

# PERCEPTION OF EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION BY STUDENTS AND YOUNG POLITICIANS IN BANJA LUKA

The background of the slide is a light cream color, decorated with numerous triangles of various sizes and colors. The colors include soft pinks, light blues, pale yellows, and muted purples. These triangles are scattered across the page, some pointing upwards and others downwards, creating a modern, geometric pattern.

Within the project "Integration 2020-2030",  
two focus groups were organized consisting of  
students from the University of Banja Luka  
and members of political parties from the Republika Srpska.

We present the results of the data collected.

## STUDENTS – BANJA LUKA

The focus group with students in Banja Luka was held on September 29 at 11:00 a.m. Nine students participated in the focus group - five were male and four were female - all of different ages and from different faculties. The conditions for holding the focus group were satisfactory. Respondents were familiar with the discussion topic only to some extent and could not prepare their presentations in advance. The atmosphere during the work of the focus group was relaxed and the impression was that the participants were sincere.

### 1. Associations on NATO

Negative associations predominate among the participants and those are:

- ✚ bombing,
- ✚ bombing of key military centers in Serbia,
- ✚ crimes,
- ✚ March 1999,
- ✚ killed civilians,
- ✚ Coca Cola was bottled in Hadžići and it was contaminated.

Among the neutral associations mentioned are:

- ✚ US military on European soil,
- ✚ military alliance.

Interestingly, no one mentioned anything positive about .

Perfectly expected, the emotions that accompany negative attitudes are: fear, hatred, injustice, and sadness. In a small number of respondents, NATO does not provoke any emotions. It turned out that they look at NATO bombing differently. They do not justify NATO, but they cannot put all the blame on it.

### 2. Knowledge about NATO

It seems that the students do not know much about NATO. They evaluated their knowledge with mark 2 thinking that even that poor knowledge is quite enough to create their attitude on the aforementioned military alliance.

Their knowledge of NATO is superficial, they know some basic facts:

- ✚ when it was formed,
- ✚ how many members there are,
- ✚ military alliance.

They are usually informed through:

- ✚ media (Russia Today, Al Jazeera and CNN),
- ✚ faculties of social sciences,
- ✚ Internet.

Two students visited the NATO website stating that there is nothing true to be read there.

The impression gained was that they are completely satisfied with the knowledge they possess without showing a desire to deepen their knowledge. They cite Malagurski's film "The Weight of Chains" as an important source of information about the disintegration of Yugoslavia and later events in the Balkans.

Only one student knew that "Merciful Angel" was a false name for the operation of the NATO forces in Serbia in 1999.

It seems that young people are most informed about the alliance at the faculty (law, political sciences, philosophy), where NATO is perceived as an aggressive military alliance directed against people who do not agree with NATO policy (Syria, Libya, Iraq, Serbia, Russia), and on which international law does not apply.

Talking about NATO, depleted uranium is very often mentioned, a thing which the respondents do not know much about, but they emphasize that it is much worse than the bombing itself carrying more serious consequences for the health of the citizens.

They know nothing about the experiences of the countries in the region (Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary) with NATO integration, but it seems to them that Croatia has not benefited much from joining the alliance.

They know absolutely nothing about the agreements that BiH has signed with NATO so far, even last year's politicization of the ANP did not move them much. None of them read the document.

### **3. Pros and cons of joining NATO**

The majority of respondents believe that BiH should not join the NATO alliance, and a considerate smaller number of respondents believe that we should remain neutral.

Talking about the reasons why we should not join NATO, it can be said that these are primarily negative emotions, for the students do not provide rational arguments why they are against. They emphasize the bombing as the main reason why joining NATO would be a treacherous act.

They failed to list any positive aspects of the BiH's accession to NATO.

### **4. NATO bombing of the Republika Srpska and Serbia**

As it was said at the beginning, many negative associations with NATO are linked to its participation in the war against Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. However, it must be kept in mind that this is not about relevant facts, but about the image created by the Serbian media for the needs of daily politics. They know little about the topic and at no point question Serbia's policy towards Albanians in Kosovo.

Talking about the bombing, one gets the impression that it primarily refers to Serbia, and less to the Republika Srpska, but they perceive the two as one nation.



## 5. Who should decide on the accession of BiH to NATO?

Although they are against BiH's accession to NATO, the majority believes that the country is going in that direction and a great desire to oppose the accession is not visible. They are familiar with the anti-NATO attitudes of most politicians in Republika Srpska, but they do not trust them.

The citizens of BiH should also vote on BiH's accession in the referendum, but the question remains whether the citizens of BiH or the peoples of BiH should vote, ie. whether Serbs should be outvoted by Bosniaks and Croats.

There is also a doubt as to whether a referendum on joining NATO should be binding or just one of the elements that BiH authorities must keep in mind when making a decision.

Even if Serbia joins NATO, students from Banja Luka oppose BiH's accession to this alliance, but they are aware that these are some "games" that do not depend on the "little" man.

## YOUNG POLITICIANS – BANJA LUKA

The focus group with the students of the University of Banja Luka was held on September 29 at 2:00 p.m. The focus group was attended by 9 young politicians, six of whom were male and two were female, from SNSD, PDP, SDP BiH, DEMOS, DEMOS, and Poligraf. The conditions for holding the focus group were satisfactory. Respondents were familiar with the discussion topic only to some extent and could not prepare their presentations in advance. The atmosphere during the work of the focus group was relaxed and the impression was that the participants were sincere.

### 1. Associations on NATO

When it comes to NATO-related associations, the negative ones predominate:

- ✚ bombing,
- ✚ nothing good,
- ✚ lie,
- ✚ participation of our soldiers in NATO forces,
- ✚ depleted uranium,
- ✚ spreading across Europe.

When it comes to bombing, it primarily refers to Serbia, and less to Republika Srpska. They do not trust NATO because they believe that the alliance is talking about one thing and doing another, and its aggressive expansion towards Russia shows that they are not a defense alliance and that democracy is not important to NATO. They did not see anything good that this military alliance brought to the citizens, and especially to the Serbs.

Negative emotions towards NATO dominate among the focus group participants, and NATO is to blame for that because it bombed Serbs in the Republika Srpska and Serbia.

Talking about the countries in the region, the respondents believe that those countries do not benefit much from NATO, but they cannot leave the alliance because it is too expensive, dangerous for their security, and because of their fear of Russia.

Young politicians are not only against NATO, but they are also quite skeptical about the EU, and the countries in the region, Slovenia and Croatia, do not benefit much from the EU. True, the EU has some good sides, employment, healthcare, education, freedom of movement, but there is a fear whether we as a society are ready for the things the EU brings (readiness for market competition with open borders - we are technologically obsolete and our competitiveness is questionable ). They are afraid that it would lead to the loss of identity, for which they are not ready. They are particularly sensitive to the introduction of LGBT rights and oppose it. The EU is not honest with us, they see us as a source of cheap labor, opportunities to open plants that are not allowed in their countries due to the environmental protection, and we would not be equal to the "old" members of this alliance. Young politicians support BiH's accession to the EU, but under the condition that the EU adjusts to us.

When it comes to emotions, they are more positive concerning NATO integration, but there is a dose of suspicion about the intentions of the EU.

## 2. Knowledge about NATO

Young politicians have not shown considerable knowledge about NATO. They do not know its history, and even less they know about contemporary events. They mostly draw conclusions about the alliance based on the events from the 1990s, bearing in mind the bombing of Republika Srpska and Serbia.

Their sources of information about NATO are:

- ✚ media, mostly Serbian media
- ✚ draw conclusions based on NATO activities,
- ✚ relatives and friends and
- ✚ social networks.

They do not visit the NATO website and do not believe the information posted there, not knowing almost nothing about the experiences of the newly admitted countries in the alliance, so one gets the impression that they are not that interested in the aforementioned.

They know absolutely nothing about the agreements that BiH has signed with NATO so far, even last year's politicization of the ANP did not move them much. Only one person briefly read the ANP. However, they agree that the whole story about the ANP was one-sided, biased, and not remembering one person who advocated pro-NATO views in public, agreeing that the public debate must be of better quality.

## 3. Is BiH joining NATO?

The answers received are quite different from the fact that there is cooperation, to the fact that we are moving towards the alliance, but so slowly that we will never join it. They are not even sure how much they should trust politicians, because they are aware that their opinion changes very quickly and it is difficult to differentiate between truth and spin.

## 4. Who should decide on the accession of BiH to NATO?

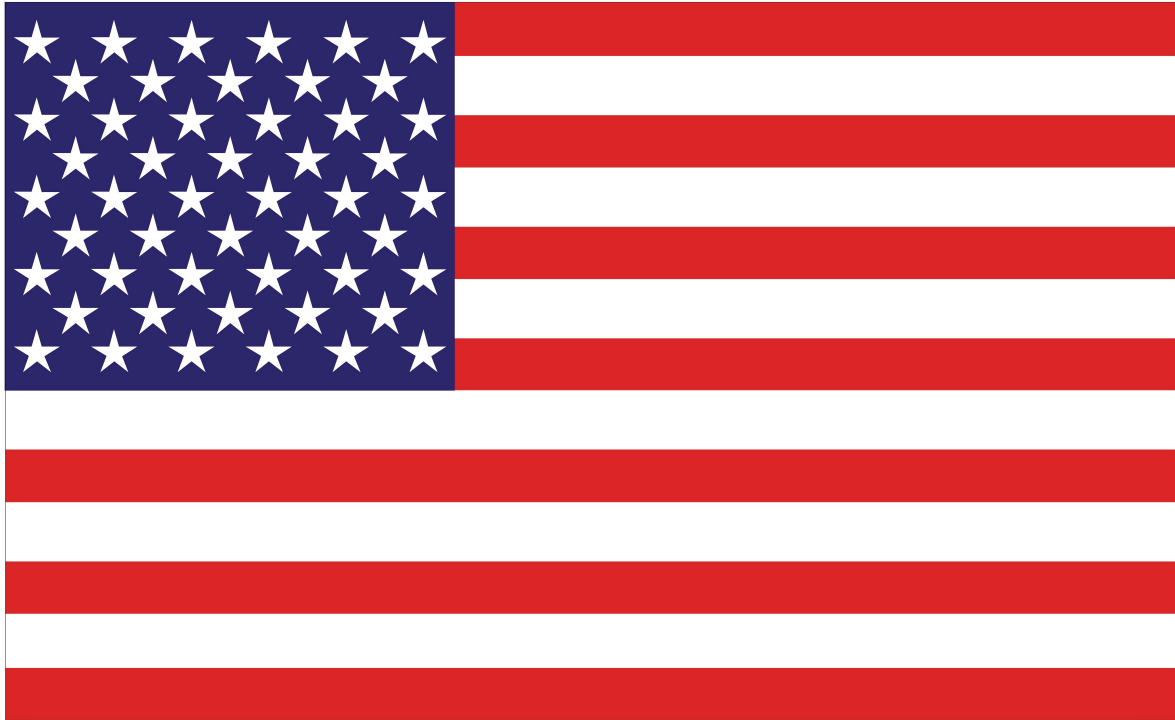
Most young politicians agree that the decision to join NATO should be made by the citizens, but they are aware that they, and especially the citizens, do not know much about it and that it is necessary to have a quality public debate. They are aware, regardless of whether they belong to the ruling parties or the opposition, that the media in RS are biased and under control, which they condemn and are not sure that the discussion would be fair and correct even if it started. They prefer entity voting, to avoid Serbs being outvoted. They do not want the decision of the accession to NATO to be tied to Serbia.



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