

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Out-group help in the time of Covid-19 and intergroup reconciliation in the Western Balkans

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## Abstract

In March 2021, Serbia made the unprecedented announcement to offer free Covid-19 vaccination to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and notably to Bosniaks, against whom three decades earlier Serbia had waged a bloody war. How was this policy appraised and, most importantly, did the policy appraisal impact reconciliation? We report here the results of a longitudinal investigation amid a representative sample of Bosniak youth ( $N = 450$ ). Results suggest that a positive appraisal of this actual, state-level policy, predicted improvement on a series of intergroup reconciliation indicators (e.g., trust in the out-group, forgiveness for past violence, hope for future relationship), particularly so amid those who are strongly attached to their Bosniak in-group.

## KEYWORDS

Covid-19 pandemic, foreign policy, Intergroup relations, conflict resolution, reconciliation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

On 2 March 2021, in the midst of a global shortage of Covid-19 vaccines, Serbian president Vučić announced that Serbia would donate 10,000 doses to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and offer free vaccinations to all BiH citizens – whose government had secured none (Euronews, 2021a; 2021b). Within days, thousands of people from BiH flocked to Serbia to be vaccinated.

Donations of in-kind food and medicine are of course not infrequent, but they tend to be made from the world's richest nations to the poorest ones or to those that are affected by a catastrophic event, such as

a natural disaster. This was not such a case. The 2021 data from the World Bank indicate a GDP per capita of \$6196 for BiH and \$9215 for Serbia, in a region (the Balkans) where countries' GDP per capita varies between \$29200 Slovenia to \$4986 of Kosovo. The anomaly of Serbia's policy decision was even more striking when we consider the recent history of the Western Balkans.

Following the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, in the early 1990s, the region was engulfed in a war which resulted in significant casualties in BiH, and particularly among the Bosniak (citizens of BiH, Muslims by tradition) population (RDC, 2023). The war in the Western Balkans opposed three ethnic groups, Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, who

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lived in the countries that were formerly part of Yugoslavia, primarily BiH, Croatia and Serbia. The war was fuelled in large part by Serbia and Croatia making claims over the same territory, whilst providing military and para-military support to same-ethnicity groups operating outside of their borders (Čalić, 2009; 2012; Gow, 2003). Grave breaches of international humanitarian law occurred, including ethnic cleansing and acts of genocide (Bećirević, 2014).

Hostilities came to an end in November 1995 with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, and Western nations and the United Nations have since invested considerable effort and financial resources in an attempt to stabilize the region and foster a durable peace (UNDP, 2021). While there is some evidence that intergroup apologies (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2022) and intergroup contact (Milošević Đorđević, 2016) may ameliorate intergroup attitudes between members of the two ethnic groups, overall interethnic relations in the region, and particularly between Serbs and Bosniaks in BiH, remain characterized by mistrust (Čehajić et al., 2008) and volatility (e.g., Amiel, 2021). This state of affairs is unsurprising: After violent conflict reconciliation between the parties involved is extremely difficult to achieve (Nadler et al., 2008), notably because a loss of hope and a lack of forgiveness undermines conflict resolution policies and practices (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Nadler et al., 2008). Given this state of affairs, it is thus of interest to investigate how the Serbian vaccine policy described above was appraised by Bosniaks, and whether such an appraisal impacted interethnic reconciliation. We start by reviewing two lines of research in social psychology that are pertinent when considering these questions, namely intergroup help and intergroup reparations, and then present the results of a longitudinal study that investigated these questions.

### 1.1 | Effects of intergroup help and reparations on intergroup attitudes

Before reviewing the insights emerging from these lines of research, it is worth asking whether Serbia's vaccine policy that is considered here, can be considered an *intergroup* policy. It could be argued that Serbia's policy did not possess an intergroup quality, since it was directed to citizens of BiH (and other countries) which includes individuals who are ethnic Serbs (~30% of the BiH population are ethnic Serbs) and can thus be considered in-group members for Serbs. It seems implausible, however, that the policy had specifically targeted ethnic Serbs. This could have been achieved by offering the vaccines exclusively to the Republika Srpska, which is part of BiH and the population of which is 90% ethnic Serbs. Thus, we believe that the policy can be considered an intergroup policy.

Serbia's vaccine policy can clearly be understood as an instance of intergroup/out-group help – a phenomenon to which social psychologists have paid significant attention in recent years (for a review, see Van Leeuwen & Zagefka, 2017). In one of the first experimental tests of the effects of out-group help on intergroup attitudes, Nadler and Halabi (2006) found that instances of help from an out-group, partic-

ularly in the case of unstable intergroup relations, had a negative effect on the intergroup attitudes of the lower status recipient of the help. The negative results in terms of intergroup relations emerging from these studies may have been the consequence of specific features of the context and of the study: strong status and the intergroup power differential between the groups, and the fact that the help provided was towards a single group member and consisted of helping to cheat in a test. However, the pattern of results that emerged in subsequent research has by and large confirmed that out-group help is not the panacea to intergroup conflict.

The group that is more likely to provide help is often, if not always, the one that has greater resources, power and status. In the presence of this status differential, lower status group members tend to perceive the help as reinforcing the asymmetric relations, if not furthering the power of the high-status group and further humiliating the in-group (Nadler, 2016). Consistent with this rationale are findings that these negative effects of help were reduced or eliminated when the intergroup trust was present (Halabi et al., 2021a), in-group normative attitudes towards the out-group were perceived to be positive (Borinca, Andrighetto, et al., 2022), and when the recipient of help had a heightened sense of control (Halabi et al., 2021b). Of course, these are also conditions that are typically not met in the context of violent intergroup conflict. Research examining the effects of out-group help in real contexts of intergroup conflict has replicated the negative effects of out-group help even for individuals low on out-group prejudice (Borinca, Andrighetto, et al., 2022).

Research on intergroup conflict and reconciliation has also investigated the impact of intergroup reparations. Could the policy discussed here be considered an act of intergroup reparation? On the one hand, it could be argued that an act of reparation requires an intention to redress one's past wrongdoings. Since the policy was not framed as such by the Serbian government, to consider the policy as reparations may not be warranted. On the other hand, it is possible that, regardless of Serbia's intentions, Bosniaks perceived it as such. Therefore, particularly given the focus on Bosniaks' attitudes in the present investigation, it is of interest to consider theoretical and empirical insights from the intergroup reparations literature. This literature suggests that specifically designed, action-oriented interventions can foster post-conflict reconciliation processes (e.g., Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2017; Paluck et al., 2019). While verbal positive statements (such as apologies) for past collective crimes often fail to foster intergroup forgiveness or improve intergroup relations (Čehajić-Clancy & Brown, 2019; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008; Wohl et al., 2011), they can be effective when coupled with offers of material compensation and punishment (David, 2016). Indeed, perceived attempts or hypothetical offers of action-oriented policies (such as reparations) were found to result in higher levels of forgiveness (Čehajić-Clancy & Brown, 2019; Zechmeister et al., 2004) as well as less perceived insult by the victim group (e.g., Giner-Sorolla et al., 2008, 2010). Other research using natural- or quasi-experimental approaches, however, failed to find evidence to support the idea that material reparation is

conductive to reconciliation (e.g., Bunselmeyer & Schulz, 2020; Firchow, 2017).

Taken together, previous research has produced mixed results regarding the consequences of intergroup help and reparations in the aftermath of intergroup conflict, on intergroup reconciliation. This might in part be due to the fact that particularly research on intergroup help has focused on individual-level help, even though the context had an intergroup element (e.g., Nadler & Halabi, 2006). Individual-to-individual help between members of different groups is clearly different from the help provided at the collective level, for instance, from country to country. In the latter case, the action is an official, institutional position that a representative of the out-group and out-group institutions is implementing in the name of the group; it is thus likely to carry a very different significance and be appraised differently by members of the recipient group, compared to individual-to-individual help.

## 1.2 | The present study

Serbia's Covid vaccination policy is clearly a case of collective help and, importantly, is an actual, large-scale, and highly visible action – rather than a hypothetical scenario that participants are asked to imagine. It thus offered a unique opportunity to investigate the appraisal of an *actual* state-to-state international policy, particularly in terms of its relationship with the intergroup attitudes among the recipient nation's citizens.

A few months before Serbia announced the above-discussed policy, we had conducted a study assessing a series of intergroup reconciliation indicators among a youth-representative sample of Bosniaks. Some of these indicators (trust, hope in positive future relations, forgiveness for past violence and perceived moral similarity) were measured with respect to Western Balkans' countries that are considered out-groups (which include Serbia) as a whole. Other indicators (perceived closeness, distance and overall attitude) were measured uniquely and specifically with respect to Serbs. Overall, these measures are considered among the most important social-psychological indicators of reconciliation in intergroup relations, particularly after violent conflict (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Nadler et al., 2008). In this article, we investigate the effect of a policy enacted by Serbia, and the main enemies of Bosniaks during the 1990s war were Serbs. It could be argued that only Serbs-specific measures are relevant. The violent conflict of the 1990s, however, was a regional conflict that had followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia. When investigating this conflict and possible paths to reconciliation, it is thus of interest to look not exclusively at one specific interethnic relation but also at the broader context of the Western Balkans. We return to this point in the discussion.

When, in the spring of 2021, Serbia announced the vaccine policy, we surveyed the same sample again, measuring the same indicators and a few additional variables, thus transforming the original study into a longitudinal one. The vaccination policy received enormous publicity;

it made the first page of national newspapers and was discussed widely on national television, resulting in widespread knowledge among the BiH population. An experimental design manipulating knowledge of the policy was thus not implementable in this context. Furthermore, a simple pre- versus post-comparison of intergroup attitudes among Bosniaks was not meaningful due to the fact that in the intervening months between the two data collections, several events occurred that impacted interethnic relations. Chief among them was a memo by unknown actors leaked to a Slovenian newspaper and outlining a scenario in which BiH was to be partitioned along ethnic lines (Amiel, 2021; Brezar, 2021) – something that elicited strong negative reactions among Bosniaks.

In the second data collection (time 2), we thus included a series of items to assess the subjective appraisal of Serbia's vaccination policy. In line with findings that the subjective appraisal of actions and events is key for attitudinal and behavioural change (Walton & Wilson, 2018), we expected positive policy appraisals to be associated with scores on reconciliation indicators at time 2, controlling for the same indicators scores at time 1. We also included a measure of in-group (Bosniaks) identification. Research in social and political psychology has long investigated the role of in-group identification in intergroup perception and intergroup relations (Yzerbyt et al., 2000). In some studies that have looked at the effect of out-group help, more negative intergroup attitudes following help a negative effect on intergroup attitudes of such help emerged among high in-group identifiers (Nadler & Halabi, 2006). However, identification was manipulated by enhancing the status of the in-group in a manner that may have led to greater in-group *glorification*, as opposed to the linked yet distinguishable dimension of in-group *attachment* (Roccas et al., 2006). This is consistent with research showing that it is in-group glorifiers, not in-group-attached individuals, who react defensively in intergroup contexts (see Castano, 2008). Attachment, on the other hand, has the potential to foster intergroup reconciliation. Selvanathan and Leidner (2020), for instance, found that Arab–Israelis who displayed strong attachment to their in-group were more likely to pursue restorative justice (i.e., reconciliation) towards Israelis (see also Li et al., 2022). For logistical, methodological and financial concerns (this was a large, expensive study with a youth-representative sample not used to answer long surveys), we focused on in-group attachment as a measure of in-group identification. High in-group attachment may still be linked to lesser readiness for reconciliation, but those who see the out-group (Serbia) policy as positively affecting the in-group, may become relatively more prone to reconciliation precisely when they are highly attached to their in-group.

## 1.3 | Sample

With support from the UNDP office in Albania and RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office) from Western Balkan countries, we collected data from a youth representative sample of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) in BiH ( $N = 450$ ; age 15–29,  $M = 22$ ;  $SD = 4.21$ ; 232 females and 218 males). The sample was distributed proportionally between

urban and rural areas and included respondents of diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

## 1.4 | Procedure

Data were collected by Valicon (<https://www.valicon.net/>), a leading consulting and survey agency operating in South-East Europe since 2007 before (November 2020) and after (May/June 2021) the vaccine policy announcement. At both times, an in-person computer-assisted personal interview technique whereby the interviewer used an electronic device to record the responses was used. Interviews with more than 30% empty or non-valid responses (such as *do not know* or *refuse to answer*) were considered unsuccessful and excluded. The survey was prepared in English, translated into the local language (Bosnian) and back-translated for quality assurance. Questions were developed in consultation with a youth advisory group of 23 members, which included community and NGO representatives, policymakers and peace-building practitioners from the Western Balkans region. Upon collection, all data were anonymized by the survey agency and before sharing the data with the team. However, the unique participants' identification numbers were still known to the agency and thus, by retaining the same agency, we were able to match time 1 and time 2 participants' responses. Importantly, our team did not have access to any identifying information. The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and under the supervision of the UNDP office in Albania. All participants provided informed consent. For minors (those 15–17 years old), a written consent of the parent or guardian was obtained. Authors' institutions did not require further review of the study. Participants were not compensated for their participation. To the extent that other stakeholders allow it, data and materials will be available upon request.

## 1.5 | Measures

### 1.5.1 | Policy appraisal

The vaccine policy appraisal was measured via a 5-item scale: I am grateful to Serbia for offering free vaccination to all citizens of BiH; I think Serbia's motivation to offer free vaccination to all citizens of BiH is noble; Serbia's decision about the vaccination is a very positive gesture towards us; Serbia's decision about the vaccination may contribute to intergroup reconciliation in the region. When I think about Serbia's donation and help to us, I feel humiliated [reversed]. Participants answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Since this was an ad hoc created scale, we checked its structure via exploratory factor analysis. This indicated the presence of only one factor (eigenvalue = 3.38; all other eigenvalues < 0.70), which accounted for 68% of the variance, and on which all items loaded strongly (range = 0.66–0.89). Responses to all items were thus averaged into a composite ( $M = 3.57$ ;  $SD = 0.83$ . Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ), where high values meant a more positive appraisal of the policy.

### 1.5.2 | In-group attachment

Participants indicated their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with two items (Being a member of my ethnic group is an important part of my life; I feel strong ties to members of my ethnic group). Responses were averaged into a composite score ( $r = .64$ ;  $M = 3.63$ ;  $SD = 0.83$ ).

### 1.5.3 | Serbs-focused reconciliation indicators

Three commonly used social-psychological measures of reconciliation focused on attitudes towards Serbs: closeness, distance and attitude change. For closeness and distance, participants were presented, twice, with a list of five national out-groups living in the region (Albanians, Croats, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Serbs) and instructed to first indicate to whom they feel closest to (time 1, 18%; time 2, 21%) and, second, most distant from (time 1, 28%; time 2, 30%). Their responses were coded as 1 if they indicated Serbs and 0 if they did not. Participants were then asked to indicate whether, compared to 2–3 years ago, their attitude towards Serbs had changed. Positive change was coded as 1, negative change as  $-1$ , and no change as 0 (time 1/time 2:  $M = 0.01/0.05$ ;  $SD = 0.41/0.45$ ). The format of both the closeness and distance measures and the measurement of attitude focusing on change is rather unusual in social psychological literature. The reason is that the items were chosen, at time 1, through consultation with the advisory group described above. Also, at the time of the preparation of the material for the first data collection, there was no plan for a second wave of data collection; hence the framing of the question in terms of change in attitude. At time 2, of course, we had to maintain the same format that had been used at time 1.

### 1.5.4 | Western Balkans-focused reconciliation indicators

Four further variables were framed with a focus on Western Balkans out-groups as a whole. Participants were reminded what countries are considered Western Balkans, before being asked to answer, and Serbia was of course among them. These indicators assessed forgiveness of, trust in, hope in the future of the relations with, and moral similarity with, people of other Western Balkans's states. Specifically, participants indicated whether they strongly agreed (5) or strongly disagreed (1) with the statement 'I am willing to forgive other groups for what they did to my people in the past' (time 1/time 2:  $M = 3.42/3.22$ ;  $SD = 1.01/1.08$ ) and with the statement 'I trust most peoples of the Western Balkans despite events that may have occurred in the past' (time 1/time 2:  $M = 3.32/3.19$ ;  $SD = 0.99/1.02$ ). They also indicated their hope about the future on a 5-point scale coded so that 5 indicated that the relations will improve a lot and 1 indicated that they will get much worse (time 1/time 2:  $M = 3.46/3.49$ ;  $SD = 0.84/0.88$ ). Finally, they indicated their level of agreement on a 1–5 response scale with each of three items assessing moral similarity

(The peoples of the Western Balkans have a common culture and a shared way of life; There are more things that unite us than separate us; Most peoples of the Western Balkan region are just as moral as my people; time 1/time 2:  $M = 3.45/3.49$ ;  $SD = 0.79/0.84$ ; Cronbach's alpha = .76/.78).

## 1.6 | Analytical strategy

In order to test the main hypothesis that the positive appraisal of the policy would predict stronger reconciliation tendencies and that this effect might be moderated by in-group attachment, we utilized a multiple regression approach. One multiple regression was computed for each indicator of reconciliation discussed above (three Serbia-focused and four Western Balkans' countries focused). In each multiple regression, the criterion was the reconciliation indicator at time 2, and the predictors were the same indicator at time 1, policy appraisal and in-group attachment. Predictors were centred, and all interaction terms between all predictors were also included in the model.

## 2 | RESULTS

Policy appraisal was generally positive ( $M = 3.57$ ) and significantly higher than the scale midpoint [3],  $F(1,448) = 218.91$ ;  $p < .001$ . Given the interest in assessing the interaction between policy appraisal and in-group attachment in predicting reconciliation indicators, we note that policy appraisal and attachment were not correlated ( $r = -.04$ ,  $p = .36$ ). A table with the correlations between all variables is provided in the Appendix.

First, we analysed the effects of policy appraisal on the three intergroup reconciliation indicators that focused specifically on Serbs: closeness, distance and attitude change. A similar pattern emerged for each of them. Policy was a significant predictor of closeness,  $t(440) = 4.36$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $B = .19$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.11, 0.28],  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ; distance,  $t(440) = -6.95$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $B = -0.27$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.35, -0.19]  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ ; and attitude change,  $t(440) = 3.60$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $B = .16$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.07, 0.24],  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . A more positive policy appraisal resulted in relative increases in closeness, relative decreases in distance and relative greater increase in (positive) attitude change. Unsurprisingly, each indicator at time 1 was a significant predictor of the same indicator at time 2: closeness:  $t(440) = 7.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $B = .34$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.25, 0.43],  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ ; distance:  $t(440) = 11.27$ ;  $p < 0.00$ ,  $B = .46$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.38, 0.54],  $\eta_p^2 = .22$ ; attitude-change:  $t(440) = 8.62$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $B = .39$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.30, 0.48],  $\eta_p^2 = .14$ . No other main or interaction effects were significant.

Closeness and distance are dichotomous variables, and as such they are best analysed through logistic regression (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). Using logistic regression yielded similar results to those reported above using linear regression, the only difference being a significant interaction between policy appraisal and time 1 distance 1 on

time 2 distance (Wald chi-Square = 6.15;  $p = .01$ ;  $b = 0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ , 95% CI [0.06, 0.57]). Computing the effect of policy appraisal at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of time 1 distance revealed that the effect of the policy appraisal on time 2 distance was stronger at low levels of time 1 distance ( $b = -3.52$ ;  $SE = 0.36$ ;  $z = -9.73$ ;  $p < .001$ ) than at high level of time 1 distance ( $b = -0.58$ ;  $SE = 0.25$ ;  $z = -2.32$ ;  $p = .02$ ), but significant at both levels.

Next, we analysed the effects of policy appraisal on each of the four intergroup reconciliation indicators with Western Balkans countries as a target. For each of the four indicators, the main effect of an indicator at T, policy appraisal and in-group attachment were significant; two-way interaction effects between policy appraisal and in-group attachment were significant (see Table 1). These two-way interaction between policy appraisal and in-group attachment are described in Table 2 and plotted in Figure 1. Policy appraisal positively predicted endorsement of the reconciliation indicators while in-group attachment negatively predicted such indicators. To better understand the interaction effects, we computed the effect of policy at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of in-group attachment. For all indicators, this analysis revealed that the effect of the policy was significant and positive for both low (Table 2, column A) and high identifiers (Table 2, column B) but stronger for high identifiers. Looking at the interaction from the opposite perspective (i.e., estimating the effect of attachment at high [+1 SD] and low [-1 SD] levels of policy appraisal), we found that the effect of attachment on reconciliation indicators was only significant, and negative, among participants who had a less positive appraisal of the policy (Table 2, column C). At high (positive) levels of policy appraisal, attachment was not a predictor of reconciliation indicators (Table 2, column D).

As shown in Table 1, the three-way interaction effect was not significant for three out of four indicators, but significant for moral similarity,  $F(1, 439) = 7.91$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\beta = .11$ , 95% CI [0.03, 0.18],  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . For moral similarity, the interaction between policy appraisal and in-group attachment was not significant at low levels (-1SD) of moral similarity at time 1,  $F < 1$ , but significant at high levels (+1SD) of moral similarity at time 1,  $F(1, 439) = 11.26$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\beta = .17$ , 95% CI [0.07, 0.27],  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . The in-group attachment was a significant, negative predictor at low level of policy appraisal,  $t(439) = -3.95$ ,  $p = .00$  but not a significant predictor at high levels of policy appraisal,  $t < 1$ .

## 3 | DISCUSSION

Achieving reconciliation following violent intergroup conflicts is challenging (Nadler et al., 2008). A range of social psychological processes such as mistrust, lack of hope and unwillingness to forgive undermine efforts in conflict resolution policies and practices, thus hindering intergroup reconciliation (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Nadler et al., 2008). By inclination or political calculation, political leaders often contribute to this state of affairs through their refusal to acknowledge in-group responsibilities, provide collective reparations or engage in pro-out-group policies that are needed in the aftermath of large-scale intergroup violence (Cohen, 2008). Research has provided valuable

**TABLE 1** Predicting reconciliation indicators at T2.

Reconciliation indicator (T2)	Policy appraisal (PA)	In-group attachment (IA)	Reconciliation indicator T1 (RT1)				Overall model R <sup>2</sup> and 95% CI	
	PA*IA	PA*RT1	IA*RT1	PA*IA*RT1	PA*IA	PA*RT1	IA*RT1	PA*IA*RT1
Forgiveness	.37*** (0.04) 95% CI [0.27, 0.44] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .14</i>	-.10* (0.04) 95% CI [-0.18, -0.01] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .01</i>	.32*** (0.04) 95% CI [0.26, 0.43] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .12</i>	.08* (0.04) 95% CI [0.002, 0.15] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .01</i>	.02 (0.04) 95% CI [-0.06, 0.10] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .0001</i>	-.01 (0.04) 95% CI [-0.09, 0.07] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .0001</i>	.06 (0.03) 95% CI [-0.01, 0.12] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .006</i>	.31 95% CI [0.23, 0.37]
Trust	.34*** (0.04) 95% CI [0.26, 0.43] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .13</i>	-.09* (0.04) 95% CI [-0.18, -0.01] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .01</i>	.25*** (0.04) 95% CI [0.16, 0.33] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .07</i>	.10*** (0.04) 95% CI [0.03, 0.18] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .02</i>	.02 (0.04) 95% CI [-0.06, 0.09] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .0001</i>	-.06 (0.0) 95% CI [-0.13, 0.02] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .004</i>	.02(0.04) 95% CI [-0.05, 0.09] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .0008</i>	.23 95% CI [0.16, 0.29]
Hope	.35*** (0.04) 95% CI [0.27, 0.44] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .13</i>	-.07 <sup>†</sup> (0.04) 95% CI [-0.16, 0.01] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .01</i>	.21*** (0.04) 95% CI [0.12, 0.29] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .05</i>	.10** (0.03) 95% CI [0.02, 0.18] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .01</i>	.01 (0.04) 95% CI [-0.06, 0.08] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .0002</i>	-.02 (0.04) 95% CI [-0.09, 0.05] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .0005</i>	.04(0.03) 95% CI [-0.02, 0.10] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .004</i>	.22 95% CI [0.15, 0.28]
Moral similarity	.39*** (0.03) 95% CI [0.32, 0.47] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .18</i>	-.11** (0.03) 95% CI [-0.19, -0.03] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .02</i>	.34*** (0.03) 95% CI [0.24, 0.42] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .14</i>	.06 <sup>†</sup> (0.03) 95% CI [-0.01, 0.4] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .01</i>	.06(0.03) 95% CI [-0.01, 0.13] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .006</i>	-.04(0.03) 95% CI [-0.11, 0.03] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .002</i>	.10** (0.03) 95% CI [0.02, 0.18] <i>η<sub>p</sub><sup>2</sup> = .02</i>	.34 95% CI [0.27, 0.40]

Note: Standardized estimates with standard error in parenthesis and effect size in italics.

Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

\*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05; <sup>†</sup>*p* = .08.

**TABLE 2** Disentangling the two-way interaction between policy appraisal (PA) and in-group attachment (IA).

	A PA at -1 SD IA	B PA at +1 SD IA	C IA at -1 SD PA	D IA at -1 SD PA
Forgiveness	.27*** (0.06) 95% CI [0.16, 0.40]	.42*** (0.05) 95% CI [0.32, 0.53]	-.17** (0.06) 95% CI [(-0.29, -0.05)]	-.02 (0.05) 95% CI [(-0.13, 0.08)]
Trust	.24*** (0.06) 95% CI [0.11, 0.36]	.44*** (0.06) 95% CI [0.34, 0.56]	-.20** (0.06) 95% CI [(-0.33, -0.08)]	.00 (0.05) 95% CI [-0.10, 0.11]
Hope	.25*** (0.06) 95% CI [0.14, 0.37]	.45*** (0.05) 95% CI [0.34, 0.56]	-.17** (0.06) 95% CI [-0.29, -0.05]	.02 (0.05) 95% CI [-0.08, 0.13]
Moral similarity	.33*** (0.06) 95% CI [0.22, 0.44]	.45*** (0.05) 95% CI [0.35, 0.56]	-.17** (0.06) 95% CI [-0.28, -0.06]	-.04 (0.05) 95% CI [-0.15, 0.04]

Note: Standardized estimates with standard error in parenthesis and effect size in italics.

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; IA, in-group attachment; PA, policy appraisal; SD, standard deviation.

\*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05; <sup>†</sup>*p* = .08.

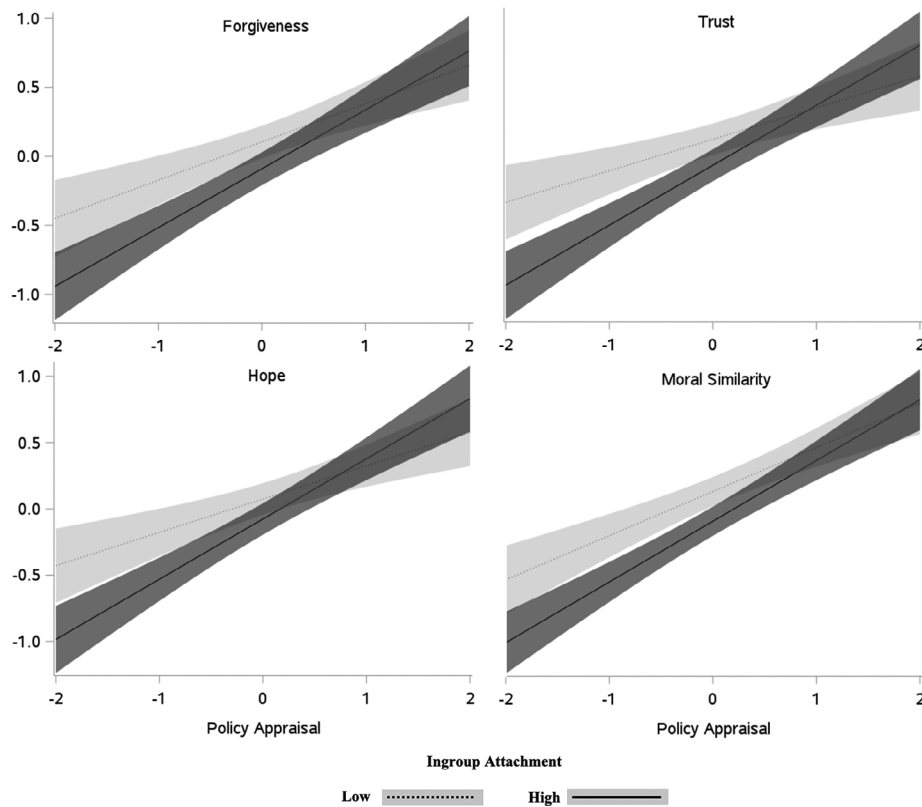
insights into how to overcome these social-psychological obstacles and thus facilitate post-conflict reconciliation by fostering positive attitudes and change in behaviour (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2021; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Halperin et al., 2013; Hameiri et al., 2014; Nadler et al., 2008). However, most empirical research has used hypothetical scenarios and convenience samples (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016). Here we reported the results of a longitudinal study investigating how an actual, state-level policy by Serbia, consisting of offering free Covid-19 vaccination to its former enemies, was appraised by Bosniaks of BiH and, most importantly, whether this appraisal predicted intergroup reconciliation among Bosniaks.

Results showed that the policy was, on average, positively appraised by Bosniaks. Most importantly, we found that the more positive the

policy appraisal, the higher the score on the reconciliation indicators (controlling for the same indicators at time 1). This was true for both the indicators specifically tailored to Serbs (closeness, distance, attitude change) and those framed more broadly towards peoples from Western Balkans countries (which included Serbs).

### 3.1 | How does this positive effect of policy appraisal fit with previous findings?

Previous research has shown that positive gestures from an out-group towards the in-group in the form of apologies or offers of help do not necessarily elicit a positive response from in-group members.



**FIGURE 1** Illustration of main and interaction effects of policy and in-group identification on reconciliation indicators.

Especially help that is unrelated to the nature of the intergroup relations, and that comes from a higher status or more powerful out-group, can be perceived as a means to humiliate the in-group and thus result in reactance and even more negative attitudes towards the out-group (Borinca, Andrighetto et al., 2022; Halabi et al., 2021). A case in point is a recent study by Borinca, Moreno-Bella et al. (2022) which investigated the effect of help with Covid-19 testing kits offered by Serbia to Kosovars. In this study, such help elicited negative out-group perceptions and emotions among Albanian Kosovars, even for those who were low on out-group prejudice. The Borinca, Moreno-Bella et al.'s (2022) study, however, is not directly comparable to the study presented here.

First, the power imbalance is arguably much steeper between Kosovars and Serbs than between Bosniaks and Serbs (Lijphart, 2004; Malcolm, 1996; Tzifakis, 2007). Second, the extent and nature of the help was very different. In the study by Borinca, Moreno-Bella et al. (2022), the help consisted of 1000 testing kits, which may have been perceived as inconsequential. By contrast, with the present study, we investigated the effect of a large-scale policy by Serbia, which not only consisted of vaccine donations but also allowed Bosniaks to get vaccinated freely by traveling to Serbia. Thousands of Bosniaks flocked to Serbia to be vaccinated. Together with these methodological differences, differences in contexts and the nature of the policy may explain the overall more positive picture emerging from the present study.

The current findings are, on the other hand, consistent with the research demonstrating the positive impact of action-oriented policies

(e.g., Čehajić-Clancy & Brown, 2019). This is particularly remarkable considering that Serbia's policy was not designed as a reparation that aimed at addressing past wrongdoings. Regardless of intentions and explicit framing by the policymaker, these findings suggest that a large-scale, pro-out-group policy can be viewed positively by members of the out-group and that such a positive appraisal can be conducive to intergroup reconciliation. In interpreting this pattern of results, it is also important to note that overall, the policy appraisal was positive – significantly above the midpoint of the scale. Given the quality of the relations between Serbia and BiH, this is an interesting result and in by itself and it also helps us understand why contrary to what one might have expected based on some previous findings (e.g., Borinca, Moreno-Bella et al., 2022; Halabi et al., 2021a), policy appraisal had an overall positive effect.

On the reconciliation, indicators that focused on Western Balkans countries as a whole, in-group attachment consistently moderated the effect of policy appraisal. While at less positive levels of policy appraisal, high identifiers scored lower on the reconciliation indicators, at more positive levels of policy appraisal this difference was not significant: both low and high identifiers scored high on all reconciliation indicators. The pattern that emerged is thus consistent with a nuanced view of the effect of in-group identification on intergroup relations. This view, which distinguishes between in-group glorification and in-group attachment (Castano, 2008; Leidner & Castano, 2012; Roccas et al., 2006), is consistent with the idea that in-group love (i.e., in-group attachment) does not necessarily translate into out-group hate (Brewer, 1999).

### 3.2 | Limitations

The current study is not without limitations. A first limitation is that we did not manipulate the presence or absence of the policy, nor Bosniaks' awareness of it. As previously mentioned, such a paradigm was simply not possible to implement in the context under investigation. It would also have undermined an important aspect of the current investigation, namely its high ecological validity. Similarly, because of the many intervening events and ever-evolving situations in the relationship between Serbia and BiH, we did not rely on pre versus post, mean-level comparisons. As a consequence, the pattern of findings that emerged from our study cannot be interpreted as evidence that Serbia's policy had a positive impact on Bosniaks' intergroup attitudes and reconciliation indicators. The focus here is not simply on an out-group policy but on the subjective appraisal of such policy by the recipients (Walton & Wilson, 2018). The present findings, however, are not simply evidence of a correlation between appraisals of the policy, on the one hand, and intergroup reconciliation tendencies, on the other. First, the study is longitudinal, and we found evidence that a positive appraisal of the policy predicted reconciliation indicators after the policy had been enacted (time 2) while controlling for the same indicators measured prior to the policy enactment (time 1) (see Grosz et al., 2020). Second, the policy appraisal measure was not just a measure of overall attitudes towards Serbs but assessed very specific reactions to the vaccine policy at hand. Thirdly, for the reconciliation indicators regarding Western Balkans, an interaction effect emerged between policy appraisal and in-group identification, which, as noted, was not correlated with policy appraisal. All in all, even though the data presented here do not allow for causal claims about the impact of the policy, they are nevertheless suggestive that policy appraisal had a positive effect on intergroup reconciliation.

A second limitation concerns the type of measures that were collected. First, the dependent variables assessed here consisted of self-reported measures that are typically conceived as indicators of reconciliation in intergroup relations (e.g., Bilali et al., 2016; Harris & Fiske, 2008; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Noor et al., 2008). However, to what extent such self-report translates into real-life behaviours remains unclear. Second, some of the reconciliation indicators were measured at the level of Western Balkans countries (which included Serbia) as opposed to separately for each country. We had several reasons for our choice. This was a large, expensive study with a youth-representative sample, and thus limiting the number of questions was important. Also, the alternative would have resulted in a very repetitive set of questions, possibly confusing or overloading participants, which would have in turn diminished the quality of their responses. Finally, asking questions at this level captures well the regional aspect of the conflict and, for Bosniaks, the Western Balkans category is a salient and meaningful one. Of the three reconciliation indicators that were specific to Serbs, one asked participants how their attitudes towards Serbs had changed in recent years. Thus, the analysis reported here assesses a sort of meta-change in attitudes. As mentioned, this was due to the fact that the reconciliation indicators and their response format had been conceived at a time when we had no plan to conduct

a longitudinal study – and thus directly asking about change in attitude was appropriate. While not customary, we believe that the phrasing of this question does not detract from its validity, especially when considering that it was not used in isolation and that the pattern emerging on this measure is replicated in the other six reconciliation indicators.

A third limitation concerns the generalizability of the present findings. The present study focuses on the BiH, and particularly on the relationships between Bosniaks and Serbs, and therefore the insights that we gain from it may be limited to similar intergroup contexts. As noted above, the recent study by Borinca, Moreno-Bella et al. (2022), conducted in the same region, but in an intergroup context with different power dynamics and also focusing on a different intergroup policy, found different results. Future research is thus needed to help us understand how power dynamics may moderate the effects of out-group help on intergroup reconciliation attitudes.

A final set of potential limitations concerns the policy itself, revolving around the issue of attitudes with regard to vaccination and Serbia's motivations. The motivations of the Serbian government to enact such a policy are unknown to us. They could have ranged from an attempt to contain the virus in the neighbouring countries because of the indirect benefits for Serbian citizens to a soft-power action aimed at serving broader national interests (Lee, 2021; Tung, 2022), to a simple altruistic action. Covid vaccination was and remains controversial worldwide and in the Western Balkans (e.g., Jeremic Stojkovic et al., 2023), and it could thus be argued that some of our respondents might not have unequivocally perceived the policy as a positive out-group-oriented action, and they may have perceived it as even as a conspiracy by Serbia. We note, however, that our data show an overall positive appraisal of the policy, and that we do indeed find that it is appraisal that matters. In other words, we are not claiming that the policy per se had a positive impact on reconciliation.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

In the current study, we examined how the appraisal of an actual, state-level policy enacted by Serbia towards former enemies, impacted intergroup attitudes and reconciliation among a representative sample of the youth of one of these former enemies, namely Bosniaks. The present findings complement the existing laboratory experiments by testing a conceptually similar hypothesis through a design with strong ecological validity. Effects reported here were observed among a youth-representative sample, and it is unclear whether the same pattern would be observed with an older generation. Attitudes held by older generations are directly anchored in conflict-related events and permeated by a range of affective experiences making them less malleable and open to change (Bar-Tal, 2000). On the other hand, as asserted in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (2015), young people play a decisive role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and are a key aspect of the sustainability, inclusiveness and success of peacebuilding efforts. This signifies that the present finding has the potential to have practical implications, for they can guide policy actors in post-conflict societies



on how to escape the cycle of mistrust, antagonistic attitudes and further violence (Castano et al., 2020), which is detrimental to human well-being and flourishing at the collective and individual level.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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This study has been implemented under the supervision of the UNDP office in Albania and RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office) from Western Balkan countries. Data collection has been funded by the United Nations Peace Building Fund.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request to the corresponding authors.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and under the supervision of the UNDP office in Albania. All participants provided informed consent. For minors (those 15-17 years old) a written consent of the parent or guardian was obtained. Authors' institutions did not require further review of the study. Participants were not compensated for their participation. To the extent that other stakeholders allow it, data and materials will be available upon request.

### TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

All results are reported honestly and the submitted work is original.

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**APPENDIX**  
**MATRIX OF CORRELATIONS**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Policy appraisal															
2. Hope T1	.17***														
3. Hope T2	.41***	.26***													
4. Trust T1	.14**	.20***	.13**												
5. Trust T2	.38***	.04	.21***	.30***											
6. Forgiveness T1	.27***	.25***	.09	.38***	.21***										
7. Forgiveness T2	.44***	.18***	.23***	.17***	.43***	.41***									
8. Moral similarity T1	.14**	.25***	.13**	.61***	.31***	.45***	.21***								
9. Moral similarity T2	.45***	.06	.26***	.21***	.63***	.26***	.40***	.39***							
10. Attitude change T1	.10*	.05	.05	.12*	.05	.06	.03	.09	.05						
11. Attitude change T2	.19***	.08	.14**	.05	.08	.11*	.08	.07	.04	.38***					
12. Distance T1	-.19***	-.16***	-.08	-.24***	-.07	-.25***	-.17***	-.18***	-.07	-.03	-.07				
13. Distance T2	-.36***	-.09*	-.17***	-.21***	-.20***	-.16***	-.30***	-.11*	-.22***	-.02	-.05	.50***			
14. Closeness T1	.13**	.09	.07	.09	.06	.23***	.22***	.17***	.05	.07	.04	-.29***	-.24***		
15. Closeness T2	.26***	.09*	.13**	.09	.19***	.16***	.24***	.10*	.24***	.00	.05	-.23***	-.34***	.37***	
16. Attachment	-.04	-.03	-.08	-.02	-.09*	.04	-.08	-.03	-.12*	.01	.04	-.06	-.08	.13**	.06

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .