

Even if the observed significance is not statistically robust, it is essential to consider Croatia's

evolving security environment in the aftermath of the conflicts of the 1990s. Following this period, Croatia undertook important institutional reforms, centralizing its political system and establishing a semi-presidential regime. Nevertheless, initial security strategies remained focused on traditional, state-centered threats. For example, the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2002 entirely omitted issues such as organized crime, corruption, and the informal economy, as well as the human-centric approach to security (Szerencsés, 2021).

In contrast, the most recent NSS, published in 2017, reflects the significant influence of Croatia's EU and NATO membership on its security policies and perspectives. This updated strategy incorporates the concept of human security and addresses soft security challenges, including organized crime, corruption, and migration. Croatia's strategic location along key trafficking routes used by organized crime groups for smuggling arms, people, drugs, and other illicit goods underscores the urgency of these issues (Government of Croatia, 2017).

The inclusion of soft security concerns in the NSS is particularly relevant when viewed through the lens of securitization theory, which examines how issues are transformed into existential threats through discursive practices. According to Otukoya (2024), seemingly ordinary challenges, such as economic crises, can be framed as threats to a referent object of security, thereby justifying extraordinary measures. Furthermore, scholars such as Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde emphasize that security is not a fixed concept but rather fluid and performative, constructed through language and social interactions.

The Croatian NSS explicitly frames soft security issues—such as migration, economic instability, and corruption—as threats to the referent object of security, with a pronounced focus on human security. This framing helps explain the slightly higher familiarity with soft security concepts among respondents in Croatia, as the continual securitization of these issues fosters greater public awareness through government communications, media narratives, and official discourse.

Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks a unified NSS, largely due to its complex federal consociational structure, which comprises two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. Persistent ethnonational

tensions continue to impede cooperation on security and related matters. Although a security policy was adopted by the Presidency on February 8, 2006, it has not been updated since. This document emphasizes environmental protection, water resource management, equal access to social rights, and improved financial discipline to ensure economic stability (Bajramović, 2024).

Given that Bosnia and Herzegovina's security policy is increasingly outdated and does not adequately address new geopolitical and security challenges that have emerged in the region since 2006, it can be cautiously argued that this may contribute to the slightly lower familiarity with soft security concepts among its youth. The lack of systematic securitization and corresponding public discourse limits their exposure to these issues, unlike in Croatia, where such topics are more actively incorporated into national security frameworks and public communication.

Further research is needed to examine additional variables, such as the influence of news media, social media, and the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the context in both countries and to enable a more robust and nuanced analysis.

#### Impact of Education on Familiarity of Soft Security Concepts

The majority of respondents in Croatia either hold a bachelor's degree or are currently pursuing one, while a smaller percentage possess a master's degree. There are very few respondents among high school students. The high proportion of individuals with a bachelor's degree or currently enrolled in such programs suggests greater access to higher education and potentially higher levels of awareness regarding security issues.

In contrast, while the majority of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina have also completed a bachelor's degree, this percentage is slightly lower compared to Croatia. Additionally, there are fewer respondents with a master's degree and only a very small number of high school students. The increased proportion of respondents with only a high school education in Bosnia and Herzegovina indicates potentially lower exposure to security-related concepts during secondary education.

According to a study conducted by the OECD (OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Bosnia and Herzegovina), a significant number of students in Bosnia and Herzegovina complete their education without mastering basic competencies, reflecting broader challenges in educational quality. Furthermore, the number of students enrolled in basic and secondary education has been declining as a result of demographic changes (Guthrie et al., 2022). This trend has persisted, as demonstrated in the most recent analysis conducted in September 2024.

Nevertheless, Bosnia and Herzegovina maintains relatively high overall youth educational attainment, albeit with limited participation in higher education. Notably, the finding that most respondents with a bachelor's degree in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported being "not so familiar" with the concept of soft security—and that only a small percentage indicated being "somewhat familiar," with almost no respondents identifying as "very familiar"—suggests a generally lower level of awareness of soft security issues. This pattern implies that security-related education is insufficiently integrated even into university curricula, further underscoring the need for targeted educational reforms to enhance student familiarity with contemporary security concepts.

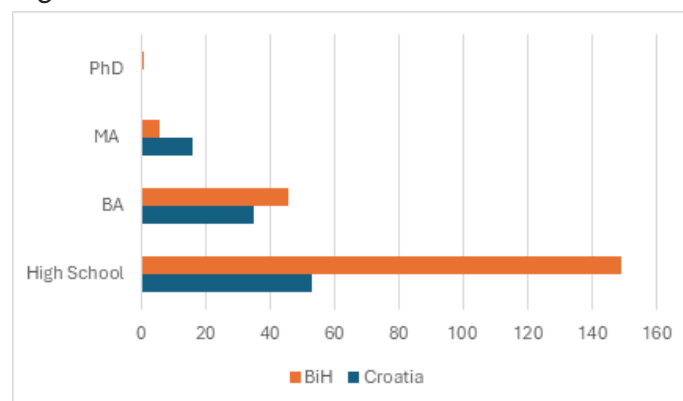
In contrast, a higher percentage of Croatian respondents holding or pursuing a bachelor's degree reported a moderate awareness of soft security issues, with a smaller proportion indicating that they were "not familiar." This suggests that exposure to security-related topics in Croatia is somewhat more prevalent than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, it is notable that only a very small number of respondents expressed a high degree of familiarity, highlighting persistent gaps in in-depth knowledge. The Croatian National Security Strategy explicitly aims to integrate cybersecurity and other security-related elements into formal education curricula, spanning from preschool to higher education. This initiative reflects an increased commitment to fostering comprehensive knowledge of soft security concepts among young people, and it may contribute to gradually improving overall familiarity and engagement in the coming years (SOA, 2017).

A Spearman's correlation test was conducted to examine the relationship between education level and familiarity with soft security concepts in

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. The  $\rho$  value for Bosnia and Herzegovina was 0.04, indicating that there is no significant correlation between education level and familiarity with soft security concepts. For the Croatian sample, the  $\rho$  value was slightly higher at 0.14; however, this still represents a weak correlation and is not statistically significant. These findings suggest that educational curricula at both the secondary and university levels in both countries may continue to prioritize traditional security issues, thereby limiting students' exposure to contemporary soft security topics.

Additionally, the relationship between respondents' perceptions of how much soft security issues affect their daily lives and their familiarity with these concepts was examined. The correlation between the variables "How much do soft security issues affect your daily life?" and familiarity was positive but very weak (Spearman  $\rho \approx 0.07$ ). Even among those who indicated that these issues significantly impact their daily lives, few reported a high level of familiarity with the concept of soft security. This suggests a potential gap between lived experience and conceptual understanding, where individuals may feel the daily effects of economic instability or social fragmentation but do not explicitly identify or interpret these challenges within the framework of soft security. Such a disconnect underscores the importance of targeted educational and awareness initiatives to bridge this gap and foster a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between individual experiences and broader security frameworks.

**Figure 2.**  
*Highest Achieved Education Level.*





### Impact of Gender on Familiarity of Soft Security Concepts

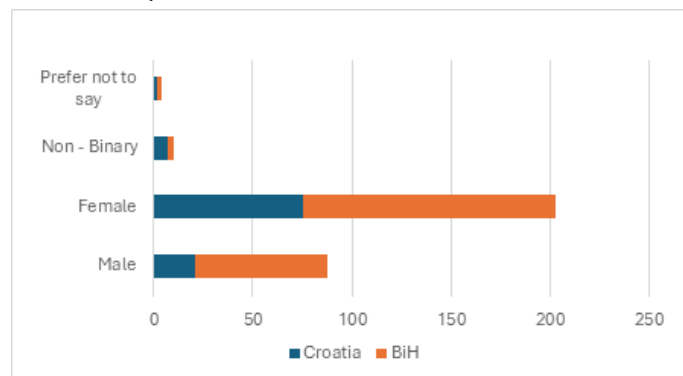
Meanwhile, gender emerged as a factor of small but notable significance. In a regression model where females were coded as 0 and males as 1, and familiarity with soft security was coded as "Not familiar" = 0, "Somewhat familiar" = 1, and "Very familiar" = 2, the relationship between gender and familiarity among respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina was analyzed. The model yielded an  $R^2$  of 0.053, indicating that gender explains approximately 5.3% of the variance in familiarity with soft security concepts. This suggests that gender does exert some influence, though its overall impact is limited.

On average, female respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina reported a familiarity score of 0.71, suggesting they lean toward being "not familiar" but with some tendency toward "somewhat familiar." In contrast, the average familiarity score for male respondents was 1.04, indicating they are, on average, closer to being "somewhat familiar." The p-value for the gender coefficient was 0.0012, demonstrating that the gender difference is statistically significant. A 95% confidence interval was applied to this model, indicating 95% confidence that the true effect of gender lies between +0.13 and +0.53. Since this interval does not include zero, it can be concluded that gender has a genuine and statistically significant effect on familiarity with soft security concepts among the surveyed population.

The same model was applied to examine the relationship between gender and familiarity with soft security concepts among respondents from Croatia. However, this model demonstrated very low explanatory power, with gender accounting for only 3.6% of the variance in familiarity. Moreover, the adjusted  $R^2$  did not improve the model's explanatory capacity. On average, female respondents reported a familiarity score of 0.84, suggesting low familiarity but approaching a medium level. Male respondents exhibited a higher average score of 1.14, indicating a familiarity level closer to "somewhat familiar." Despite these differences, the p-value for the gender coefficient indicates that the model is not statistically significant at the 5% confidence level. At a 95% confidence interval, the effect of gender on familiarity was found to be statistically insignificant, as the interval includes zero (-0.02 to +0.63). As illustrated in Figure 3, the majority of respondents from both countries identified as female. Other gender categories, such as "non-

binary," were represented but in numbers too small to be statistically significant.

**Figure 3.**  
*Gender Representation*



The stronger gender effect observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina may be attributed to social and educational differences in how security-related topics are discussed and perceived. Existing data on gender and civic participation in the Western Balkans suggest that women in Bosnia and Herzegovina face more significant structural barriers to engaging in security-related discussions compared to women in Croatia. In Croatia, EU membership has facilitated the implementation of policies that promote gender inclusiveness in both education and public discourse. Previous research supports this argument, indicating that women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are frequently underrepresented in policy discussions concerning both hard and soft security issues (UNDP, 2021). Gender mainstreaming in the security sector was perceived as a foreign concept in Bosnia and Herzegovina twenty years ago and proved challenging to transpose into practice. Neither the political elite of Bosnia and Herzegovina nor representatives of the international community fully recognized the importance of integrating gender considerations into security sector reforms during the 2000s (Delić, 2021).

Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted formal policies on gender equality, such as the National Action Plan (NAP) on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, "Women, Peace and Security." The latest iteration of this plan (2018–2022) includes strategic objectives aimed at:

- Increasing women's participation in military forces, police, and peacekeeping missions, including in decision-making positions;

- Enhancing human security from a gender equality perspective;
- Improving conditions and access for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 (Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2018).

The implementation of National Action Plans (NAPs) has led to some progress in this area, including the establishment of gender focal points within security institutions and increased awareness of gender issues. However, several challenges persist. These include the limited increase in women's participation in decision-making roles within the security sector, the insufficient integration of gender perspectives into security policies and practices, and the need for more robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of implemented measures. Additionally, the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina stipulates that equal gender representation is achieved when one sex is represented by at least 40% of the total number of candidates on electoral lists (Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2001). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this provision has proven limited. Persistent issues include non-compliance by political parties with quota and ranking requirements, the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms to ensure adherence, and deeply rooted cultural and societal norms that continue to hinder women's political participation.

Women's political participation in decision-making processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina is often constrained by dominant male political power structures. Prevailing traditional and conservative societal views create the illusion that politics is a domain reserved exclusively for men, thereby perpetuating a politics of exclusion and distancing women from having a constructive impact on policy-making processes (Mulalić & Karić, 2020). These findings indicate that women are frequently marginalized and excluded from discussions and conceptual frameworks related to security. This marginalization effectively denies them the opportunity to influence decisions concerning their own safety, both in terms of hard security and soft security threats, which are often interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Respondents from Croatia did not exhibit statistically significant variations that could be attributed to gender, presenting a markedly different picture from that observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the European Institute for

Gender Equality (EIGE, 2024), participation in lifelong learning in Croatia remains above the 2010 level, at 13%, with increased participation among both young women and men, as well as among individuals with lower levels of education. The same source notes that women's representation in political decision-making in Croatia generally aligns with the EU average, with the exception of ministerial positions. Croatia's commitment to gender equality is explicitly articulated in its constitution, which was amended in 2000 to establish gender equality as a fundamental value. This commitment was further reinforced by the Gender Equality Act, consolidated in 2008 and updated in 2017, thereby providing a robust legal framework for promoting gender equality across all aspects of national policy. This stands in stark contrast to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where comparable legal provisions have not been integrated into the constitution.

The implementation of Croatia's first National Action Plan (NAP I) has significantly contributed to raising awareness and building the capacities of state agencies and authorities engaged in enhancing the role of women in peacekeeping policies and in the security and defense sectors. It has also facilitated the integration of gender perspectives across all processes and activities within these fields (Government of Croatia, 2019). Furthermore, substantial efforts have been made to incorporate gender perspectives into educational programs, aiming to challenge traditional gender roles and promote equality from an early age.

### **Relationship Between Country of Residence and Level of Trust in National Governments and International Organizations**

Interpreting the tested correlation between country of residence and level of trust in national governments, the analysis revealed a very weak relationship, with the regression model explaining only 0.63% of the variation. The negative coefficient suggests that Croatian respondents, on average, reported slightly lower trust in their national government compared to respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the p-value of the model exceeds 0.5, indicating that the effect is not statistically significant and that there is no strong evidence to support the conclusion that country of residence has a real impact on trust in national government. Research conducted by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung further supports this interpretation, highlighting a

widespread dissatisfaction among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina toward government institutions. This dissatisfaction is largely attributed to perceptions of institutional incapacity to effectively address contemporary challenges, crises, and social turbulence (Heinrich Böll Foundation & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024). Additionally, a Youth Study conducted in 2024 reported that only 10% of young people in Croatia expressed trust in their government (Institut za društvena istraživanja & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024).

However, when comparing the level of trust in international organizations to address soft security issues among respondents from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, important differences emerge. The regression model indicates a significant difference in trust levels, with Croatian respondents reporting, on average, 1.16 points higher trust compared to respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The average trust score among respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina was 1.37. Notably, this model explains 42.6% of the variance in trust in international organizations, and it is statistically significant ( $F = 226.76$ ). According to MEASURE – BiH (2022), youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina ranked religious institutions as the most trusted, while government institutions received the lowest levels of trust. Trust in international institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs) was also relatively low, with 57% of respondents indicating low trust, 21% indicating medium trust, and 20% indicating high trust.

According to Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2024), distrust in EU institutions among the youth population in Bosnia and Herzegovina is high (53.9%), while distrust in NATO is even higher (66.4%). This reflects ongoing political and social dynamics, particularly in the context of ethnonational politics and narratives that redirect blame from national institutions to international actors. Specifically, such narratives often frame external institutions and other countries as responsible for the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, frequently referencing the General Framework Agreement for Peace as a focal point for this blame-shifting. There is some evidence to support this interpretation, as stabilization has historically been prioritized over democratization in the country (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024).

In contrast, research by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2019) found that in Croatia, one-third of

respondents expressed trust in religious institutions and volunteer movements, while approximately one-quarter placed their trust in the European Union, media, civil society organizations (CSOs), the United Nations, and NATO (with 29% indicating trust in the EU, 23% in the UN, and 22% in NATO). The study further revealed that youth in Croatia generally maintain favorable views of the EU, associating it with opportunities for education, employment, and travel. While 39% of Croatian youth believe that developments at the EU level are moving in the wrong direction, about one-third remain optimistic. Additionally, one-third of young people in Croatia hold positive expectations for the future of the next generation within the EU, whereas nearly half believe the situation will remain largely unchanged (PROMISE Project, 2019).

### **Correlation Between Belief in International Cooperation's Contribution to Soft Security**

A simple regression model was employed with the dependent variable being the belief that international cooperation contributes to addressing soft security issues while controlling for independent variables such as trust in international organizations and country of residence. This model provided further detailed evidence regarding the role of trust in international organizations within the context of soft security.

The analysis indicated that approximately 36.5% of the variation in beliefs about the contribution of international cooperation is explained by trust in international organizations and country of residence. Trust in international organizations emerged as a highly significant predictor, with results showing that for every one-point increase in trust in international organizations, belief in the value of international cooperation increases by 0.60 points.

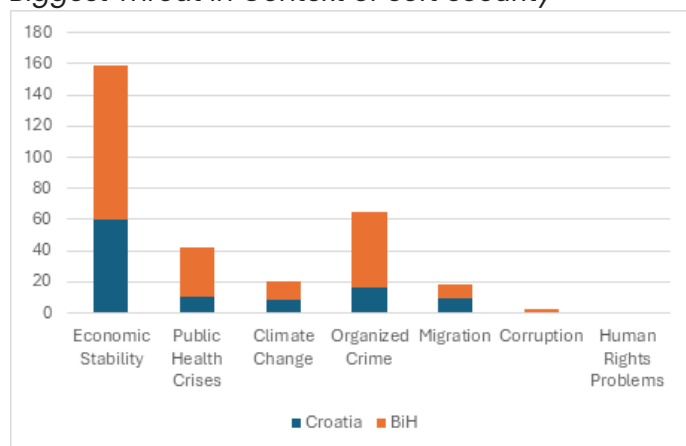
Regarding country of residence, Croatian youth, on average, rated the contribution of international cooperation 0.44 points higher than their counterparts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

These findings reinforce that both institutional trust and the context of EU membership play a significant role in shaping youth perceptions of the value of international cooperation and the role of international organizations in addressing soft security challenges.

### Youth Opinions and Perceptions of Soft Security Problems

Regarding perceptions of the most significant current threat in the context of soft security, 60 respondents from Croatia identified economic stability as the greatest threat. Organized crime and migration ranked as the second and third most significant concerns, respectively. Respondents from Croatia expressed the least concern about corruption and human rights issues. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, economic stability was also identified as the primary threat, followed by organized crime in second place and public health crises in third. Respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, like their Croatian counterparts, were least concerned about corruption and human rights problems.

**Figure 4.**  
*Biggest Threat in Context of Soft Security*

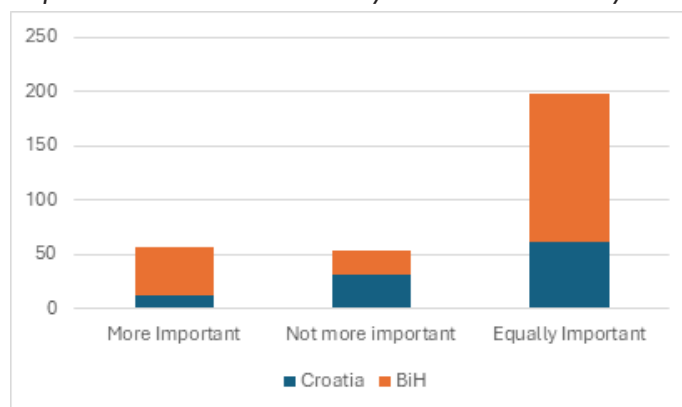


Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina assign relatively greater importance to hard security compared to their peers in Croatia; however, overall, respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina still perceive hard and soft security as equally important. In contrast, Croatian youth also consider hard and soft security to hold equivalent importance, yet they are less inclined to prioritize hard security over soft security than their counterparts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, a higher proportion of Croatian respondents explicitly indicated that hard security is not more important than soft security.

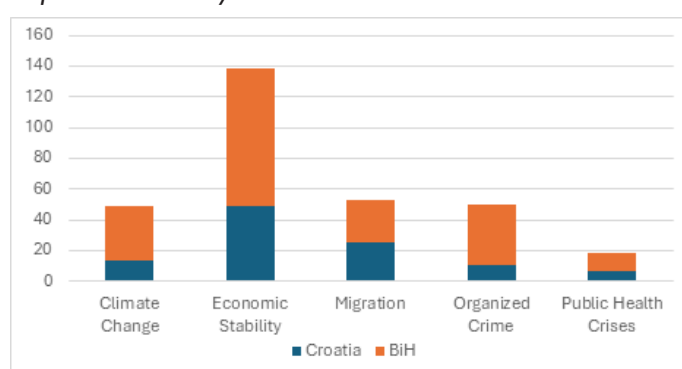
Youth in Croatia anticipate that over the next ten years, economic stability and migration will constitute the most significant soft security challenges. In contrast, respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina expect economic stability and organized crime to be the most pressing issues in the coming decade. Notably, climate change

and public health crises were the least frequently identified as future concerns by youth in both countries.

**Figure 5.**  
*Importance of Hard Security over Soft Security*



**Figure 6.**  
*Top Soft Security Problems in the next 10 Years*

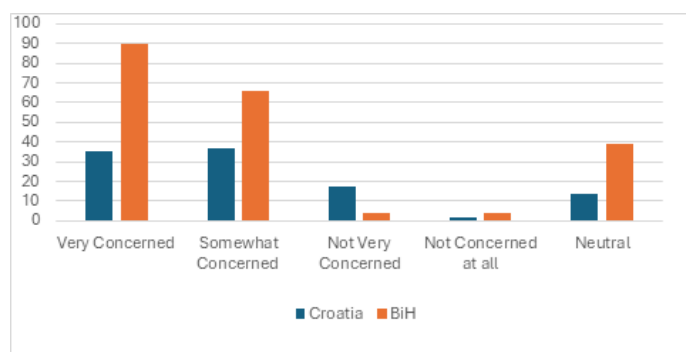


### Environmental Issues and Climate Change

Respondents from Croatia appear significantly less concerned about climate change than their counterparts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey found that, among Croatian respondents, 35 reported being very concerned about environmental issues, 37 somewhat concerned, 17 not very concerned, 2 not concerned at all, and 14 provided neutral responses. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the distribution differed notably, with 90 respondents indicating they were very concerned, 66 somewhat concerned, 4 not very concerned, and 39 offering neutral responses. While the majority of respondents in both countries expressed at least some level of concern for environmental issues, the proportion of youth demonstrating active concern was higher in Bosnia and Herzegovina (78.4%) compared to Croatia (68.5%).



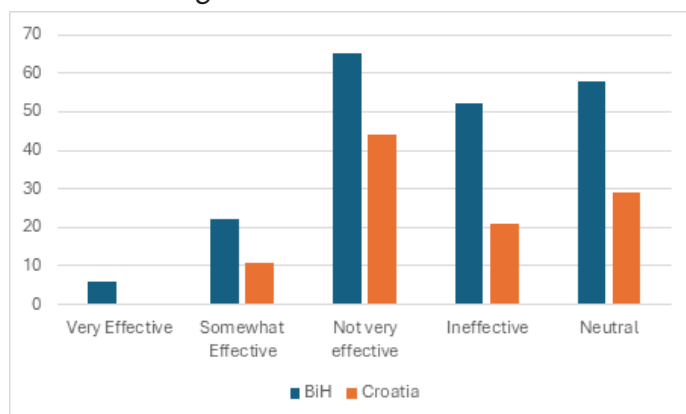
**Figure 7.**  
*Level of Concern for Environmental Issues*



### Role of National Government in Addressing Climate Change Issues

Respondents from both countries perceive their national governments as highly ineffective in addressing climate change issues. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25.6% of respondents described their government as ineffective, 32% as not very effective, 10.8% as somewhat effective, 3% as very effective, and 28.6% remained neutral. Among respondents from Croatia, 20% characterized their government as ineffective, 41.9% as not very effective, 10.5% as somewhat effective, none as very effective, and 27.6% remained neutral.

**Figure 8.**  
*Role of National Governments in Addressing Climate Change Issues*

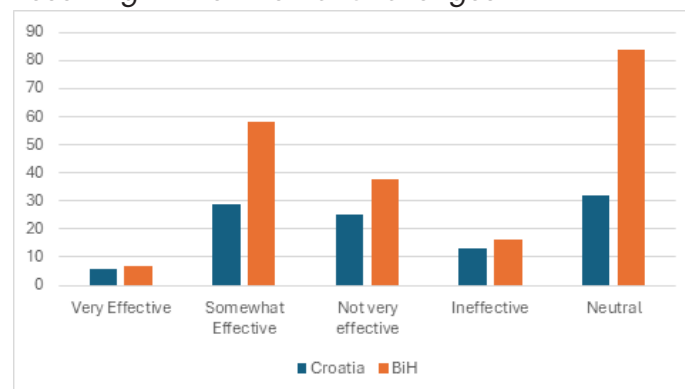


### Role of International Organizations in Addressing Climate Change Issues

Regarding the assessment of the role of international organizations in addressing climate change, youth from both countries expressed moderate confidence in their effectiveness. Among respondents from Croatia, 5.71% considered the role of international organizations to be very effective,

27.62% somewhat effective, 23.81% not very effective, 12.38% ineffective, and 30.48% remained neutral. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3.45% of respondents rated international organizations as very effective, 28.57% as somewhat effective, 18.72% as not very effective, 7.88% as ineffective, and 41.38% expressed a neutral stance.

**Figure 9.**  
*Effectiveness of International Organizations in Resolving Environmental Challenges*



The substantial percentage of neutral responses in Bosnia and Herzegovina suggests that a significant segment of youth lacks sufficient information regarding the specific actions and impacts of international organizations on climate change, resulting in an inability to form strong positive or negative opinions. Additionally, consistent with previous findings, this may reflect a broader skepticism toward international bodies.

### Belief in Climate Change Being a Threat to National Security

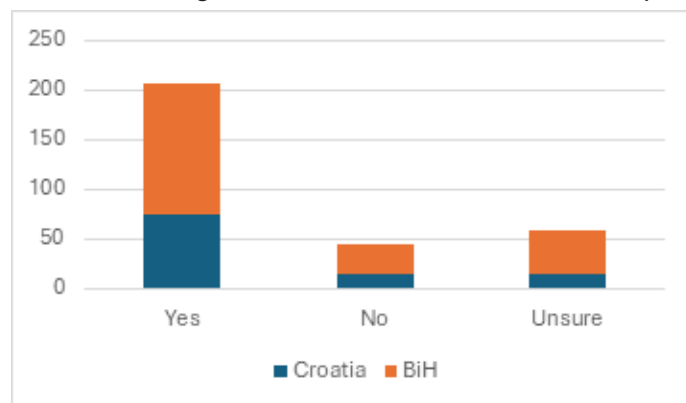
Youth in Croatia perceive climate change as a threat to national security to a significantly greater extent than their peers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Specifically, 64.53% of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina agreed that climate change poses a national security threat, 14.28% disagreed, and 21.18% were unsure. In contrast, 71.43% of respondents in Croatia agreed with this statement, 14.29% disagreed, and 14.29% expressed uncertainty.

A notable difference emerges in the level of uncertainty between the two countries, with youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina being significantly more unsure compared to their Croatian counterparts. This may indicate a greater lack of information specifically concerning the security implications of climate change, the perceived complexity of

linking environmental issues to national security, or perhaps a less prominent public discourse around climate change as a security threat in Bosnia and Herzegovina compared to Croatia.

Correlating this with previous findings, the higher level of uncertainty aligns with the observed lower levels of trust in international organizations among respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina. This may suggest limited interaction with actors actively engaged in environmental and climate security issues, thereby contributing to the information gap identified among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Figure 10.**  
*Climate Change as a Threat to National Security*



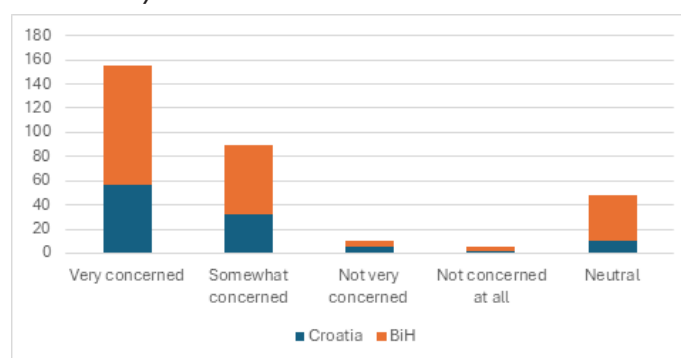
### Unemployment and Economic Stability

Respondents from both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed high levels of concern regarding unemployment and economic stability. Among respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 48.8% reported being very concerned, 30.5% somewhat concerned, 2.5% not very concerned, 1.5% not concerned at all, and 18.7% provided neutral responses. These results indicate that a combined 77.4% of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed high or moderate concern about economic stability and unemployment, with fewer than 5% reporting low levels of concern.

The situation in Croatia is similar, albeit with minor variations. Among Croatian respondents, 53.3% reported being very concerned about unemployment and economic stability, 30.5% somewhat concerned, 4.8% not very concerned, 1.9% not concerned at all, and 9.5% provided neutral responses. These findings indicate that 83.8% of Croatian respondents expressed either strong or moderate concern, demonstrating a comparable

overall level of concern to that in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the slightly higher proportion of respondents expressing strong concern and the lower percentage of neutral responses suggest a more pronounced perception of economic vulnerability among Croatian youth.

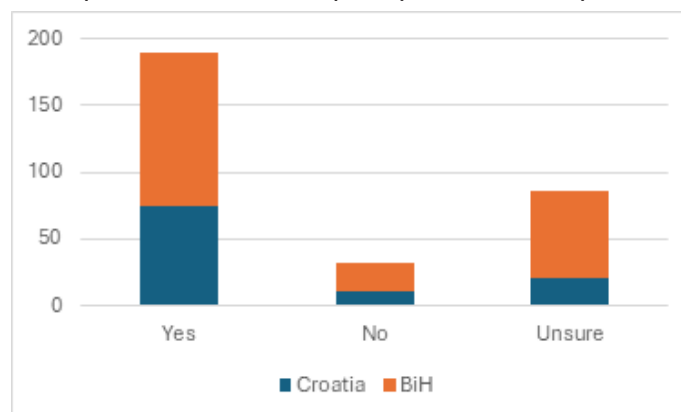
**Figure 11.**  
*Unemployment and Economic Stability as Security Threats*



### Perception of Social Inequality as a Soft Security Threat

Regarding the perception of social inequality as a security threat, 70.5% of youth in Croatia agreed with the statement, 9.5% disagreed, and 20% reported being unsure. The pattern in Bosnia and Herzegovina was similar but demonstrated greater uncertainty: 57.1% of respondents agreed, 10.8% disagreed, and 32% were unsure. A clear majority in both countries recognize social inequality as a serious security concern, with Croatian respondents showing a stronger overall consensus.

**Figure 12.**  
*Perception of Social Inequality as a Security Threat*



The higher level of uncertainty among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina may suggest either limited exposure to this topic in public discourse or a

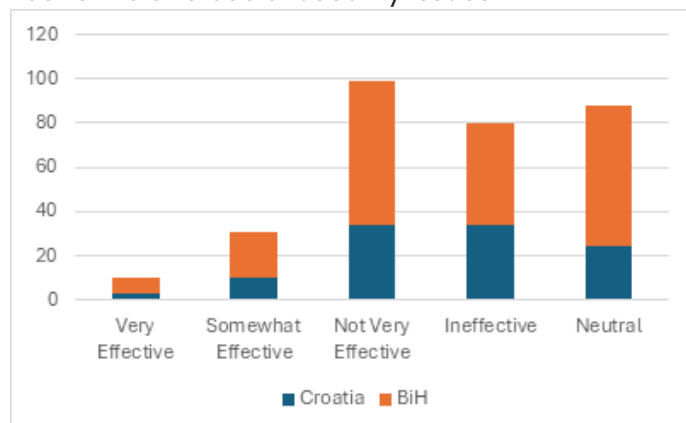
more complex relationship between socioeconomic disparities and perceived insecurity—an area warranting further research to elucidate the underlying causes.

### Effectiveness of National Government and International Organizations in Addressing Economic and Social Security Issues

Respondents from both countries perceive their national governments as largely ineffective in addressing economic and social security issues. Among youth in Croatia, 2.9% rated the national government as very effective, 9.5% as somewhat effective, 32.4% as not very effective, 32.4% as ineffective, and 22.9% remained neutral. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3.4% of respondents considered the national government to be very effective, 10.3% somewhat effective, 32% not very effective, 22.7% ineffective, and 31.5% provided neutral responses.

**Figure 13.**

National Government Effectiveness in Addressing Economic and Social Security Issues

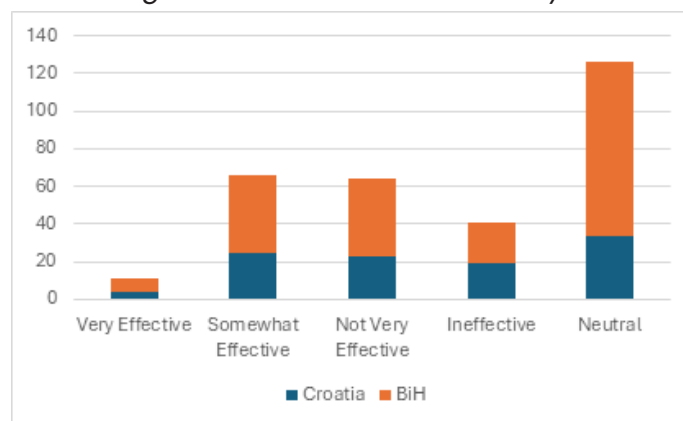


Respondents from Croatia reported the following evaluations regarding the effectiveness of international organizations (IOs) in addressing economic and social security issues: 3.8% rated them as very effective, 23.8% as somewhat effective, 21.9% as not very effective, 18.1% as ineffective, and 32.4% remained neutral. Among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3.4% considered IOs to be very effective, 20.2% somewhat effective, 20.2% not very effective, 10.8% ineffective, and 45.3% remained neutral. In Croatia, approximately 27.6% of respondents expressed some degree of confidence in IOs, while 40% expressed doubt. The relatively high level of neutrality (32.4%) may indicate uncertainty or a lack of exposure to the engagement of IOs in economic and social issues. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 23.6% of respondents viewed IOs as effective, while

31% expressed negative opinions. Notably, nearly half (45.3%) of respondents remained neutral, suggesting either institutional detachment or a lack of perceived visibility and impact of IOs in domestic economic affairs.

**Figure 14.**

International Organizations' Effectiveness in Addressing Economic and Social Security Issues



Overall, confidence levels in both countries remain modest, with fewer than 30% of youth affirming the effectiveness of international organizations in addressing economic and social security challenges.

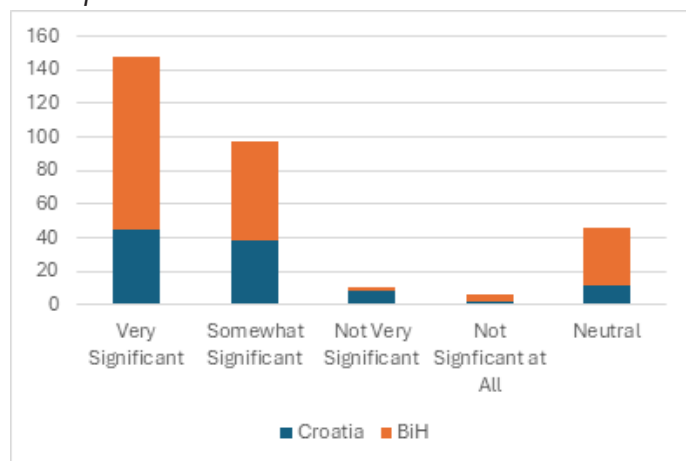
### Organized Crime and Corruption

#### Perceived Threat of Organized Crime and Corruption

Approximately 42.9% of respondents from Croatia consider the threat of organized crime and corruption to be very significant, while 36.2% view it as somewhat significant, 7.6% as not very significant, 1.9% as not significant at all, and 11.4% remained neutral. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 50.7% of respondents regard this threat as very significant, 29.1% as somewhat significant, 1.5% as not very significant, 2% as not significant at all, and 16.7% expressed a neutral stance. Overall, 79.1% of Croatian youth perceive organized crime and corruption as a significant or very significant threat, compared to 79.8% of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Notably, respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrated a higher proportion identifying it as a "very significant" threat relative to their Croatian counterparts. The higher rate of neutrality in Bosnia and Herzegovina may suggest political fatigue or the normalization of corruption as a persistent background condition in daily life. While Croatian respondents also acknowledge the severity of the

threat, their more balanced distribution between "very significant" and "somewhat significant" categories may reflect comparatively stronger trust in the rule of law and institutional capacity to address such issues.

**Figure 15.**  
*Perceived Threat of Organized Crime and Corruption*



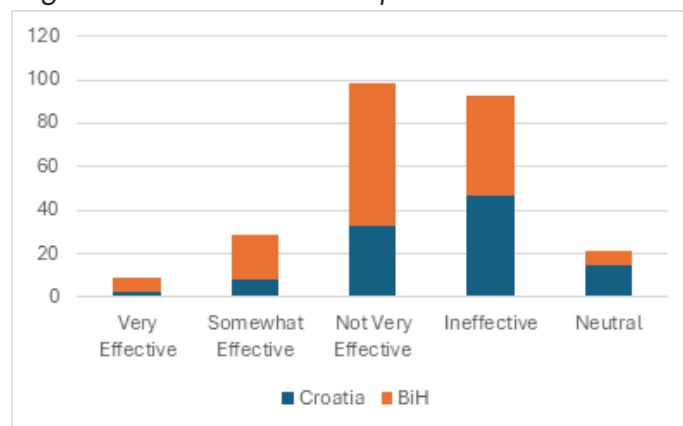
### Effectiveness of National Governments and International Organizations in Addressing Organized Crime and Corruption

Youth in both countries express strong dissatisfaction with the performance of their national governments in addressing organized crime and corruption, with negative evaluations overwhelmingly outweighing positive ones. In Croatia, 1.9% of respondents rated the government's role as very effective, 7.6% as somewhat effective, 31.4% as not very effective, 44.8% as ineffective, and 14.3% remained neutral. Overall, 76.2% of Croatian youth expressed a negative perception of their government's handling of organized crime and corruption. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4.8% of respondents viewed the government as very effective, 14.5% as somewhat effective, 44.8% as not very effective, 31.7% as ineffective, and 4.1% remained neutral. Similarly, 76.5% of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina provided negative evaluations of their government's performance in this area.

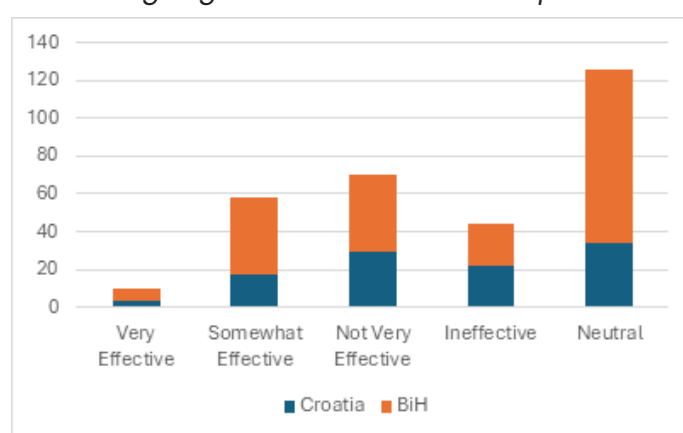
While trust in IOs remains relatively moderate across both Croatia and BiH, youth express far more scepticism when evaluating the effectiveness of these institutions in combating organized crime and corruption. Only 19.1% of Croatian Youth and 23.6% of BiH youth see IOs as effective in this domain. Nearly half of BiH respondents (45.3%) opted for a neutral

response, suggesting a lack of visible international engagement or insufficient communication around ongoing efforts.

**Figure 16.**  
*National Governments' Effectiveness in Addressing Organized Crime and Corruption*



**Figure 17.**  
*International Organizations' Effectiveness in Addressing Organized Crime and Corruption*



Generalized trust in IOs is much higher than in task specific domains.

### Conclusion

This study offers a critical contribution to the evolving scholarship on security studies in the Western Balkans by illuminating youth perceptions of soft security challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Moving beyond conventional, state-centric conceptions of security, the findings reveal that young people in both contexts increasingly prioritize non-military threats, particularly economic instability and corruption, as core security concerns. Despite Croatia's



EU membership and Bosnia and Herzegovina's ongoing struggles with fragmented governance, both countries exhibit comparable patterns of institutional distrust and limited familiarity with soft security concepts, underscoring structural deficiencies in civic and security education.

By centering youth perspectives—often marginalized in security discourse—this research addresses a significant gap in the literature and underscores the necessity of integrating youth voices into policy development. The findings highlight an urgent imperative for the formulation of youth-oriented policy measures that not only address immediate socio-economic vulnerabilities but also foster civic literacy, institutional trust, and meaningful participation in democratic processes. Strengthening these dimensions is vital for enhancing societal resilience and consolidating long-term regional stability.

Moreover, the study elucidates the critical role of international organizations and transnational cooperation in addressing soft security challenges. However, the prevailing skepticism toward these actors observed among respondents suggests the need for more transparent, inclusive, and context-sensitive engagement strategies.

While the cross-sectional design provides valuable insights into current attitudes, the absence of longitudinal data limits the ability to capture the dynamic evolution of youth perceptions over time. Future research should thus incorporate longitudinal methodologies, qualitative interviews, and comparative analyses across additional regional and demographic contexts to deepen understanding of these complex dynamics. Additionally, investigating the influence of digital media, informal civic networks, and educational interventions represents a promising avenue for further inquiry.

Ultimately, investing in youth as active stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries is paramount for cultivating inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable security architectures in the Western Balkans. Recognizing and harnessing the transformative potential of youth will be essential for translating policy aspirations into enduring regional peace and cohesion.

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