

# Did we get civic activism wrong? Understanding the waltz between constructive and aggressive civic tendencies in Bosnia–Herzegovina

Alexander Guest, Ilke Dagli and Marian Machlouzarides

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *Despite the end of conflict in 1995, Bosnia–Herzegovina still suffers from unresolved ethnic and social tensions, where fostering social cohesion, active citizenship and mitigating ethnonationalist tensions and politically motivated violence remains among the main goals to achieve transformative peace. This paper, based on quantitative analyses of 3,637 adult respondents, shows that the tendency of Bosnians to be active or violent citizens sometimes overlaps and are not very distinct patterns of behaviour. The purpose of this paper is to identify factors that differentiate pathways and help explain (un)civil civic behaviours and inform the work of peace and development actors.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The paper is based on a quantitative household survey conducted with a representative sample of 3,637 adults in Bosnia and by using a wide range of statistical tools from scaling to correlation analysis. This data set measures factors and conceptual notions associated with passive, constructive and aggressive civic tendencies and social cohesion in a nuanced way by using different metrics and scales. The survey was designed and conducted by The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD) and the Bosnia–Herzegovina Resilience Initiative in 2020, in partnership with The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) and The International Organization for Migration (IOM) for the SCORE Bosnia–Herzegovina study (SeeD, 2020).*

**Findings** – *Overall, the factors that were discovered to be linked to the manifestation of constructive and aggressive civic tendencies are multidimensional, and range from intergroup relations (e.g. tension, tolerance) to political and civic attitudes (e.g. ethnonationalism, civic responsibility, gender equality), from individual traits (e.g. education, economic stress) to the media landscape (e.g. information consumption). While the empirical evidence shows that some of these factors can push citizens towards both active and violent civic behaviours simultaneously, this study identifies and distinguishes those that can reduce aggressive civic tendencies while increasing constructive civic tendencies.*

**Practical implications** – *This paper proposes a replicable approach and evidence-based conclusions which can help validate the theories of change for the peace and development actors to ensure that scarce peacebuilding resources are invested where the impact is greatest, and the actors can protect the sanctity of their responsibility to do no harm.*

**Social implications** – *This paper seeks to provide a robust empirical understanding for more effective policy-making and programming that can support Bosnia–Herzegovina's endogenous resilience against socio-political shocks and transformative peace trajectory. This paper seeks to demonstrate how peace and development actors can build and use an evidence-base for understanding civic behaviours and as a result formulate tailored efforts with greater likelihood of impact. This would help fulfil commitments towards sustainable development goals and the 2030 global agenda (UN General Assembly, 2015).*

**Originality/value** – *This study contributes insights to the emerging literature at the nexus of peacebuilding, individual skills/attitudes and civic behaviour. While the conclusions are highly contextual, the methodology is informed by multidisciplinary literature and is replicable in other post-conflict and non-conflict contexts, and thus can be used for cross-country comparisons and theory building around civic activism and constructive citizenship. The approach distinguishes between*

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Received 13 January 2022  
Revised 13 February 2022  
Accepted 13 February 2022

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Office for Transition Initiatives (OTI) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

*passive citizens, constructive activists, aggressive activists and purely violent citizens. This study discovers that the bifurcation is between passive citizens and active citizens, and although constructive and aggressive civic tendencies might be theorised to be contradictory, they overlap and tend to co-occur.*

**Keywords** *Citizenship, Activism, Social cohesion, Civic behaviours, Transformative peace, Conflict transformation, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Inter-group relations, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Evidence-based peacebuilding, Political violence, Quantitative sociology*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction and purpose

This paper unpacks overlapping pathways between constructive and aggressive civic tendencies and behaviours to inform peacebuilding, reconciliation and democratisation efforts with a more nuanced understanding of the citizenry's role and behavioural manifestations (e.g. civic participation, constructive citizenship), using survey data from Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have two main goals and hence, two key contributions to the literature; the first is empirical and policy-driven, while the second is theoretical and method driven.

Firstly, we seek to provide a robust empirical understanding for more effective policy-making and programming that can support Bosnia–Herzegovina's endogenous resilience against socio-political shocks and transformative peace trajectory. We seek to demonstrate how peace and development architects can build and use an evidence-base for understanding civic behaviours and, as a result, formulate tailored efforts with greater likelihood of impact. This would help fulfil commitments towards sustainable development goals and the 2030 global agenda ([UN General Assembly, 2015](#)). We argue that without a more nuanced understanding of civic behaviours, especially the relationship between non-violent and violent civic activism, efforts that promote civic participation and engagement could inadvertently lead to polarisation, social fractures and instability. As such, our paper can help peace and development architects improve their conflict sensitivity and uphold the sanctity of the “do no harm” principle.

Secondly, we seek to contribute to the literature around civic behaviours with quantitative analyses to strengthen the theoretical nexus between peacebuilding, social cohesion and civic participation. As such, we build an evidence-based theory of change which can help illuminate the pathway to nudging citizens towards more constructive civic choices in Bosnia–Herzegovina and elsewhere. While our conclusions are highly contextual, our methodology is informed by multidisciplinary literature and is replicable in other post-conflict and potentially non-conflict contexts, and thus can be used for cross-country comparisons and theory building on and around civic activism and constructive citizenship.

We do this by analysing data from a quantitative household survey conducted with a representative sample of 3,637 adults in Bosnia and by using a wide range of statistical tools from scaling to correlation analysis [1]. This data set measures factors and conceptual notions associated with passive, constructive and aggressive civic tendencies and social cohesion in a nuanced way by using different metrics and scales. The survey was designed and conducted by The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD) and the Bosnia–Herzegovina Resilience Initiative (BHRI) in 2020, in partnership with USAID/OTI and IOM for the SCORE Bosnia–Herzegovina study [The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD), 2020].

We quantitatively investigate the differences, overlaps and pathways between constructive and aggressive civic tendencies. We avoid monochrome dichotomies such as violent versus non-violent, good versus bad citizens and punitive (e.g. Malcolm X) versus reconciliatory (e.g. Martin Luther King) activism. Instead, we measure civic tendencies depending on the strength and prevalence of constructive and aggressive civic behaviour choices independently based on citizens' responses to different civically and politically

charged scenarios. The independent measurement of these two scales allows us to distinguish between passive citizens, constructive activists, aggressive activists and purely violent citizens. We discover that the bifurcation is between passive citizens and active citizens and although constructive and aggressive civic tendencies might be initially theorised to be rather contradictory, in fact, they overlap and tend to co-occur.

We pose the following research questions:

- RQ1.* How can a social movement born out of frustration and mobilised for positive social change remain peaceful and constructive in a post-conflict context where social cohesion is fragile or fractured?
- RQ2.* How can peace and development actors strengthen citizens' constructive civic engagement while ensuring that their efforts towards promoting civic participation do not contribute to reinforcing aggressive, polarising or violent citizenship tendencies (i.e. conflict sensitivity of efforts)?

We divide our paper into three overarching sections. We first present our conceptual and theoretical frameworks, illustrating our three-dimensional approach to civic orientations and positioning it in the relevant literature, tying these into the contextual framework of Bosnia–Herzegovina. This first section provides the blueprint to our overall approach and highlights our original and multidisciplinary contribution. We then present and discuss our results, giving a detailed overview of the associations of constructive and aggressive civic tendencies and grounding these in the realities of Bosnia–Herzegovina and the relevant policy and programmatic implications. Finally, we conclude the paper with a series of evidence-based recommendations that emerge from the quantitative findings.

### Conceptual, theoretical and contextual framework

Civic tendencies in this paper refer to a combination of behavioural choices and orientations, adopting a three-dimensional approach. Aggressive civic tendency refers to the likelihood of a citizen to act violently or to justify violence in the face of adversity when civically mobilised (e.g. clashes with the police during a riot, looting during a protest). Constructive civic tendency refers to civic choices that are engaged, active and reconciliatory and strictly excluding any justification of violence. Passive civic tendency is when a citizen is disinterested, choosing not to engage in civic and political affairs at all. Although our conceptualisation is not too dissimilar from the surprisingly under-theorised literature on uncivil society and uncivil activism ([Anheier and Toepler, 2010](#); [Kopecky and Mudde, 2003](#); [Melville et al., 2010](#)), we add another layer of complexity by proposing behavioural fluidity and also analytical rigour.

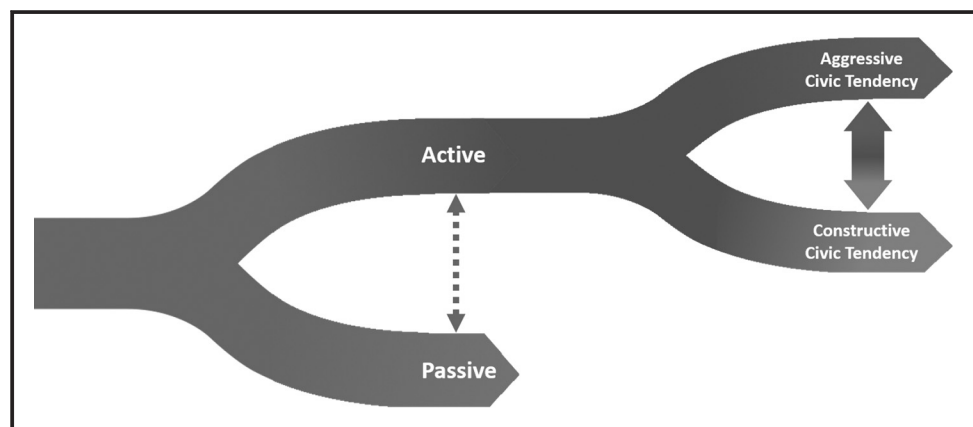
The illustration above is built based on the evidence from Bosnia–Herzegovina and supported by other SCORE findings from Armenia [[The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development \(SeeD\), 2019b](#)], Ukraine ([The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2019a](#)), Bosnia–Herzegovina [[The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development \(SeeD\), 2020](#)] and cross-national analysis of active and violent citizenship ([Lordos et al., 2022](#)). It summarises our overall conceptual approach to understanding and analysing civic tendencies and helps us position the paper in the relevant literature. The empirical evidence tells us that the gap between passive and active civic tendencies is wider (less correlated) than the gap between constructive and aggressive tendencies, which are closely related. In other words, we do not expect citizens to sway from passive to active easily; but fluctuation from constructive to aggressive is more likely, as they are both expressions of engagement in civic issues. Indeed, active citizens, when faced with a trigger or an adversity (e.g. a systemic shock, an electoral tension, a participation mechanism becoming ineffective or inaccessible), can be expected to react either constructively or aggressively since both tendencies can coexist in a citizen's arsenal of possible reactions to socio-political developments.

Scholarly work on civic participation and engagement, which sits at the epicentre of political theory, has been a rich and dynamic literature for decades with wide-reaching connotations to different disciplines from behavioural science to peace studies. The role of civic activism in cultivating social capital and, in turn, playing a critical role for sustainable economic development, as well as its positive correlation with multiple indices such as the human development index and social cohesion index, is well established in the literature via multiple cross-country studies (World Bank, 2014; Hoskins *et al.*, 2006; Malik and Waglé, 2002; Tolbert *et al.*, 1998). From a policy perspective, civic participation and engagement are also enshrined as a right in multiple international covenants, declarations and charters (UN General Assembly, 1948). The right to be an active citizen is seen as essential to shape society, for good governance and accountability of institutions and for cohesive and democratic societies.

While mechanisms of civic participation and engagement are well theorised and researched, while civil society's role in democratisation is well documented and while active citizenship is accepted as a normative and desirable socio-political outcome (UN General Assembly, 2015), aggressive civic tendencies, whether reformist, radical or opportunistic, remain highly underexplored (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014). The literature on civic participation and engagement often romanticised civic activism, and when it did not, it mostly analysed civil unrest in hindsight. More recently, scholars have focused on predicting civic unrest by shifting their gaze from sociological, psychological and anthropological studies to social network and media analysis (Hua *et al.*, 2013; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, our paper contributes to parsimonious explanations around social unrest dynamics that focus on internal processes such as social and spatial diffusion (Braha, 2012) by enriching them with quantitative analyses and by accounting for the role of psychosocial assets, individual soft skills and inter-group relations.

On the other hand, the literature on civic violence mostly revolves around understanding and preventing radicalisation and violent extremism (PVE). What we conceptualise as "Aggressive Civic Tendency" (Figure 1) is not necessarily criminal or extremist by nature but sits in between the PVE and civic participation literatures. It sits in between because justification of violence and aggression as a means to bring about a political or social change is inherent to civic behaviours, but the extent of which varies significantly. A binary approach to civic behaviours as violent versus peaceful places us in close proximity to dystopian scenarios like the Minority Report (Dick, 1956) or to dysfunctional policies like Prevent in the UK (Home Office, 2021), which turns citizens into suspects instead of nudging them towards constructively channelling their civic grievances and, arguably,

**Figure 1** Relationship between civic orientations



exacerbates their grievances and marginalisation by conflating risky with risk itself (Heath-Kelly, 2018).

Civic activism (i.e. the totality of civic participation and engagement) can take myriad different forms, from voting to campaigning, petitions to demonstrations, volunteering to charitable donations, participatory budgeting to debating current issues on online platforms. Yet, civic activism is not non-violent or reconciliatory by default and can carry aggressive tendencies. Aggressive civic tendencies do not need to go as far as violent extremism for them to be destabilising or polarising. When a civic movement exhibits aggressive tendencies, however, justified or not, such as clashes with the police, looting or antagonising another group, this disengages potential allies and members, undermines the movement as well the cause and ultimately weakens social cohesion (Biekart and Fowler, 2013).

Aggressive civic behaviours are observed at all points across the left-right political spectrum, for common or divergent causes and with justifications of violence changing between causes (e.g. accumulation of personal grievances attached to one cause versus another) and over time (e.g. state of socio-economic well-being, meaningful civic participation mechanisms) (Delmas, 2018). The feelings of frustration, disenchantment and marginalisation that are inherent to civic activism are not always contained within democratic mechanisms and functional relationships between right-holders and duty bearers (Biekart and Fowler, 2013), especially in post-conflict environments where mechanisms that citizens can leverage to influence socio-political change are weak or ineffective. When citizens are not able to channel their frustration, constructively hone their calls for change or feel represented, heard and cared for by institutions, aggressive tendencies can become heightened and justified as “self-defence” and as a “struggle for existence”.

Citizens who are on the lower end of the *Aggressive Civic Tendency spectrum* (low justification of violence, low aggression and high activism) cannot be considered extremist or radical; they are not and should not be interest groups for the PVE literature (Hoskins et al., 2006). However, when citizens’ *Aggressive Civic Tendencies* are high or heightened or when their numbers grow, a demonstration, a protest, an ethnically coloured graffiti or slur could easily create a mob out of a civic movement/initiative and turn into civil unrest, even if it manifests in a disorganised or opportunistic way. This could create institutional, social and economic dysfunctionality and instability (Braha, 2012).

This is precisely why we focus our investigation on Bosnia–Herzegovina in particular and on post-conflict contexts in general because democratisation and transformative peace journeys are incomplete, socio-political narratives are ethnically coloured and social cohesion is fractured. A nuanced understanding of civic orientations is particularly pertinent in such contexts to prevent relapse and populist polarisation. Only then can we nurture a resilient and constructive citizenry that can resist polarisation and radicalisation in the face of socio-economic and political stressors.

In other words, while PVE literature does not engage with the violent civic tendencies before they reach the path of radicalisation, civic participation and democratisation literatures leave the violent civic orientations to the PVE literature. This leaves internal and individual factors that lead to different manifestations of civic behaviours under-researched and allows the over-extension of hyper-securitised counterterrorism and PVE policies into social policy. Thus, instead of dichotomising and prematurely demonising, we offer an approach that can untangle civic tendencies to understand where and how they overlap and diverge and identify pathways that can nudge citizens towards a more constructive and resilient form of civic activism in Bosnia–Herzegovina and potentially beyond. In the simplest terms, we investigate how and why some of us can channel our frustration constructively and become change agents, while some grow more polarised and experience intergroup tension, and others withdraw their voice or grow apathetic.

There is no doubt that the literature on Bosnia–Herzegovina is rich, and the country’s post-war transition has been well researched. However, Bosnia–Herzegovina still presents a pertinent empirical case study for two main reasons, which boil down to socio-political anxieties with regard to the lack of progress towards transformative peace in the country and the needs for greater regional stability and integration across the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Despite the end of armed conflict with the Dayton accords of 1995, Bosnia–Herzegovina still suffers from unresolved ethnic and social tensions, as well as experiencing proliferation of divisive narratives. Many scholars agree that the rapid and externally driven liberal democratisation processes inadvertently fostered ethnonationalist structures through multiple rounds of (early) elections, which triggered highly polarised political rivalries and hooliganistic affiliations (Fischer, 2011; Woodward, 2009; Chandler, 2004). In almost all the local and national elections since 1995, candidates and parties with an ethnopolitical agenda prevailed (Keil and Perry, 2015; Fischer, 2011). In the early 2000s, the international organisations and donor community, which still have a prevalent presence in the country, expanded their peacebuilding scope to build social cohesion and nurture transformative peace [2]. Among their goals were addressing exclusive ethnonationalist narratives, mitigating the spread of politically motivated violence and lessening the risk of conflict relapse. Their strategy was to complement the top-down approach of the Dayton Peace Agreement with a bottom-up approach via strengthening civil society and community cooperation for societal healing.

Constitutional structures can only be transformative if they are successful in cultivating a pluralistic political culture which goes hand in hand with constructive citizenship. Yet, the exponential increase in non governmental organisations (NGOs) has not resulted in greater cohesion but instead created antipodal societal forces that pull civic attitudes, profiles and initiatives in opposing multi- versus mono-ethnic directions (Weissberg, 2004). As a result, over two decades later, the war trauma that was not transformed continues to be transferred (Funk *et al.*, 2020). In fact, Bosnia–Herzegovina’s ranking has been deteriorating [3] in the Fragile States Index (The Fund for Peace, 2018). Multilayered stressors from mis/disinformation campaigns, growing populist narratives of intolerance and myriad socio-economic adversities caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as geopolitical tensions between the EU, Turkey and Russia exacerbate the fragility factors in the region. Given the rise of populism in the EU, which is endangering the Union’s integration policies and the country’s slow journey towards accession, these dynamics render the case of Bosnia–Herzegovina highly pertinent for regional stability (Sweeney, 2018; Kasapović, 2018). As such, it is essential for international organisations and national civil society to understand the pathways to constructive citizenship and endogenous resilience, and improve the effectiveness of their transformative peace and social cohesion efforts.

## Results and discussion

This section will present the indicators used to assess civic tendency and explore the correlations of those indicators with the library of other measured SCORE indicators. We shed light on what factors are involved in shifting civic orientations from passive to active and in shifting the nature of that active citizenship from an aggressive to a constructive civic tendency.

Individuals achieved a score from 0 to 10 on constructive civic tendency and aggressive civic tendency, depending on their answers to a series of questions. Respondents’ scores in constructive civic tendency were calculated based on questions about:

- willingness to participate in civic initiatives;
- civic engagement; and
- items encapsulating a constructive and reconciliatory response to civic issues.

Constructive civic tendency, therefore, includes willingness to be an active citizen and an interest in communal issues, an estimate of actual levels of participation and an engaged and reconciliatory attitude towards communal challenges. Scores in aggressive civic tendency were based on questions about aggression, justification of violence for political means and items encapsulating a violent or antagonistic response to civic issues. Aggressive civic tendency, therefore, contains interpersonal anger and aggression, ideological justification of violence and violent and tension-generating attitudes towards communal challenges. It is important to note that aggressive civic tendency does not measure the frequency of violent or aggressive acts but rather a tendency towards normalising and justifying such acts, as well as an increased tendency of responding aggressively to socio-political tensions. Those citizens who scored high in these indicators (Table 1) can thus be considered to have a higher propensity for either active or aggressive civic tendencies. However, we do not establish a well-defined threshold beyond which individuals are classed as “active” since such citizenship phenomena are more accurately seen as a spectrum which may vary over time and depending on the situation citizens are placed in.

Reliability analysis was conducted on these collections of items to ensure their quantitative validity, giving Cronbach’s alpha of 0.92 and 0.72 for constructive and aggressive civic tendencies, respectively. Table 1 below shows the items used to measure constructive civic tendency and aggressive civic tendency, as well as the per cent response to each of the possible answers. The question items were rescaled such that they ranged from 0 to 10 and then combined to give the score for the composite civic behaviour indices.

Figure 2 below shows the histograms of the indicators of constructive and aggressive civic tendency, giving the distribution of citizens across the range of scores. Each respondent was assigned a score in the two dimensions based on their responses to the questionnaire items. Responses to each item were aggregated into the three component indicators, and then the three indicators equally contributed to the overall civic tendency scale (active or aggressive). Indicators were rescaled such that the indicators ranged from 0 to 10 in each case. A floor effect is noted in both scales, although the effect is much more prominent in aggressive civic tendency than in constructive civic tendency. This is to be expected since many citizens are likely to fully reject any justification or use of violence for political means, and therefore get a score of 0 in aggressive civic tendency. To achieve a score of around 5, a citizen would need to be on the fence about normalising violence or responding violently in civic scenarios: this is already quite extreme civic behaviour. Any definition of harmonious positive citizenship would restrict scores of aggressive civic tendency to below 3. In Bosnia–Herzegovina, we see that 23.7% fall above this threshold, implying that there may be a critical mass of citizens open to more aggressive and confrontational civic activism.

Constructive civic tendency was found to be correlated to aggressive civic tendency with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.27 ( $p < 0.01$ ), meaning that those who score higher in one of the variables also tend to score higher in the other. The relationship between these two factors implies that citizens can be both constructive and aggressive at the same time, especially when it comes to ethnically coloured issues. It highlights that any analysis of civic behaviour or policy which aims to foster civic activism must also take into account the nature of that citizenship: if it is constructive or aggressive, reconciliatory or tension-generating. To understand how individuals sway between constructive and aggressive, and to identify entry points for nudging citizens towards reconciliatory responses rather than violent and polarising ones, we identify factors related to constructive civic tendency alone or to both constructive and aggressive civic tendency.

**Table 1** Question items and per cent of responses for constructive and aggressive civic tendency

<i>Willingness to participate in civic initiatives</i>				
If there was an NGO in your area which focused on one of the following themes, would you be motivated to participate in one of the following activities?		I would not attend (%)	I would consider attending (%)	I would definitely attend (%)
Helping vulnerable people (e.g. elderly, disabled, homeless)		28.2	44.0	27.7
Fighting corruption		32.0	43.0	25.0
Economic and career opportunities (e.g. recruiting events, scholarships)		32.8	43.3	23.9
Youth activities (e.g. youth centres, involvement of youth in community)		36.6	41.3	22.1
Protecting the environment		37.8	41.5	20.7
Activities organised by your local religious group or institutions		40.4	41.5	18.1
Sport, hunting, fishing, football supporters' groups		46.8	35.1	18.0
Recreational or cultural activities (e.g. music festivals, food festivals)		41.9	42.1	16.1
Promoting coexistence amongst all ethnic groups in community		43.2	40.9	15.9
Heritage and history (monuments, museums)		44.7	44.1	11.1
Other		68.3	20.7	11.0
Promoting my political party (e.g. political rally)		62.2	30.5	7.3
<i>Civic engagement</i>				
How often do you do each of the following activities?	Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)
Vote in elections	11.0	18.4	37.3	33.4
Engage in formal or informal charity deeds (donate money, goods, help a neighbour, etc.)	40.2	33.4	20.7	5.7
Discuss politics and current events with your family, friends, colleagues, etc	44.2	37.8	15.3	2.7
Participate in volunteering activities (e.g. forest conservation, providing skills training to youth, fundraising for families in need)?	62.2	25.4	9.7	2.7
Sign a petition, write a proposal or complaint on an issue that is important for you?	57.4	29.9	10.5	2.2
Participate in activities aimed at improving your apartment building, block or neighbourhood?	58.0	27.4	12.5	2.1
Attend public events or meetings of a political party?	67.2	23.7	7.3	1.8
Post, share and/or debate social, political and civic issues via online groups and networks?	72.1	19.8	6.5	1.6
Attend community meetings in your locality (MZ, youth council, association for residents)?	60.9	30.5	7.1	1.5
Participate in discussions, meetings or activities organized by NGO(s)/association of citizens?	75.5	17.9	5.2	1.4
Participate in public demonstrations supporting causes you believe in?	71.4	21.2	6.2	1.2
<i>Scenarios: constructive civic tendency responses</i>				
How likely are you to do each of the following in response to these situations?	Would definitely not do this (%)	Would probably not do this (%)	Would probably do this (%)	Would definitely do this (%)
Response to citizenship scenario 1: I would participate in the protest peacefully, making sure to avoid provocation of violence	29.4	25.0	34.3	11.2
Response to citizenship scenario 2: I would try to encourage peaceful methods of solving the problem within the community	28.7	19.4	38.6	13.3
<i>Aggression</i>				
To what extent do the following occur in your life?	Never or rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Don't know/no response (%)
If somebody hits me, I hit back	48.9	29.1	16.8	5.2
Given enough provocation, I may hit another person	67.8	23.5	4.6	4.1
I have trouble controlling my anger	74.9	17.9	3.4	3.8
<i>Scenarios: aggressive civic tendency responses</i>				
How likely are you to do each of the following in response to these situations?	Would definitely not do this (%)	Would probably not do this (%)	Would probably do this (%)	Would definitely do this (%)
Response to citizenship scenario 1: participate in the protests and seek out to crush the opposition as quickly as possible	54.1	28.7	14.0	3.2
Response to citizenship scenario 1: participate in the protests, ready to counter opposition's violence with force if necessary	59.6	28.9	9.2	2.3

*(continued)*



**Table 1**

Response to citizenship scenario 2: I would join the protest of my ethnic group, ready to respond with violence if needed

57.0

30.1

10.4

2.5

*Justification of violence*

Some people believe that violence is sometimes necessary to achieve a political goal or to achieve social change, while others disagree. On a scale from 0 to 10 which of the following views are closer to your own views on the use of violence?

0 = use of violence makes social division worse and ultimately does not solve any problems

10 = use of violence is justified to achieve political goals

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

71.7%

10.1%

5.9%

4.0%

2.2%

2.5%

0.7%

0.7%

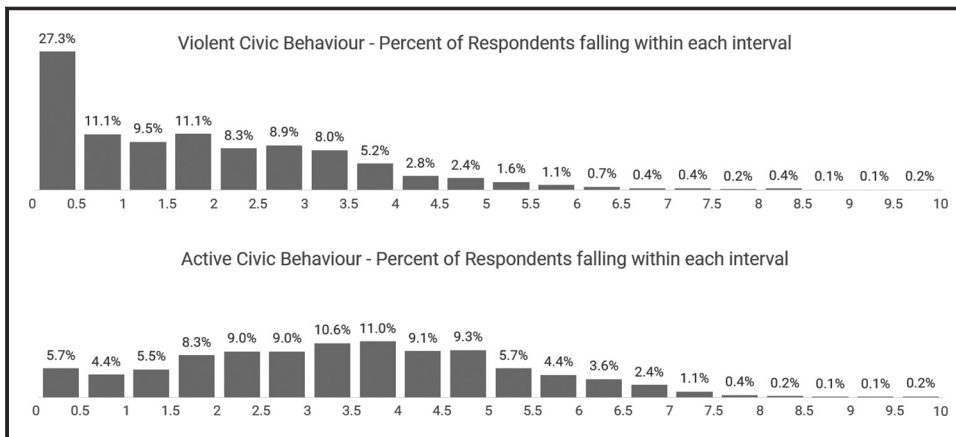
0.7%

0.5%

1.0%

**Figure 2**

Histogram of constructive and aggressive civic tendency showing the distribution of citizens across scores from 0 to 10

***Factors associated with citizenship patterns***

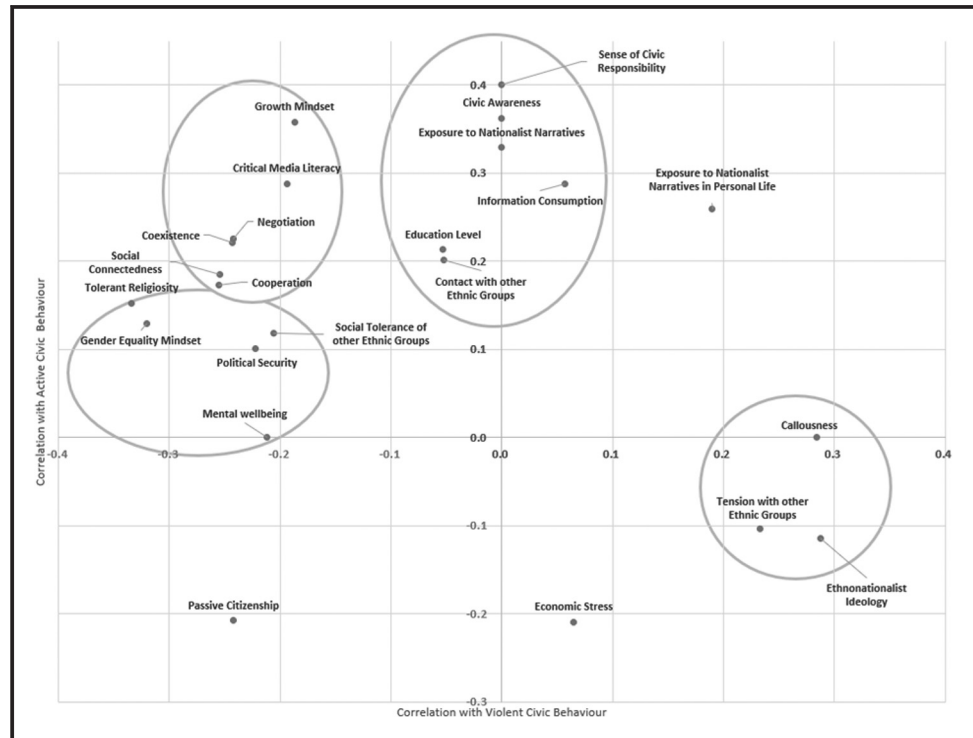
We follow an exploratory method of investigating which factors are associated with citizenship patterns by checking the correlation coefficient of constructive civic tendency and aggressive civic tendency with various SCORE indicators – including psychological, social, economic, political, ideological and demographic factors. Figure 3 below shows the factors which were discovered to be associated with either constructive civic tendency or aggressive civic tendency with a correlation value of 0.2 or more and  $p$ -value of 0.01 or less.

Because we want to identify the unique correlation of each indicator with either constructive or aggressive civic tendency, when we calculate the correlation value with one of the two indicators, we control for the other. In Figure 3 below, variables which are higher up on the vertical axis are more strongly correlated with constructive civic tendency and, therefore, can generate more civic engagement, thus revealing entry points for building active citizenship among disengaged citizens. Variables further to the right on the horizontal axis are associated with a higher level of aggressive civic tendency, whereas those on the left are negatively correlated. These variables are, therefore, the factors which are associated with either generation (right) or inhibition (left) of civic violence. Variables on the top-left of the diagram are positively correlated with constructive civic tendency while also being negatively correlated to aggressive civic tendency, thus being factors ideally suited to generate engaged citizenship that is also non-violent.

***Factors associated with constructive civic tendency***

Several variables are found to be associated with higher constructive civic tendency but with no or weak relationships with aggressive civic tendency (Figure 3, upper ellipse).

**Figure 3** Correlations of constructive and aggressive civic tendency. Each point represents a variable whose coordinates are defined by the correlation of that variable with an aggressive civic tendency (x-axis) and constructive civic tendency (y-axis). ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $R > 0.2$ )



These are a higher sense of civic responsibility (feeling empowered, willingness to take responsibility for societal improvement), higher civic awareness (a self-assessment that one is aware of the political scene and keenly follows political developments) and higher information consumption (the frequency of reading or listening about politics and social affairs through traditional and online media), higher education level and more frequent contact with other ethnic groups. A higher exposure to nationalist narratives, which does not necessarily translate to support for such narratives, is also associated with more constructive civic tendency. Furthermore, economic stress (precarious employment, lower-income, lack of economic opportunities) is associated with a lower level of constructive civic tendency, implying that economic barriers are limiting civic participation and that being an activist is a privilege more accessible to economically secure citizens. The finding that civic awareness, information consumption and exposure to nationalist narratives are all associated with constructive civic tendency illustrates a motivational nexus originating from the ethnically tense media landscape.

Nationalist narratives were identified in consultation with local experts and researchers and encapsulated the main radicalising narratives and divisive discourse underpinning ethnonationalist ideology (Turčilo, 2018; Turčilo and Veljan, 2018). We draw a distinction between exposure to ethnonationalist narratives and support for ethnonationalist ideology. The former is measured by asking about the frequency of exposure to the core radicalising narratives which proliferate in Bosnia–Herzegovina, while the latter is measured by asking about support for the key political and social goals of those ideologies (e.g. separation of the ethnic groups of Bosnia–Herzegovina into ethnically uniform areas, domination of one ethnic group over others). Ethnonationalist narratives were constructed differently for each

of the three large ethnic groups of the country (Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs), as the radicalising discourse differs, although there are some common themes, such as perceiving one's ethnic ingroup solely as victims of the war and normalising the ingroup's radical violent groups. We also drew a distinction between exposure to such narratives through formal channels (the media, from politicians, etc.) and informal channels in one's personal life, in more intimate settings (family, friends, at school or work, social media, place of worship).

We observe that exposure to nationalist narratives is associated with more constructive civic tendency, but when this exposure happens through informal channels, it generates both higher constructive civic tendency and aggressive civic tendency (Figure 3). Although respondents reported a higher perceived frequency of exposure through formal and media sources and a lower level of exposure in personal settings, it is precisely in those personal settings where those narratives are translated into active and aggressive civic behaviour. This may be because those channels are inherently more social and thus more effective at convincing the listener and rationalising away any concerns about using violence to achieve their goals, rather than being impersonal and transient as in the more frequent ravings of televised political speeches [The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD), 2020].

### *Factors associated with aggressive civic tendency*

Three key indicators were found to be associated with higher levels of aggressive civic tendency (Figure 3). These were ethnonationalism, callousness and tension with ethnic outgroups. Ethnonationalism measures the level of support for nationalistic narratives and ideologies, including avoiding other ethnic groups, wanting one's children to be taught only by the ethnic ingroup and wanting to secure territory for the ethnic ingroup. Uncovering a direct link between support for ethnonationalism and aggressive civic tendency underlines that these ideologies can motivate citizens towards aggression and justification of political violence. Similarly, tension with ethnic outgroups (lower levels of trust and positive feelings, more stereotypes, social anxiety and social distance) was also found to be strongly associated with aggressive civic tendency. Inter-communal tensions prompt citizens who espouse ethnonationalist ideas to violence, leading to a further breakdown of trust and positive feelings. When these two also co-occur with callousness (the general lack of interest in or empathy with other people) and when empathy or cross-group solidarity is absent, this can lead conflict relapse, where tensions can flare up into violence.

On the other side of the spectrum, several factors were also found to be significantly related to lower levels of aggressive civic tendency (Figure 3, leftmost ellipse). The factor most strongly associated with lower levels of aggressive civic tendency was tolerant religiosity, an indicator which probes to what extent individuals feel that all religions have an element of truth in them, that other religious groups are worthy and deserving of respect, and whether their concept of faith is ecumenical. This highlights the importance of religion-based reconciliation through universalist messages common in all faiths, crucial for reducing the tendencies towards violent activism.

Support for more progressive policies towards gender equality, social tolerance, political security (the feeling that one can openly discuss their political views and criticisms without fear of repercussions) also tends to be higher in those who reject violent citizenship, pointing to a nexus of progressive variables around rejection of violence [4]. Women also tend to score lower on the aggressive civic tendencies than men, implying the need for gender-sensitive programming to provide the tools and pathways for men to participate in their communities without resorting to toxic masculinity that normalises violence. In a country where narratives of masculinity feed into the conflict, with gender roles constructing expectations of men to be protectors of their families and, by extension, their ethnic group,

this result shows the urgency of deconstructing traditional gender norms and building a new reconciliatory model of masculinity (Dumančić and Krolo, 2017; Milićević, 2006).

Finally, mental well-being is a counterweight to aggressive civic tendency. This indicates that citizens who lean towards violence also are more psychologically fragile, possibly with unresolved war trauma and mental health issues. The mental health dimension of positive citizenship is often overlooked, but here reveals itself as an unavoidable challenge that must be faced to engender non-violent reconciliatory activism in Bosnia–Herzegovina.

### ***Factors associated with higher levels of constructive and lower levels of aggressive civic tendency***

Despite the positive correlation between constructive civic tendency and aggressive civic tendency, it was possible to identify a handful of factors which are positively associated with constructive civic tendency but negatively associated with aggressive civic tendency (Figure 3, top-left ellipse). This category of variables is crucial, as they serve as the most fertile ground to generate citizenship that is active without being violent. Growth mindset (measuring curiosity, intellectual flexibility, openness to learning), critical media literacy (the ability to critically appraise media content), interpersonal soft skills of negotiation and cooperation, social connectedness (the strength of relationships with family and friends) and support for multiethnic coexistence (which measures the support for policies encouraging cooperation between ethnic groups).

In summary, the factors we find to be associated with citizenship patterns cover a wide gamut of socio-political and economic forces. As we have seen, these include economic factors, social networks, intergroup relations, individual skills and attitudes, mental health and polarising narratives in a toxic media sphere. The wide range of these factors implies that peacebuilding and development actors should adopt a multidimensional approach, avoiding the proverbial silos. We propose ways to leverage these factors towards transformative peace and resilient social cohesion in conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has presented a series of factors that are involved in characterising different forms of civic tendencies. We discover that although constructive and aggressive civic tendencies might be initially theorised to be rather contradictory, in fact, they overlap and tend to co-occur. The bifurcation is between passive citizens and active citizens, while active citizens may opt for constructive or aggressive civic tendencies dependent on context. Overall, our paper has discovered the importance of focusing not just on the quantity of civic activism but also its nature. An accurate understanding of a society's or an individual's civic behaviour must include an assessment of different natures of that behaviour simultaneously. Otherwise, there is the risk of identifying factors which may seem to be generating constructive citizenship but are, in fact, more closely related to violent or aggressive civic tendencies. Given our findings, we propose a series of entry points which can contribute to nudging civic tendencies towards more constructive and less aggressive forms of civic participation to scholars, practitioners and those working towards a more socially cohesive and engaged civic space.

Our results show a clear way forward for various groups who exhibit different forms and profiles of civic behaviours. If our target group has been identified to need a shift from aggressive to constructive civic tendency, then it is important to focus on the nexus of factors associated with higher constructive civic tendencies and lower aggressive civic tendencies. These are:

- *Social connectedness*: the strength of relationships with friends, family and neighbours point to the importance of a robust social network among those who have constructive

non-aggressive citizenship. More research is needed on precisely how social networks dampen the slide towards more aggressive forms of citizenship. Social isolation tends to be a characteristic of those who are more prone to aggressive civic outbursts and mitigation at the individual level might focus on building social relationships and community cooperation.

- *Cooperation and negotiation skills*: these interpersonal soft skills are presumably activated when an individual or a social movement is faced with the dilemma of using aggressive or constructive means of achieving its goals. Having those skills in one's arsenal may result in a push away from violent civic behaviour. Therefore, practitioners working to generate more active participation should also focus on workshops to reinforce these interpersonal skills among potential activists and young people.
- *Critical media literacy skills and growth mindset*: awareness, information and the media cycle motivate interest in communal issues, but exposure to nationalist narratives through such channels also tends to motivate civic action. When exposure to nationalist narratives occurs in personal life, this gives a clear push towards aggressive activism. Citizens with critical media literacy and growth mindset are those that question their own beliefs, challenge their media bubble and their social circle, and are open to other opinions. These attitudes are necessary for resilience against the potentially adverse effects of information consumption and exposure to nationalist narratives. There is work to be done among educators and civic society to incorporate critical thinking and media literacy into school curricula, but these efforts should not stop at adolescents and young adults. Scholars and media practitioners should forge partnerships to study the proliferation of narratives that generate aggressive citizenship and limit them, at least from formal channels.

In demographic or geographic groups where there is an identified need to emphasize the shift away from violent forms of citizenship, the most effective factors to focus on are the following:

- Tolerant forms of religiosity, tolerance of other ethnic groups, support for gender rights are all associated with lower aggressive civic tendencies. To generate this kind of tolerance to outgroups, meaningful contact with other groups that do not create friction is crucial, especially in a post-conflict ethnically fractured context like Bosnia–Herzegovina (Čehajić *et al.*, 2008; Čehajić and Brown, 2010).
- In Bosnia–Herzegovina, inter-ethnic tensions (stereotypes, negative feelings and mistrust), as well as ethnonationalist ideology, is observed on the local level and are higher in some cantons, which might be diagnosed as flash points generating civic violence.
- Mental health was found to be associated with aggressive civic tendencies, which underlines the importance mental health and psychosocial support strategies that various international agencies are trying to mainstream into peacebuilding. We show that it has a role in generating healthy civic behaviour as well, and this is particularly relevant in contexts where war or genocide has traumatised the citizenry. We cannot expect healthy citizenship without resolving psychological wounds and forgiveness (Voci *et al.*, 2017).
- Lack of political security is associated with more aggressive civic tendencies. We should be aware that those who turn to violent means generally have a grievance that their opinions are marginalised. Whether a real or a perceived threat, this perception should be dispelled and socio-political pluralism should be promoted.
- Socio-therapy and inter-group healing efforts would be effective entry points to address all three factors listed above and should leverage common interests, inclusive dialogue and peace dividends towards building a common community vision. Civil society and

the international community should facilitate such healing through contact as much as possible.

## Notes

1. For the full SCORE Bosnia–Herzegovina study, visit: <https://scoreforpeace.org/en/bosnia/>
2. Transformative peace mainly refers to altering the entire structure of a polity rather than merely ending violence. We adopt the broader, more holistic conceptualisation that also includes societal reconfiguration of friend-enemy distinctions, where peace is not only signed on paper by the leaders but also is internalised, accepted and routinised in social relationships as well (Dagli, 2016).
3. The country ranking went up to 77th in 2021 compared to 95th in 2018, experiencing a 2.7 points change compared to the previous year, the largest negative change since 2007. See <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
4. About the importance of women in peace processes, see also: The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (2018).

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